



BeWolfed (Midnight Creek #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She came back for answers. He's the problem she never saw coming.

Elowen

Returning to Midnight Creek was never part of the plan—but when my aunt vanishes without a trace, I have no choice. Her beloved magical bookstore is unraveling, the town is on edge, and the infuriating werewolf next door won't stop getting in my way. Rudy Kane is gruff, overprotective, and way too tempting for his own good.

But the deeper I dig into her disappearance, the more I uncover a growing darkness in Midnight Creek—one that feeds on blood magic and broken bonds. And the more I realize: I don't just need Rudy's help. I might need him.

Rudy

Witches mean trouble, and I've spent years keeping my distance—until Elowen storms back into town, all fire and fury, shattering my quiet existence. She's stubborn enough to go toe-to-toe with me, reckless enough to dive headfirst into danger, and powerful enough to throw my instincts into chaos.

Midnight Creek isn't safe anymore. Supernatural tensions are rising, blood magic is twisting the town's balance, and if Elowen and I don't work together, we won't just lose her aunt—we'll lose everything.

But protecting her means letting her in. And if I let myself get any closer to the one woman I can't resist, I might lose myself in the process.

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Elowen

I clenched the steering wheel as I crossed into Midnight Creek, my witch sight flaring to life without warning. The wards that should have shimmered with warm, protective magic now crackled, thin and fractured like old glass. Wrong .

A bleary-eyed fae scrubbed at graffiti scrawled across The Grove Gaming Store. The words "WITCH PLAGUE" still bled through in jagged, half-erased letters. My protective magic surged instinctively, prickling beneath my skin before I tamped it down. Control. Always control.

Three weeks. That's all I'd been gone—since my last visit during my college's spring break. But something had changed in my absence. And it wasn't just that Aunt Rose was missing—though that was the most worrying.

Two years ago, I'd left Midnight Creek eager to reinvent myself, to become someone defined by more than tragedy and other people's expectations. I'd enjoyed pretending to be a normal college sophomore with normal worries at my mostly- human university, and not being "poor Elowen, the orphan Rose raised" or "little Elowen with the unpredictable magic."

But now my only family was missing—the woman who'd held me through nightmares after my parents died, who'd never given up on me even when my wild magic destroyed half her inventory. The thought of Rose in danger made my chest constrict with a fear I couldn't afford to show.

And my hometown... was this. The bustle of supernatural businesses along Main

Street felt subdued. The Hungry Wolf Diner's windows were dark and it was barely sundown. Luna's Fortune & Tea Room had boards over one window, their scorched edges suggesting magical damage.

I parked on the street outside Midnight Brew, desperate for caffeine after the long drive. The coffee shop had been my second home during high school, back when I'd spent countless hours studying while Rose worked late at the bookstore. The memory of sharing witch's brew—a dark brew coffee with hints of cinnamon—with werewolf study groups and fae art students made the current tension even sharper. The protective wards along the windows prickled against my senses like static electricity.

When I stepped inside, conversations stuttered to a halt. A young vampire I'd tutored in magical theory last summer quickly looked away. The fae barista's smile went professionally blank as I approached the counter, her silver-dusted wings twitching.

"The usual?" I asked hopefully. Rose and I had been regulars here for years.

"We're... out of the witch's brew blend," the barista said, her eyes darting nervously toward other customers. "Supply issues."

Right . The special blend came from Crystal Clear Apothecary next door to Rose's shop. "Regular coffee is fine. To go please."

She took my money without meeting my eyes. At a nearby table, two werewolves hunched over their phones, voices carrying just enough for my enhanced hearing: "—can't even open The Crystal Connection app without getting flooded with witch profiles. Like they're trying to take over that too—"

"Elowen?" A familiar voice broke through the tension.

Charlotte stood in the doorway, petite but impossible to miss, looking as sunny as

ever with her blonde hair and wide smile. At least my best friend hadn't changed. She'd chosen Midnight Creek College while I'd fled across the state, but our friendship had survived the distance.

"I thought that was your car! When did you get back?"

"Just now." I hugged her tight, grateful for one normal interaction. Charlotte was human, but she was one of the ones 'in the know' in town. She'd even been accepted into Midnight Creek College's supernatural studies department.

"Have you heard anything about—"

"Not here," she murmured. "Let's walk."

I took my coffee from the counter and followed her out into the spring evening.

She linked her arm through mine like old times, her shorter stride falling into step with mine, though her grip was tense. "It's gotten worse since you left—the divide between witches and other supernaturals. Rose was one of the only ones still trying to bridge it."

"What happened?" Midnight Creek had always had its politics, but never this level of open hostility.

"It started small. Whispers about witches hoarding magical knowledge, controlling too much of the town's power. Then businesses started picking sides." Charlotte lowered her voice. "Rose said it's happening in other towns too."

Back at college, my roommate Toni had faced relentless judgment from her coven—just for hooking up with someone outside her species. I'd dismissed it as old-fashioned prejudice then, but now...

We passed Crystal Clear Apothecary, where Mrs. Rowe, the witch owner, argued with a delivery man whose ears marked him as fae. "—perfectly good herbs just because they're witch-grown?" she demanded. "Twenty years I've supplied this town—"

"Orders from management," he muttered, climbing back into his truck. "Nothing personal."

Across the street, a young werewolf and witch couple hurried past, heads down as others openly stared. The sight made my chest ache. This had never been a problem before. Rose had often said that supernatural bonds—especially rare ones between species—were sacred things, transcending politics. Now it seemed even those connections were being poisoned by whatever was happening in town.

"Rose was worried," Charlotte continued. "She said someone was deliberately stoking the tensions, but she couldn't prove it. And then..."

"She vanished." The words tasted bitter. "And the police dismissed it."

"People do travel and forget to check in," the sheriff had said when I called, his tone dismissive.

But Rose would never do that. My stomach knotted at the memory of that conversation, at how easily they'd dismissed my concerns.

She was my only family, and I was hers. No matter how busy she got, she always let me know she was okay. Even when my grief-fueled magic had blown out the bookstore's windows. Even when I'd accidentally hexed her favorite chair. Even when I'd ranted about leaving for college because I needed space from being "Rose's project."

And now—nothing. Something was wrong. I could feel it in my bones – a cold dread that hadn't left me since her first missed call, her first unanswered text.

We reached Rose's Rare Books & Curiosities. The store's protective runes still recognized me as family, but they felt strained, like they'd been fighting off magical attacks.

"I should go." Charlotte squeezed my hand. "Text me once you're settled? And El... be careful. Something's very wrong in this town."

I nodded, watching her hurry away, across the street and behind Luna's Tea Room, following the side streets down toward campus.

I gave myself a push and climbed the steps of my aunt's shop. It was one of the businesses on the north side of Main Street, which all backed to the steep rise of the mountain. The old Victorian style house—painted a bright pink—held the bookstore on the first floor and our apartment on the second. Beneath, in the mountain itself, Rose had crafted a magically made cave storage for the most dangerous treasures.

I hesitated at the door, fingers tracing the protection runes carved into its surface, then glanced back up Main Street. Through my witch sight, the town still shimmered with its dual layers of reality—one mundane, one magical. A human couple walked past, oblivious to the true nature of the storefronts they passed.

I took a breath and turned the key in the lock. It clicked open. I stepped inside and gasped.

Books lay scattered across the hardwood floor like fallen soldiers, their spines cracked open at random pages. Dust motes floated lazily in the hazy evening light filtering through the window. The display cases near the entrance were toppled, shelves shoved askew as if someone had searched in a frenzy. Protective charms that

Rose had always tucked carefully between the books lay shattered in pieces.

The store window showed no signs of a break-in, no smashed glass or splintered locks, and the front door had opened easily for me. But inside was chaos.

My aunt would never have allowed this. Rose ran her store with militant precision, each book categorized by both mundane and magical systems. This wreckage didn't just defy that order—it desecrated it.

I followed the trail of damage deeper into the store, moving slowly, my footsteps echoing off the hardwood. The bookshelves loomed like silent witnesses, their contents jumbled and violated. I laid my hand on the register counter, and the protective wards etched into its surface flickered faintly. They still recognized me, but the glow was weak..

Dark drops of blood near the base of the counter stained the wood flooring. I crouched, my breath catching in my throat.

The destruction of the store was recent, they'd been looking for something today or yesterday. But was the blood from one of the intruders? Or was it older from Rose? My pulse quickened.

I tried an identification spell, murmuring the words as I lay my fingers on the blood, but it fizzled almost immediately. My magic sparked erratically, sputtering out like a candle in the wind. "Come on," I whispered frantically, trying again. "Work, damn it." Frustration burned in my chest—the same old problem. When it mattered most, my power fluctuated between too much and too little, never the steady control Rose had mastered.

Under an overturned box of protective charms, one paper caught my eye: a note, half-finished and smeared as though Rose had been interrupted mid-sentence.

Deliberate interference in supernatural relations... It's spreading beyond the town borders. If something isn't done soon—

The words stopped there, unfinished.

My heart raced as I reached for my phone. I needed to document everything. Pictures of the notes, the blood trail, the broken charms. I had to find her. No matter what the sheriff said, Rose was in danger. I could feel it.

A low growl froze me in place.

Slowly, I turned toward the sound. In the shadows near the cave storage entrance crouched the largest wolf I'd ever seen. Silver-grey fur bristled along massive shoulders, and eyes that held far too much intelligence fixed on me with predatory intensity.

I should have been terrified. Should have run screaming. Instead, my breath caught as his scent hit me—forest after rain, leather, and something wild that made my magic surge unexpectedly. It flooded my system, a crackling current of power that made my fingertips tingle and the air around me shimmer with violet light.

But weeks of helplessness and frustration tangled with this new, bewildering awareness, and I lashed out.

"Really?" I demanded, adjusting my glasses as power crackled around me. "You're going to pull this alpha wolf intimidation act now? In my aunt's store? When she's missing and I'm trying to find her?"

The wolf's ears flattened in what looked suspiciously like surprise. Clearly he wasn't used to people talking back. But Rose had taught me that most supernatural posturing was exactly that—posturing.

"I don't care if you're the big bad wolf himself. Get out!" I grabbed the nearest object—a weighty tome on medieval healing practices. "I have enough to deal with without some overgrown furball making more mess!"

The wolf's form blurred and shifted, magic rippling through the air as he took human shape. The transformation was smooth, controlled—marking him as powerful even among werewolves. When the shimmer faded, a man stood before me, wearing a worn leather jacket and jeans, his chest bare and muscled beneath the open jacket.

"Overgrown furball?" His voice was rough velvet, one eyebrow arching as he crossed his arms over his scarred skin. "That's a new one."

I swallowed hard, willing myself not to stare at the defined muscles or the intriguing scars that mapped stories across his skin. The man was infuriatingly handsome, with dark hair streaked with silver at the temples and amber eyes that still held a lupine glow. Something hot and impossible flickered in my stomach—absolutely not the time.

"You growled at me!" I tried to maintain my fury, clutching the book tighter as if it could shield me from the bewildering reaction he triggered. My magic pulsed in response to his proximity, the familiar unpredictability shifting to something new—a resonance that both thrilled and terrified me.

"I was investigating," he said, taking a step closer. His movement was pure predator, graceful and deliberate. "You're the one sneaking in here at night."

"With a key! Because it's my aunt's store," I repeated, backing up until I hit a bookshelf. "Wait—investigating what? Do you know something about Rose's disappearance?"

His gaze shifted to the side—before his expression hardened. He took another step

closer, his presence overwhelming in the confined space. A woodsy, earthy scent enveloped me, sending my magic into a disorienting hum that made the nearest books tremble on their shelves.

"Leave, little witch. This isn't your problem." His voice deepened to a growl that seemed to resonate directly with something primitive in my core.

I glared back at all six feet of tall, dark, and handsome. "Like hell it's not."

The books on the shelves around us quivered, responding to the tension crackling between us. Several romance novels actually sighed, their pages ruffling as if caught in a breeze. I'd been back in Midnight Creek for less than an hour, and already I was facing off with an arrogant alpha wolf in my aunt's destroyed bookstore, while my magic behaved as unpredictably as ever.

But this time, the unpredictability felt different. Instead of misfiring or surging out of control, my power seemed to be reaching for his, creating a circuit I didn't understand.

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Rudy

The witch refused to be intimidated—I had to give her that.

Most people cowered when confronted by a wolf my size. This one? She'd threatened me with a book on medieval medicine. Now she stormed around her aunt's shop like I was the intruder, picking up fallen volumes and returning them to shelves with movements that couldn't quite hide the tremor in her hands.

And damned if I didn't find myself following her.

"Stop hovering," she muttered, crouching to gather fallen books. Her scent drifted toward me—lavender and old paper mixed with something electric that made my wolf pace restlessly beneath my skin. "If you're not going to help clean up, you can leave."

I should leave. I had leads to follow, evidence to track. The witch disappearances formed a pattern that stretched beyond Midnight Creek, and time was running short. But something held me here, watching her slender fingers trace the spines of damaged books with such care, her dark hair falling forward to shield her face. Something beyond the investigation.

"Who exactly are you?" I asked, ignoring her dismissal. "This is Rose's store."

She paused, a leather-bound grimoire held protectively against her chest. When she turned, those intelligent eyes examined me through her glasses, assessing and unimpressed.

"I told you, I'm her niece, Elowen," she said, as if explaining something to a particularly slow child. "Besides, you still haven't explained who you are and why you're here."

I bit back a snarl at her tone, watching as she returned the grimoire to its shelf with practiced precision. Her movements were efficient, professional—but I could smell the worry beneath her composed exterior.

The truth was tangled up with my old pack, with blood magic corruption I'd been tracking for years – with my father's murder and my solitary mission since. Sharing that with a witch I'd just met wasn't my style. But those sky blue eyes behind her glasses held steady, demanding answers I wasn't ready to give.

"Rudy Kane," I finally offered, my name a reluctant concession. "I'm a private investigator. Supernatural cases." I reached for a fallen book, its binding cracked. "Rose's disappearance fits a pattern I've been tracking."

"What pattern?" The professional demeanor cracked slightly, hope and suspicion warring in her expression. "Do you know what happened to her?"

I didn't answer immediately. The truth was that Rose had practically engineered my arrival in Midnight Creek, leaving breadcrumb trails of evidence that led straight to her store. She'd offered the apartment at a suspiciously low rent, asking pointed questions about my investigation. The witch had been mapping blood magic corruption long before I arrived.

Instead, I lifted the grimoire Elowen had been reaching for, noting traces of foreign magic on its spine—tainted and wrong. "Someone went through these systematically. See this discoloration? Blood magic residue."

Her eyes narrowed as she examined the book. "Blood magic? Here in Midnight

Creek?"

"It's been spreading." I kept my voice neutral despite the old rage rising. "Three witches disappeared from Shadow Valley last month. Similar traces were left behind."

"And you think that's connected to Rose?" She crossed her arms, studying me with sharp focus. "Why are you investigating witch disappearances?"

Because I'd seen what blood magic did to my father's pack. Because Rose had been close to exposing the corruption I'd tracked for years.

"It's my job." I glanced at the darkening windows. A pack enforcer passed by, watching too closely. "Look, this isn't the best place to discuss details. The Silver Flask has private booths with old protection spells. We can talk more there."

She hesitated, looking around at the mess of books and papers. "I need to secure the store first. Rose would never forgive me if anything happened to her collection."

I nodded. "I'll help. Faster with two."

For the next hour, we worked in focused silence, reorganizing books and fixing display cases. My wolf noticed things—how she didn't flinch when our hands brushed, reaching for the same text. How her scent shifted subtly when I moved closer, a sweetening that suggested awareness beyond professional courtesy.

More interesting was her magic—unpredictable, powerful in bursts then hesitant. Nothing like the steady control witches typically cultivated. When she murmured protection spells to strengthen the wards, power sparked around her fingers like lightning seeking ground, illuminating her face with violet light. Beautiful and dangerous.

"There." She stepped back, surveying our work. "That should hold for now."

The autumn evening had fully settled outside. I shrugged off my jacket, catching her slight shiver as the store's heating struggled against the mountain chill. "Here. It's cold out."

Her laugh surprised me—warm and genuine despite the circumstances. "I know the Silver Flask is wild, but there's no way they're letting you in without a shirt no matter how cute you are." She pushed the jacket back at me, though a slight redness crossed her cheeks.

My wolf huffed in pleasure. She thought we were cute. I mentally shook myself. Not the time.

"Besides, I have magic," she said, whispering a few words that made the air around her warm. The spell wobbled slightly before settling, and I caught a flash of frustration in her eyes, quickly masked. Interesting—the witch had control issues with her magic. "Lead the way, Mr. Private Investigator. Let's see what you know about my aunt's disappearance."

My wolf wanted to move closer, to guard against the darkness gathering outside. I held that instinct in check, maintaining distance as we headed for the door. This wasn't about attraction or protection. This was about finding Rose and stopping whatever corruption was spreading through the supernatural community.

But watching Elowen secure the final wards, power crackling around her like contained lightning, I had a feeling things were about to get complicated. She wasn't what I'd expected when I came to investigate tonight. Something told me she was going to challenge every boundary I'd carefully maintained since going lone wolf.

For now, though, we had a mystery to solve. I gestured toward the Silver Flask's

glowing windows down the street. "After you." Professional. Distant. Safe.

My wolf disagreed, but I ignored it. One step at a time.

The Silver Flask hummed with subdued energy, the usual raucous supernatural crowd muted by recent tensions. The carved protection spells along the doorframe recognized us both, flaring briefly as we entered. Inside, species segregation was immediately obvious—witches clustered near the hearth, werewolves claiming the bar, fae keeping to shadowed corners. Nothing like the integrated crowd I'd seen when first arriving in Midnight Creek.

"Wow," Elowen murmured. "It's worse than I thought."

The bartender nodded to me, then did a double-take at Elowen. "Rose's niece," he said, surprise evident. "Haven't seen you since—"

"Since I was home for the equinox," she finished, her tone casual though I caught the tension beneath it. "Has my aunt been in recently?"

The bartender's expression closed immediately. "Haven't seen Rose in weeks." His eyes darted to the pack members at the end of the bar. "Your usual booth is open, Kane."

I guided Elowen toward a corner booth with ancient runes carved into its wooden frame. The moment we sat down, the ambient noise dimmed—one of the Flask's unique features, private booths that actually stayed private.

"You have a usual booth." Elowen raised an eyebrow, settling across from me. The low lighting caught in her dark hair, highlighting auburn undertones. "How long have

you been in Midnight Creek?"

"Six months." I signaled for drinks. "Moved here tracking the blood magic cases."

"And you just happened to move in next door to my aunt's shop?" Her skepticism was palpable.

I shrugged. "Best vantage point to watch the town's magical hub."

"Convenient." She leaned forward, and I caught a stronger whiff of that sweet scent that made my wolf stir. "So what exactly do you know about my aunt's disappearance that you're not telling me?"

Directness. I could respect that. "Rose was investigating the same blood magic corruption I've been tracking."

Elowen's eyes narrowed. "And you know this how?"

"We... compared notes." Which was putting it mildly. Rose had practically strong-armed me into sharing my research once she realized we were investigating the same pattern. "Your aunt is formidable."

The ghost of a smile touched her lips. "You have no idea." She twisted her glass, studying the liquid as if it held answers. "What exactly is this blood magic doing? And why target witches?"

Before I could answer, a shadow fell across our table. Lola set down two drinks with practiced ease, arching an eyebrow at me before turning her sharp gaze on Elowen. "Didn't expect to see you sharing a booth, Kane. New business partner?"

Elowen glanced between us, curiosity sparking. "Something like that. And you are?"

"Lola," I answered before she could. "She works with me—keeps an ear to the ground for anything useful."

Lola gave me a dry look. "More like I try to keep you from getting yourself killed. Midnight Creek's politics are a minefield right now."

"So I've noticed," Elowen murmured, wrapping her fingers around her glass. "You hear anything about Rose?"

Lola sighed, crossing her arms. "Not directly. But something's been shifting. The pack's been more aggressive lately—Curtis, in particular, has been sniffing around places he never used to care about."

That got my attention. Curtis had always been ambitious, but if he was pushing beyond his usual reach, that meant trouble. "How aggressive?"

"Like he's not entirely himself anymore." Lola's lips pressed together in a thin line. "Blood magic doesn't just make people stronger—it makes them... different. Twists their instincts. Curtis was here last night, watching. And if he saw you two together, word's already spreading."

Elowen absorbed that in silence, her grip tightening around her glass. "You think the pack had something to do with my aunt's disappearance?"

"I think they're involved in something bigger than just pack politics," Lola said carefully. "And whatever Rose was looking into? It made her a target."

Elowen's magic flickered at the edges of my senses—controlled, but simmering beneath her skin. "Then we need to find out what she knew."

Lola nodded, then leaned against the table, fixing me with a pointed look. "And you?"

You sure you want to drag her into this, Kane? Blood magic corruption doesn't just disappear. Once it takes root, it spreads."

Elowen answered before I could. "I'm already in it. Rose is my family. I'm not backing down."

Lola studied her for a long moment, then let out a small, approving huff. "Good. Just don't get yourselves killed before you figure this out. I like my informants breathing."

She straightened, giving me one last meaningful glance before disappearing back toward the bar. I watched her go, then turned back to Elowen.

"Blood magic takes natural inclinations and corrupts them," I said, returning to her earlier question. "Loyalty becomes blind obedience. Protection becomes possession. I've seen it firsthand—watched pack members I'd grown up with transform from family into fanatics."

Elowen's expression darkened. "Then we have to stop it."

I nodded. "Yeah. We do."

A commotion at the bar interrupted us. A young wolf—barely past his first shift by the look of him—had backed a witch into the corner. I recognized him as one of the local alpha's newer recruits, his eyes tinged with the faint redness that signaled early blood magic influence.

"You witches think you're so special with your fancy college and your books," he snarled, eyes flickering with that unnatural reddish tint. "Maybe it's time someone showed you—"

I was moving before conscious thought, my hand closing around the young wolf's

wrist. "Enough." My voice dropped to the alpha register that made subordinate wolves instinctively submit.

The young wolf's eyes widened, his head tilting slightly before he caught himself. "You're not pack," he spat. "You don't command me, lone wolf."

"He doesn't," came Elowen's voice from behind me, steady and calm. "But I imagine the Silver Flask's neutrality wards do." She nodded toward the ceiling where ancient runes glowed warning. "Unless you want to find out what happens when you break them?"

The young wolf hesitated, confusion flickering across his face. He looked at me, then at Elowen, nostrils flaring as he caught our combined scents.

"A witch and a lone wolf," he sneered, though he backed away. "How fitting. Both betraying your own kind." His gaze shifted to me. "The alpha knows you're interfering. He says to remind you what happened to your father."

My claws threatened to emerge. The young wolf smirked before backing toward the door, the witch he'd cornered already forgotten.

"Well," Elowen said as we returned to our booth, the privacy wards reactivating. "That was informative."

"How so?" I struggled to push back the rage the wolf's words had triggered.

"He confirmed the alpha knows about your investigation." Her eyes met mine, sharp and assessing. "And that something happened to your father. Something they think will scare you off."

I didn't answer immediately. My father's murder wasn't something I discussed—not

with anyone. But those intelligent eyes held mine, waiting with unexpected patience.

"It won't," I finally said. "Scare me off."

She nodded, accepting the non-answer. "Good. Because if my aunt is involved with this blood magic corruption, we need to find her before they do whatever they did to your father."

We. The word hung between us, presumptuous and strangely right. I should refuse. I worked alone for good reasons. Getting close to others—especially a witch with unpredictable magic and eyes that saw too much—was dangerous. For both of us.

"This isn't your fight," I said, the words automatic but lacking conviction.

"My aunt. My fight." She leaned forward. "And based on what just happened, you could use someone watching your back. Someone they won't expect you to work with."

The logic was sound, even if every instinct warned against partnership. I studied her—the professional exterior that couldn't quite hide the fierce protectiveness beneath. Rose had mentioned her niece's powerful but untamed magic, how she'd left to escape the pressure of Midnight Creek's expectations. I hadn't expected the steel beneath the bookish appearance, or how much it would appeal to both man and wolf.

"Fine," I conceded, ignoring my wolf's pleased rumble. "But we do this carefully. These people are dangerous."

"I gathered that from the dramatic threats and glowing red eyes." Her sarcasm couldn't quite hide her relief at my agreement. "So where do we start?"

"Rose's research. The cave storage behind the bookstore." I lowered my voice further.

"She kept her most dangerous findings there."

"How do you know about the cave storage?" Suspicion crept back into her tone.

"Your aunt showed me." Which wasn't entirely a lie. Rose had shown me the storage after I'd already found it on my own. The witch had been calculating, deliberate in what information she shared. As if setting pieces on a game board only she could see completely. "It's where we compared notes on the blood magic cases."

Elowen nodded slowly. "Then that's where we'll start. Tonight. We can't waste time."

"Hold on," I countered. "We'll be more effective if we take a few hours to prepare. I'll get and organize my notes, and you can check her letters, her calendar—there might be something there that changes our approach. And if we go in blind, we could miss something important."

She hesitated, frustration clear in the tight set of her jaw. "I don't like waiting."

"I know," I said, keeping my voice steady. "But rushing in without all the information or sleep won't help your aunt."

Her shoulders dropped slightly, tension giving way to reluctant agreement. "Fine. First thing in the morning."

I tossed back my drink. "I'll meet you at the bookstore at eight."

As I watched her walk back toward the bookstore, her posture straight despite the worry I knew she carried, something shifted inside me. My wolf recognized it before I did—the beginnings of respect. Of interest. Of something more dangerous than either.

Tomorrow we'd search for answers in Rose's hidden research. Tonight, I'd try to ignore how Elowen's scent lingered on my jacket, or how my wolf kept replaying the moment she'd stood beside me against the young pack member.

I had a feeling nothing would be the same after this. For better or worse, Rose's niece had just become part of my investigation. Part of my carefully isolated existence.

And my wolf didn't mind at all.

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Elowen

Last night's cleanup had barely touched the devastation in my aunt's store. In the harsh morning light, evidence of Rose's abduction was everywhere—books displaced from precise locations she'd maintained for years, scattered papers covered in her handwriting, that faint magical residue we hadn't fully cleared. I ran my fingers along the edge of an ancient grimoire, feeling the lingering echo of foreign magic and fought back a wave of nausea. Someone had put their hands on Rose's books—on Rose.

Sleep had eluded me despite my exhaustion. I'd spent hours poring over Rose's appointment book and correspondence, searching desperately for clues, finding only cryptic notes about "border issues" and "community tensions." Every dead end amplified my growing fear. Rose was the only family I had left. After my parents died, she'd been mother, mentor, and anchor. Her disappearance left a void that threatened to swallow me whole.

The bell above the door chimed precisely at eight.

"Morning." Rudy's deep voice carried across the store as he approached with two coffee cups, setting one on the counter. "Witch's brew. The barista at Midnight Brew suddenly remembered how to make it when I asked."

I accepted the coffee, recognizing the peace offering. "Twenty-dollar tip?"

"Something like that." He gestured toward the materials I'd spread across the desk. "Find anything?"

"Rose was tracking something far beyond local tensions." I indicated the papers—her notes on pack politics, blood magic sigils, and the half-finished letter warning of interference. "I've been trying to connect the dots since dawn. She knew something was coming."

Rudy studied the materials, pointing to symbols I hadn't recognized. "Something about these look familiar."

"What are they?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure."

Just then a movement flickered between the shelves.

A figure materialized—a woman with opalescent eyes and floating hair moving with fluid grace. I summoned defensive magic instinctively, heart racing.

"Your thoughts are particularly loud this morning," she commented, unfazed. "The romance novels have been quite invested in your internal debate about a certain wolf."

Recognition flashed—Rose's last letter had mentioned hiring some interesting new help. "You must be Daisy."

The strange woman nodded. "The books have been quite insistent about meeting you. Especially this one." She lifted a grimoire whose binding seemed to whisper. "It remembers your aunt's touch. The magic recognizes blood."

"What do you know about Rose?" I demanded, stepping forward. "Do you know where she is?"

Daisy's expression remained placid. "The mystery section is quite concerned about the deep wounds in the land."

My pulse quickened. "Tell me exactly what you know."

Daisy didn't say anymore, only floated away.

I turned to Rudy, gripping his arm with urgent fingers. "Rose's hidden research. We need to find it now."

"We're just about to check the cave storage," he reminded me. "That's where it will be."

I pressed my palm against the mountain rock that formed the bookstore's rear wall, whispering the opening spell with Rose's name woven into the incantation. The stone shimmered, revealing a passage carved into the mountain itself.

The chamber beyond hummed with Rose's protective magic. I trailed my fingers along a shelf of grimoires, my throat tightening. Every book, every artifact carried her magical signature — reminders of her brilliance and the gaping hole her disappearance had left in my life.

"We'll find her, Elowen." Rudy's voice softened, sensing my struggle.

I couldn't respond, couldn't trust my voice not to break.

"Rose organized everything," I explained, falling into the familiar structure of my aunt's mind. "Historical precedents on the left, current research on the right. Theoretical magic in the upper shelves, practical applications below."

I located a leather-bound journal hidden behind a false panel—one of the secret spots

Rose had made me memorize for emergencies. The journal contained her observations on supernatural community dynamics, blood magic influence, and theories about who might benefit from supernatural discord.

"Here," I said, my voice steadier as I pointed to a passage about pack territories. "Rose was tracking unusual movement patterns among the local pack, establishing presence in Shadow Valley."

"The alpha's extending his influence," Rudy confirmed grimly. "Shadow Valley has always been neutral territory."

"What could Rose have meant?"

A crash from the store interrupted my racing thoughts. We rushed back to find three college students browsing while Daisy rearranged the fallen books, unconcerned.

"What happened?" I asked.

The bell chimed.

"Elowen!" Charlotte's familiar voice brought a rush of comfort. "Are you okay? I heard the store was broken into?"

"I'm okay," I said, and her fierce hug steadied something inside me.

The bell chimed again.

The man who entered carried an air of calculated ease, every movement deliberate, as if he were used to being observed. His academic elegance—artfully tousled dark hair, expensive but understated clothing—belied an intensity that made my magic prickle uneasily. His gaze settled on me with polite curiosity, assessing but not lingering.

"Miss Evers." He nodded to Charlotte before turning to me. "And you must be Rose's niece. I'm Dr. Oscar Katz. I was deeply concerned to hear about your aunt. Her work on protective magic integration was well-respected."

There was nothing inherently off about his words, nothing overtly wrong. But something about him felt... practiced. Too smooth. As if every word was weighed before it left his lips.

Rudy stepped forward, tension radiating from his frame. "Professor. Didn't expect to see you here."

"Didn't you?" Katz's expression didn't flicker, but his tone held something unreadable. "These days, Midnight Creek is more than just a quiet town, wouldn't you say?"

Magic crackled faintly in the air—my own, unsteady, reacting to the subtle shifts in the conversation. Charlotte, oblivious to the underlying tension, glanced between us. "Dr. Katz has been working on community outreach between supernatural factions. He's been helping students navigate the tensions."

"A noble cause," Rudy murmured, voice flat.

Katz smiled, a perfectly measured thing. "Knowledge fosters understanding. And understanding prevents war. Surely, that's something we can all agree on."

The weight of his gaze landed on me again, and for the briefest moment, I had the strangest sensation that he wasn't just looking at me—he was studying me.

"Was there something specific you needed?" I asked, keeping my voice neutral.

"Your Medieval herbals collection." He tapped a finger against the side of his coat as

he spoke. "I'm gathering research on protective charms used in historical blood magic countermeasures. Given recent events, I thought it prudent."

Something inside me went still. He was choosing his words carefully. Not mentioning what those "recent events" were. Not saying Rose's name.

"We're reorganizing," I said smoothly, gesturing to the lingering disarray. "Perhaps another time."

Daisy, still absorbed in rearranging books, hummed thoughtfully. "Your threads are rather tangled, Professor," she remarked. "So many knots forming. I do hope they unravel the right way."

Katz's expression remained perfectly composed, but I caught the way his fingers flexed briefly, as if resisting the urge to clench. "Fate is an interesting thing, isn't it?" His voice was light, almost amused. "I suppose we'll see how the threads fall."

He nodded politely to Charlotte. "Miss Evers. Your recent paper on human perspectives in supernatural academia was quite insightful."

Charlotte flushed, clearly pleased. "Thank you, Dr. Katz."

His gaze flicked back to me once more, unreadable. "Another time, then."

The bell chimed as he left.

I exhaled slowly, only now realizing I'd been holding my breath. The store felt colder in his absence.

"Well!" Daisy clapped her hands. "The books are whispering already. Such an interesting weave we've stepped into."

I barely heard her. My mind was still turning over every word, every careful omission. Oscar Katz had given nothing away, but something told me he was far from uninvolved.

"Rudy." I turned to find him still radiating menace. "Planning to lurk there all day?"

"Depends." He moved closer, all predatory grace. "Planning to let more suspicious professors dig through Rose's secrets?"

"He's been nothing but kind," Charlotte protested. "He's trying to help with the student tensions—"

"Right." Rudy's sarcasm could cut glass. "Because supernatural academics never have hidden agendas. Especially ones who appear right when blood magic starts spreading."

Movement caught my eye—Daisy's book pile shifting, ancient volumes hurtling toward my head. I reached for magic instinctively, but my spell tangled with the books' protective wards.

Strong arms caught me as the magical backlash hit. I melted against Rudy's chest, his heat and woodsy scent overwhelming rational thought.

"Careful, little witch." His voice rumbled through me. "Old magic bites back."

"The threads!" Daisy's delighted cry broke the moment. "Oh, they're weaving such lovely patterns now. Fate does enjoy her little nudges."

"Books to sort. Store to fix. Aunt to find," I said, forcing myself back to priorities despite the magnetic pull between us.

As the day progressed, I couldn't shake the growing certainty that time was running out. The journal's detailed maps of ritual sites, the tracking of pack movements, the connections between missing witches—Rose had left breadcrumbs for me to follow.

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Rudy

We headed back into cave storage, leaving Daisy to mind the store. I needed all my focus to stay on mission, not on Elowen's scent—lavender and lightning wrapped in paper and stone—that called to something primal within me.

Rose's collection was unlike anything I'd encountered in my years of investigation—grimoires bound in materials I couldn't identify, artifacts whispering in dead languages, scrolls sealed with blood magic. All clues that might lead us to her, if we could decipher them in time.

"These tunnels go deeper than I expected," Elowen said ahead of me, witch-light dancing above her palm. The narrow passage forced us close, our shoulders brushing. "Rose expanded them last year for the 'problematic acquisitions.'"

"Problematic how?"

"The kind that try to possess their readers," she replied matter-of-factly. "Or rewrite reality. Or summon things from dimensions that shouldn't touch ours."

I raised an eyebrow. "Your aunt collects these for fun?"

"Rose believes dangerous knowledge should be preserved but contained." A hint of pride colored her voice. "Better in her cave system than circulating among those who don't understand the risks."

We reached a chamber I hadn't seen in my previous explorations—its walls lined with

ritual calendars and astronomical charts. Rose's scent lingered here, fresher than elsewhere. She'd been working here shortly before her disappearance.

A lunar calendar caught my attention, the next full moon circled boldly in red ink. Rose's precise handwriting filled the margins: Convergence point. Maximum potency. Final stage.

"Three days until the full moon," Elowen said, tension evident in her shoulders. "We're running out of time."

She moved to a large map spread across a central table, her fingers tracing the colored markers. "Seven points," she breathed, following the green markers. "Seven witches taken from different locations, forming a perfect ritual circle."

"And nine pack positions," I added, indicating the blue markers forming an outer circle around the witch points. "Classic blood magic configuration—the power of seven augmented by nine, creating sixteen points of corrupted energy."

"With one focal point at the center." She touched a black marker positioned at the southern quarry. "The alpha."

Her intuitive grasp of the situation was impressive. Most people would still be in denial over a missing relative, but Elowen was piecing together the conspiracy with analytical precision, her fear for Rose channeled into determined action.

"Rose knew," I said, pointing to notations along the map's edge. "She was tracking the connection between the missing witches and the ritual preparation."

"Which means she'd have confronted them," Elowen said, anxiety flashing across her face. "Alone. Without telling me. Typical Rose—always protecting everyone but herself."

The frustration and fear in her voice was raw. For a moment, her composed exterior cracked, revealing the depth of her worry. Before I could respond, Daisy appeared at the tunnel entrance, her form spectral in the cave's dim light.

"The Glitter & Stone where shadows speak," she announced cryptically. "Twilight hides what daylight seeks."

Elowen turned sharply. "Daisy, speak plainly. Do you know where Rose is?"

"Shadow Valley's veil grows thin on Wednesdays. The dancers know where the witches sleep. Mr. Cash keeps twilight's secrets for those who pay the proper price."

I exchanged a glance with Elowen. "The Glitter & Stone is a supernatural strip club in Shadow Valley—a gathering place for information that doesn't circulate in polite society."

"You think Rose went there investigating the missing witches?" The hope in her voice was painful to hear—desperate for any lead, any connection to her missing aunt.

"It makes sense. Shadow Valley exists in perpetual twilight due to degraded wards. Perfect place to hide captives."

Elowen stepped closer to Daisy, her voice tight with controlled emotion. "Is Rose still fighting? Is she alive?"

Daisy's expression softened, becoming unexpectedly clear. "The books say her pages remain unwritten. Her story continues, though the ink grows faint." Then, as quickly as the clarity appeared, it faded back into whimsy. "The mystery section is quite invested in the next chapter."

Relief transformed Elowen's face. Not certainty, but hope—Rose was alive. That conviction seemed to straighten her spine, sharpen her focus.

"This is it," Elowen said, her voice fierce with renewed determination. "A solid lead."

"Shadow Valley is dangerous territory," I cautioned. "The supernatural community there plays by different rules."

She met my gaze directly, blue eyes blazing. "You think that scares me? My aunt raised me after my parents died. She's the only family I have. I don't care if I have to walk into hell itself to find her."

Her declaration struck deep—the loyalty, the courage, the fierce protectiveness. My wolf responded with instinctive respect, recognizing a kindred spirit in the determination to protect family at any cost.

"We'll check it out tonight," I agreed. "Wednesday nights at The Glitter & Stone are quieter—better chance of getting information without attracting attention."

As we prepared to leave, an otherworldly energy pulsed through the tunnels—neither witch-magic nor pack power, but something ancient and unsettling. The protective wards flickered and strained.

Elowen's hand found mine instinctively in the disorientation. The contact created an unexpected connection—our energies aligning, steadying each other against the strange power.

"What was that?" she asked, eyes wide behind her glasses.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But it affected the wards."

"The barriers between worlds grow thin," Daisy's voice echoed. "The ritual circle seeks to make them thinner still." Her cryptic warning followed us back to the bookstore.

As we headed out of the caves to the bookstore, I caught Elowen watching me with that perceptive gaze.

"You felt it too, didn't you?" she asked quietly. "In the cave. When our magic connected."

"Yes," I admitted. "Never experienced anything like it before."

She nodded, something like relief crossing her features. "Good. I thought I might be going crazy."

"If you are, we both are," I replied.

Her smile was brief but genuine—a moment of connection amid the growing danger. "Shared delusions. How comforting."

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Elowen

Shadow Valley existed in perpetual twilight. As we crossed the boundary from Midnight Creek, the world shifted around us. The crisp clarity of my hometown's wards gave way to a hazy purple-tinged reality where shadows stretched impossibly long. The degraded magical barriers created a liminal space where supernatural elements bled through even to human perception.

I shivered as the strange pressure pressed against my witch senses. "The ward degradation is worse than I remembered."

Rudy walked close beside me, his presence solid and reassuring. "Shadow Valley's always operated on different principles. The supernatural community here prefers the ambiguity."

"You mean they prefer not having to follow rules." I scanned the neon-lit establishments with their gaudy displays promising supernatural pleasures—so different from Midnight Creek's quaint storefronts.

My mind kept circling back to Rose. Was she here somewhere in this perpetual dusk? Being held against her will? The longer she remained missing, the more desperate I felt. Three days until the full moon ritual. Time was running out.

The strange energy of this town seemed to loosen thoughts I'd normally keep contained. "Have you ever heard of cross-species mate bonds?" I asked.

Rudy's stride faltered slightly. "Rare but powerful. My father spoke of them

once—connections that transcend species barriers, merging magical signatures into something stronger than either alone."

"Rose mentioned them in her research," I added. "Said they were once revered as sacred bridges between supernatural communities before the divisions grew so rigid."

"Now they're mostly seen as political liabilities," he finished. "Dating is fine, well used to be, but mates – that's a complication in a world that prefers clear boundaries."

Something unspoken passed between us — an awareness I wasn't ready to acknowledge. My magic responded to his proximity differently than with any other werewolf, reaching outward rather than drawing in.

The Glitter & Stone loomed ahead, its purple neon sign casting eerie light across the dusk. The building seemed to absorb shadows, its stone facade embedded with crystals pulsing with faint magical energy. Two imposing bouncers flanked the front entrance.

The bouncers recognized Rudy, exchanging knowing glances when he mentioned tracking Rose. "Mr. Cash might know something," one offered. "He remembers everyone."

Inside, the strip club was a contradiction of luxury and decay—plush velvet booths, enchanted poles stretching impossibly high, supernatural dancers performing with magically enhanced movements. The air carried a faint metallic tang beneath the expensive liquor and cheap perfume—blood magic.

"Mr. Cash sees everything that happens in Shadow Valley," Rudy murmured, guiding me through the crowd. His body subtly shielded me from predatory gazes.

"Who exactly is Mr. Cash?" I asked, acutely aware of the enhanced senses

surrounding us.

"Some kind of crossbreed with connections everywhere. His only loyalty is to profit."

Verne, the gargoyle bartender, nodded us toward a door behind the bar. "He's expecting you," he said, concern flickering in his eyes as they lingered on me. "Be careful what you ask for."

The warning settled uneasily as we followed a fairy hostess to a door marked simply "Management."

Mr. Cash sat behind an ornate desk that dominated the small office. He was unlike any supernatural being I'd ever encountered—impossibly short and wide, with multiple chins, too many teeth, and golden eyes that blinked rapidly in quick succession.

"Well, well," his voice was surprisingly melodious. "The lone wolf and Rose's niece. How very... unexpected."

The way he said "unexpected" made it clear it was anything but. My witch senses prickled with warning. And how did he even know who I was? I'd certainly never been to the strip club before.

"We're looking for Rose," I said directly, refusing to be intimidated by his unnerving stare.

"So many people looking for so many things." Mr. Cash's fingers—short, pudgy, with too many joints—steeped under his multiple chins. "Information is valuable in Shadow Valley."

"Name your price," Rudy's voice was tight with barely restrained impatience.

Cash's gaze shifted between us, calculating. "A favor. Unspecified. To be called in when needed."

"No deal," Rudy said immediately. "Open-ended favors are too dangerous."

Cash leaned forward, his chair groaning under his weight. "Then perhaps a more immediate arrangement. I have a... situation requiring resolution."

"What situation?" Rudy's suspicion was evident.

"The fairy dancer, Elspeth, spoke to your aunt last." Cash's multiple chins quivered as he frowned. "She's been living in my protected quarters since. Pack enforcers have been watching my establishment continuously, waiting for her to leave."

I studied his expression. "You've been protecting her?"

"Protection costs," Cash said bluntly. "Rooms that could generate income, security resources diverted, potential business lost from wolves who disapprove. She knows too much about pack and witch business, and keeping her safe has become... unprofitable."

"So you want us to what—extract her?" Rudy asked.

"I want this situation resolved." Cash's golden eyes blinked rapidly. "Take her with you, convince the wolves to leave my establishment alone, I don't care which. But my business suffers while she remains, and the pack grows more aggressive by the day."

Now his offer made sense—pure self-interest. "You're not concerned about stopping the ritual."

"I'm concerned about my profit margins," Cash corrected. "Blood magic rituals,

supernatural politics—none of my concern as long as business flows. But recently, business has not been flowing."

Cash pressed a button, and the fairy hostess appeared with a tray bearing three crystal glasses filled with glowing blue liquid.

"What's this?" I asked, my witch senses instantly alert.

"Twilight Spirit. A specialty of mine." Cash's smile widened unnaturally. "Someone very interested in you two specifically requested I offer it. Paid handsomely for the privilege."

Rudy stiffened. "Who?"

"Client confidentiality," Cash demurred, though his eyes gleamed with amusement. "Let's just say there are... factions... who find the idea of a witch-wolf alliance intriguing."

"You're working for someone else," I realized. "Someone who wants to influence us."

"I work for profit," Cash corrected. "Sometimes that means negotiating between multiple interested parties." He gestured to the drinks. "The Twilight Spirit is harmless—it simply enhances natural connections. Makes what's already present... clearer. My benefactor believes you two might benefit from seeing certain... possibilities more clearly."

"And why would we drink something offered under such suspicious circumstances?" Rudy challenged.

Cash shrugged his impossibly wide shoulders. "Because I won't let you talk to Elspeth unless you do." His smile turned sly. "Besides, I will drink first."

He lifted his glass and took a substantial swallow, making a show of it. "Perfectly safe. Just illuminating."

I exchanged glances with Rudy.

"Who exactly is your client?" I pressed.

"Some think the old boundaries between species need to be broken. Some think new ones should be made. Me?" He shrugged. "I just sell information."

Reluctantly, I took the smallest possible sip of the glowing liquid. It tasted of blueberries and starlight, with an underlying wildness that warmed as it went down.

My magic responded immediately, becoming more vibrant, more present—but not out of control. Instead, it felt like a veil had been lifted, allowing me to perceive magical energies more clearly.

Including the energy between Rudy and me.

I glanced at him, startled to see golden threads of magic stretching between us, visible only to my enhanced perception. His eyes widened slightly as he took a small sip from his own glass, suggesting he could see it too—the way our magical signatures reached for each other, intertwining in the space between us.

Cash watched our reactions with unmistakable satisfaction. "Fascinating, isn't it? How certain energies naturally complement each other?"

"The fairy dancer," Rudy prompted, clearly trying to refocus the conversation despite the new awareness humming between us.

"Third stage, far left," Cash directed, waving a pudgy hand in dismissal. "Our

business is concluded. Enjoy your drinks."

The abrupt dismissal felt calculated, but I was too distracted by the new magical awareness to protest. As we left the office, I caught Mr. Cash's reflection in a mirror—his expression no longer bored but intensely focused, watching us with something that looked disturbingly like anticipation.

The club seemed more crowded when we re-emerged, the music pulsing with a hypnotic beat that made my skin tingle. The Twilight Spirit's effects continued to build, not overwhelming my senses but enhancing them, making the magical currents throughout the club visible as flowing streams of colored light.

We made our way toward the stage Cash had indicated.

Rudy glanced at me, his eyes briefly flaring gold. "I can see your magic. Actually see it."

"I can see yours too," I admitted. "Like golden threads reaching out."

His expression grew troubled. "And connecting with yours. That's not normal, Elowen."

Before I could respond, we reached the third stage where a fairy dancer with translucent wings performed. Elspeth—it had to be. Unlike the other dancers whose movements were sensual but practiced, hers carried a desperate energy, her wings occasionally fluttering with what looked like fear rather than performance. When our eyes met, recognition flashed across her features, followed immediately by panic.

She finished her dance quickly, disappearing backstage before we could approach. Rudy nodded toward a side corridor. "Service area. She'll have to pass through there to reach the dressing rooms."

We positioned ourselves in the shadows of the corridor, waiting. Minutes later, Elspeth appeared, moving hurriedly with her head down. When she spotted us, she froze like a cornered animal.

"We're not here to hurt you," I said quickly. "We're looking for Rose Montgomery. I'm her niece."

The fairy's eyes widened. "You shouldn't be here," she whispered, glancing nervously over her shoulder. "They watch me. All the time."

"We can help you," I assured her. "Cash told us you've been staying in his protected quarters. You don't have to remain here."

Elspeth's wings fluttered with nervous energy. "You don't understand. There's nowhere safe for me now. The pack has marked me—they can track my fairy signature anywhere I go."

"Then come with us," I suggested. "To Midnight Creek. The wards there are stronger."

"No," she said firmly. "It wouldn't be safe."

"Is there somewhere else you could go?" Rudy asked. "Someone who could protect you after we leave?"

"There's a fae sanctuary in the outer reaches of Shadow Valley," she admitted. "Cash has been... negotiating my passage. For a substantial fee, of course."

"We'll cover it," I said without hesitation. "Consider it payment for information about Rose."

Relief flickered across her features before worry returned. "The pack. The corrupted ones," she explained, wings trembling visibly. "They took Rose after she spoke to me. They'll take you too if they see us talking."

"Please," I moved closer, letting my witch signature become perceivable to her. "Rose is my only family. We need to find her before the full moon ritual."

Elspeth's fear warred with compassion. Finally, she nodded sharply. "The old quarries east of town. They're keeping the witches there—seven of them, including your aunt. For the doorway ritual."

"Doorway?" Rudy pressed. "What doorway?"

"I don't know what it means," Elspeth whispered, her voice trembling. "The alpha isn't himself anymore. Something else looks through his eyes. Something wrong."

The revelation sent a chill down my spine. "And the witches?"

"Power sources. Their natural magic channeled through blood magic corruption." Her eyes fixed on mine, suddenly intense. "Your aunt is still fighting them. She's weakened their hold somehow, disrupted the preparation rituals. That's why they've kept her isolated from the others."

My heart clenched. "Is she hurt?"

"Weakened, but alive." Elspeth's wings fluttered nervously. "They need her conscious and her will intact for the ritual to work. But after..." She didn't finish the sentence.

"The witches are at the southern quarry now?" Rudy asked, his body tense with urgent energy.

"Not all of them. They're gathering them for a preparation ritual tonight, but the main ceremony is at the full moon." Elspeth's gaze darted toward the main club area. "I have to go. If they see us talking—"

"One last thing," I interrupted. "Do you know who's really behind this? Is it just the alpha?"

"I don't know," she said and then she was gone.

"We need to leave," Rudy said, his hand finding mine with unexpected urgency. "If they're gathering witches tonight for a preparation ritual, the pack will be on high alert."

I nodded, but as we turned to go, I caught sight of a wolf I recognized from the Silver Flask—one of the enforcers who had confronted us there. He was speaking with Mr. Cash near the bar, his gaze scanning the crowd with predatory focus.

"Too late," I murmured. "We've been made."

Rudy followed my gaze, his body shifting subtly into a protective stance. "Back exit. Through the service corridor. Now."

We moved quickly, slipping through the crowd toward the service area Elspeth had used. The effects of the Twilight Spirit continued to intensify, making the magical connections throughout the club visible as a complex web of energies. Most concerning were the threads connecting several patrons to the pack enforcer—tainted, sickly bonds that pulsed with corrupted magic.

We reached the back exit and emerged into the perpetual twilight of Shadow Valley's alleyways. The cool night air should have cleared my head, but instead, it intensified the magical awareness. Every sense felt heightened—the textures of brick against my

fingertips, the subtle shifts in magical currents around us, and most of all, the golden threads connecting me to Rudy, growing stronger with each passing moment.

"We should get back to Midnight Creek," I said. "They're watching the car," he said, peeking around the side of the building. "We should lay low for a bit."

But when he turned, his eyes met mine, the gold in them brightening. I stepped closer to him. "Elowen." My name was a warning and a plea combined. "This isn't—"

"I know." I reached up, my fingertips brushing his jaw. "The Twilight Spirit is enhancing what's already between us. Making it impossible to ignore." I could see our magics intertwining more visibly now, witch-violet and wolf-gold creating patterns that danced in the space between us.

"I've wanted you since you threatened me with that book," he admitted, voice dropping to a growl that sent heat pooling low in my belly.

"I've wanted you since you shifted from wolf to man and glared at me like I was the intruder." The confession fell from my lips with surprising ease, walls lowering that I normally kept firmly in place.

We moved at the same moment, meeting halfway in a kiss that felt like inevitability. His mouth claimed mine with hunger that matched my own, his arms pulling me against him with desperate strength. I gasped against his lips, my magic surging in response, reaching for his power with joyful recognition.

We stumbled backward until my back hit the wall of the alley, hidden in shadow from the main street. Some distant part of my mind recognized the danger, the vulnerability, but it was drowned out by the overwhelming need to be closer to him, to feel our magics merge completely.

"This isn't how I wanted this," Rudy murmured against my neck, his lips trailing fire across my skin. "Not because of some supernatural cocktail."

"It's not the drink," I insisted, fingers tangling in his hair. "It's just... lowering our barriers. This was always going to happen."

A growl rumbled low in his chest, vibrating against me as his hands slid beneath my shirt, rough palms gliding over my bare skin. Our magics flared together, creating a cocoon of power around us that shimmered with mingled violet and gold.

The contrast between his callused touch and my softness sent shockwaves of heat straight to my core. My magic crackled in response, violet sparks flickering along my fingertips before dissolving into the air. For once, it wasn't wild or erratic—it flowed in perfect synchrony with the desire pounding through my veins.

"Tell me to stop," he growled, his restraint hanging by a thread. "If there's any part of you that doesn't want this—"

"I want this," I breathed, meeting his gaze directly. "I want you. Whatever happens next."

Something primal flashed in his eyes, and then his control snapped. He claimed my mouth in a kiss that stole the breath from my lungs, his body pressing me hard against the wall. His hands roamed lower, lifting my skirt and yanking down my underwear. It dropped to my feet, and I stepped out of it.

He gave a sharp inhale, then his fingers were between my legs, parting me, stroking through the slickness pooling there. A satisfied growl vibrated through his chest.

"Fuck, Elowen," he groaned, his forehead pressing against mine for a brief, trembling second. "You're already so wet for me."

I whimpered as he teased my clit, slow circles that sent lightning straight to my core. My hips jerked forward instinctively, chasing more, but he held me firm, keeping me pinned against the rough brick.

"Patience," he murmured, voice thick with dark amusement. "I want to feel you unravel first."

His fingers delved deeper, sliding between my folds, coaxing more moans from my lips. I braced my hands against his chest, fingers digging into the hard muscle beneath his shirt, barely able to think past the sensation of his touch. His rhythm quickened, pressing, stroking, every movement designed to push me higher. My magic surged in response, a wild, shimmering pulse between us, feeding into the storm of pleasure building inside me.

"Rudy—" I gasped, my body tightening, pleasure cresting too fast, too sharp.

He pulled his fingers away just as I teetered on the edge, making me cry out in frustration. His hands gripped my waist, spinning me effortlessly to face the wall. I barely had time to process the shift before his palm slid down my spine, urging me to arch for him.

"Stay just like that," he ordered, his voice rough with command. "I want to feel you like this."

The sound of his zipper, the sharp intake of breath as he freed himself—then the blunt, thick head of his cock pressed against my entrance. He didn't tease this time, didn't make me wait. He thrust forward, seating himself deep with one hard stroke, stretching me, filling me until I had no choice but to take him completely.

A broken moan tore from my lips, my fingers splayed against the brick. He was so big, so deep, the fullness almost unbearable. But instead of giving me time to adjust,

he reached around, fingers finding my clit again, rubbing in tight, deliberate circles.

"Rudy!" My voice was high, desperate, the pleasure overwhelming.

"That's it, little witch," he growled against my ear, his breath hot on my skin. "Take me. Feel how perfectly you fit around me."

He set a relentless pace, thrusting deep and slow, each movement perfectly timed with the strokes of his fingers against my clit. My body clenched around him, caught between the pleasure of his cock stretching me and the devastating friction at my core.

The alley faded, the world narrowing to nothing but the sensation of him inside me, surrounding me, owning me.

"Mine," he growled against my neck, his hips snapping harder, deeper. "Say it."

"Yours," I gasped, no hesitation, no doubt.

"Fuck, Elowen—" His rhythm faltered, his body shuddering against mine. "Come for me. Now."

His fingers pressed just right, his cock hitting that perfect spot inside me, and I shattered. My orgasm ripped through me, pleasure so intense it blurred into magic, spilling outward in a violet surge of power. Rudy groaned, his grip tightening as he thrust deep one last time.

His release spilling into me as he bit into my shoulder. I didn't even feel the pain of the bite, but with it, the mate bond locked into place with a pulse of raw, electric energy.

We stayed like that, bodies shaking, magic settling around us in shimmering waves. My cheek rested against the cool brick, his weight solid and grounding behind me. His fingers traced the new mark forming on my shoulder—his mark. His claim.

A claim I hadn't expected.

Rudy's breath was warm against my skin, but his body was tense, his hands hesitant now where they'd been so sure just moments before. "Elowen." His voice was rough, strained. "I didn't know—"

"I didn't either," I admitted, my own voice barely above a whisper. My heart pounded, but not from fear. From uncertainty. From the weight of what had just happened. "But... you want to undo it?" The words were quiet, but saying them hurt more than I'd anticipated. The thought that he might regret this, might see it as a mistake—it made my chest ache in a way I wasn't prepared for.

His fingers tightened on my skin, and I felt the sharp spike of his emotions through the bond—shock, a flash of fear, then something deeper. Fierce. Protective. "No. Never." He spun me around, his grip strong but not forceful, his golden eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine. "You're mine now." The words were nearly a growl, but beneath them, I felt the raw edge of vulnerability. "And I've never wanted anyone more."

Relief flooded through me so fast I nearly laughed, but I swallowed it back, searching his face for any sign of hesitation. There was none. Only the same uncertainty I felt. The same unspoken fear— Did I want this? Did he? Would we be enough?

I let out a slow breath, pressing my palm against his chest, right over the steady beat of his heart. "Good," I said, voice steadier than I felt. "Because you're mine now too."

Something in him eased at that, tension unraveling from his frame as if he'd been

bracing for something painful. A slow, wicked grin ghosted across his lips, but his hands trembled slightly where they held me. I realized then—he'd been afraid of my answer just as much as I'd been afraid of his.

Later, as we stood trembling in the aftermath, our bodies still pressed together and the mate bond humming with new life between us, reality began to reassert itself. The magical mark on my shoulder—his mark—tingled with residual power. Through our new connection, I could feel him.

Not just his presence, but his emotions. The way they swirled in an intricate storm—satisfaction, concern, and beneath it all, a fierce joy he couldn't entirely suppress. But there was something else, too. A lingering shadow of doubt, not in me, but in himself.

"I can feel you," I whispered, still adjusting to the strange dual awareness. "Your emotions. Your magic."

His thumb brushed my cheek with surprising tenderness. "And I can feel yours." His voice was softer now, the rough edges worn down by exhaustion and the strange, undeniable rightness between us. "Are you really okay with this? With being permanently connected to someone you've known for days?"

The question contained worlds. Was I okay with the loss of independence I'd always guarded so fiercely? With being bound to a lone wolf in the middle of supernatural tensions? With the politics that would inevitably follow?

But deeper than that was the fear that made my throat tighten—that he might not be okay with it. That maybe I wasn't what he wanted after all.

I swallowed hard, choosing honesty. "I don't know."

His expression flickered, something unreadable crossing his face before he carefully masked it. I felt the way his heart clenched, the way he tried to shield the pang of uncertainty from me, but the bond didn't lie. He was afraid I'd reject this. Reject him.

I reached up, tracing my fingers along his jaw, grounding myself in the warmth of his skin. "But I don't regret it."

Surprise flashed through the bond, and then his shoulders sagged slightly, relief rolling off him in waves. "You mean that?"

"I do." I touched the mate mark on my shoulder, still tingling with magical energy. "We were manipulated into the timing, but not into the connection itself. That was already forming. We both felt it. This just... forced us to acknowledge it sooner."

His relief was palpable now, a quiet storm settling inside him. "We'll figure out the rest together."

A beat of silence stretched between us, something unspoken lingering in the air. Then Rudy exhaled, his hand sliding down to lace his fingers with mine.

"He knew," Rudy said after a moment, anger threading through his voice. "Cash manipulated us into forming the mate bond."

"But he was working for someone else," I added, straightening my clothing with shaking hands. "Some third party who wanted us bonded. But why? What do they gain from it?"

Rudy's expression darkened. "In the current climate, a witch-wolf mating is politically complicated for both of us. It makes us stronger, but also targets from multiple sides."

I considered the possibilities. "Cash mentioned someone who thinks 'freely chosen bonds' might combat the corruption. What if someone is deliberately working against the entity behind the blood magic?"

"Or setting us up to be more valuable sacrifices," Rudy countered grimly. "A mated pair's bond would generate more power in a ritual than two separate individuals."

The implications were troubling. We'd been pawns in some larger game—one where we couldn't even identify all the players. But one thing was certain now.

We weren't playing alone anymore.

As we made our way back toward the boundary between Shadow Valley and Midnight Creek, I noticed something extraordinary. My magic, so unreliable for years, now hummed with steady purpose, strengthened and focused by its connection to Rudy's power. When I called a small flame to my palm experimentally, it formed instantly—perfect and controlled, without the erratic surges that had plagued me since childhood.

"The bond stabilizes your magic," Rudy observed, watching the flame dance steadily above my hand.

"And what does it do for you?" I asked, curious about the reciprocal effects.

He closed his eyes briefly, seeming to look inward. "Everything's... sharper. Clearer. My wolf senses are enhanced, but there's more control too. Less struggle between man and wolf."

The discovery was unexpected but welcome. Whatever Mr. Cash's motivations for facilitating our bond, it had given us strengths we hadn't possessed separately. Strengths we would need if we were going to save Rose and stop whatever entity was

planning to use the full moon ritual as a doorway between worlds.

"We need to check the southern quarry," I said as we crossed back into Midnight Creek's more structured reality. "If they're gathering witches there tonight—"

"We need a plan first," Rudy countered, his strategic mind already working. "Going in unprepared against pack enforcers and blood magic would be suicide."

Through our bond, I felt his protective instincts warring with his respect for my abilities—a complex balance that made me appreciate him even more. He wasn't trying to hold me back. He was thinking tactically.

"Tomorrow then," I agreed. "We map the quarries, gather what information we have from Rose's research, and make a proper plan."

As Midnight Creek came into view, the weight of what had happened—what we'd learned—settled over us. Seven witches, including Rose. A corrupted alpha serving as vessel for an ancient entity. A ritual designed to open a doorway between worlds.

And us, newly bonded, walking into the center of it all.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

Rudy

Dawn crept through the windows of Elowen's apartment above the bookstore, painting her sleeping form in gold. I hadn't slept—couldn't sleep—not with the mate bond singing through my blood and Rose's peril weighing on my conscience.

I traced the mark on Elowen's shoulder, still hardly believing it was real. My mate. Three days ago I'd been a lone wolf tracking blood magic corruption. Now I was bonded to a witch I barely knew, while her aunt remained captive.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen—not manipulated by some mysterious third party through Cash's Twilight Spirit. Not while Rose was still missing and blood magic corruption spread through the supernatural community.

But the bond didn't care about timing. It pulsed between us, unfamiliar yet undeniable. I could sense her presence—an awareness that hadn't been there before—but it was faint, like hearing a sound through thick walls. I knew she was there, but the details remained elusive.

My phone vibrated. Lola. Three missed calls already. The clock showed 6:30 a.m., which meant news of our mating had already spread through supernatural channels.

I slipped from the bed and moved to the kitchen to return the call.

"Tell me you didn't," Lola demanded without preamble.

"Good morning to you too." I kept my voice low, glancing toward the bedroom.

"A witch, Rudy? In the middle of all this? Are you trying to paint a target on both your backs?"

My wolf bristled at her tone, but I forced myself to remain calm. "It wasn't exactly planned. Cash put something in our drinks"

"That manipulative bastard," she said. "What was it?"

"Something called Twilight Spirit. Supposedly enhances existing connections."

"Existing—" Lola broke off, then sighed. "So you were already halfway there. Should have known from how you talked about her."

Had I been that transparent? I'd spent years mastering control, keeping my emotions hidden. But apparently one witch with unpredictable magic and steel in her eyes had cracked that facade without even trying.

"The pack knows," Lola continued, her voice dropping. "Curtis was at The Glitter & Stone last night. He's been... changed since he returned. The blood magic is stronger in him than the others."

"Changed how?" Curtis was the enforcer Elspeth had mentioned in connection with Rose's disappearance.

"Like he's not entirely himself anymore. Like something else is driving him." The concern in her voice was palpable. "He reports directly to the alpha now, and he was watching you two last night. This mating will complicate the rescue operation."

Understatement of the century. A lone wolf mating a witch during the worst supernatural tensions in decades was more than a complication—it was a declaration. A challenge to both the pack's blood magic corruption and the growing divisions

between species.

"Any news on Rose?" I asked, refocusing on what mattered most.

"Nothing concrete. But there are whispers about a major ritual planned for the next full moon. Something bigger than their previous attempts." Lola paused. "And Rudy? The pack isn't the only group taking an interest in your new mate. Oscar Katz has been asking questions about Elowen."

A protective growl escaped before I could stop it. Through our bond, I felt Elowen stir in response, her consciousness reaching drowsily for mine.

She appeared in the doorway moments later after I had hung up with Lola, wrapped in a blanket, hair tousled from sleep. The mate mark stood out clearly on her shoulder, already healing with supernatural speed. I couldn't feel her emotions, not fully, but there was something... a faint pull when she looked at me. Recognition. Connection.

"Was that about Rose?" she asked immediately, moving to the coffee maker.

Her first thought was for her aunt—not the life-changing bond we'd formed, not the dangers we now faced, but Rose.

"Lola, with an update on pack movements," I replied.

She nodded.

I studied her, searching for regret in her expression. Instead, I found quiet determination, her focus sharpened by urgency. A warmth flickered in my chest—mine or hers, I couldn't tell. The bond wasn't clear enough for that yet.

"You're handling this... well," I observed cautiously.

A wry smile touched her lips. "Freaking out won't help us find Rose." She poured coffee into two mugs. "Besides, I've always adapted quickly. Had to, after my parents died."

The casual reference to her loss struck me. She rarely mentioned her parents. Like me, she kept her pain private, controlled.

"There's something else you should know," I said, meeting her eyes directly. "Dr. Katz has been asking questions about you. Specifically you, not just about Rose."

Her brow furrowed, concern flickering through our bond. "Why would he care about me?"

"I don't know. But his timing in Midnight Creek, his interest in blood magic research..."

"You think he's connected to Rose's disappearance?" Skepticism colored her voice.

"I think nothing about Oscar Katz is coincidental." I leaned against the counter, organizing my thoughts. "Rose trusted him enough to consult him on blood magic countermeasures. But she had notes—ones that suggested she wasn't sure of him either."

Elowen frowned, her fingers tightening around her mug. "You mean she had doubts?"

"Maybe. Or maybe she just wasn't willing to trust him completely. But if he was working with her, he might know something we don't."

She exhaled, processing that. "Then we need to talk to him."

"We will. But first, we check the quarry sites." I showed her my phone, Lola's latest text flashing across the screen: Pack on move. Multiple enforcers headed to Shadow Valley. Something big happening tonight.

The timeline was accelerating.

As we moved with unified purpose, I marveled at how naturally we fell into partnership. The mate bond was there, but it wasn't everything—not yet. It wasn't dictating our choices, just amplifying something that had already been forming between us. Something built on trust, necessity, and something deeper we hadn't quite put a name to yet.

Whatever the alpha planned, whatever entity waited beyond the ritual doorway, we would face it together. Not because fate or magic or drugged drinks had forced us together, but because we chose to stand side by side.

And that choice made all the difference.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

Elowen

The abandoned quarry stretched before us like an open wound in the mountainside, its white stone walls reflecting the afternoon sun with blinding intensity. I shielded my eyes, my witch sight activating automatically to scan for magical traces.

Three quarry sites on this side of town, and this was the first. From the outside, it looked unremarkable—just another abandoned mining operation. But my senses told a different story. Magic lingered here, subtle but unmistakable, like the metallic taste before a lightning strike.

"Blood magic residue," I confirmed, kneeling to examine faded markings near the entrance. "Recent, but not fresh. Days old, maybe a week."

Rudy crouched beside me, his wolf senses complementing my magical perception. Through our new bond, I felt his focus sharpen, cataloging scents and sounds beyond human or witch perception.

"Pack enforcers were here," he murmured, running his fingers through dust. "At least four distinct scents, including Curtis." His jaw tightened at the name. "And witches. Three... no, four different magical signatures."

My heart leapt. "Can you tell if one was Rose?"

He closed his eyes, concentrating. "Similar magical trace. Could be Rose."

Hope and dread warred in my chest as I pushed to my feet. The thought of her being

held captive for some dark ritual made my hands shake with barely controlled fury. Time was running out. Two days until the full moon.

"Let's check inside," I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

We moved cautiously into the quarry, following a path that wound between massive blocks of cut stone. The walls rose around us, creating a natural amphitheater open to the sky. At the center, dark stains marred the white stone floor in a pattern too deliberate to be natural.

"Ritual circle," I identified, my voice tight with anger. "Classic blood magic configuration—seven points for channeling witch power, nine for wolf essence, and one central position for the ritual leader."

"The alpha," Rudy growled.

I knelt beside the nearest point, touching the stained stone gingerly. Magic sparked at my fingertips, but not the corrupted feeling I expected. This was cleaner, more focused. Protective magic—Rose's signature style.

"This is strange," I murmured, excitement building. "These aren't corruption sigils. They're countermeasures—protection spells worked into the ritual circle."

Rudy frowned. "Why would they include protection spells in a blood magic ritual?"

"They wouldn't." Recognition dawned as I traced the hidden patterns. "These were added afterward. Someone came back and modified the ritual space—weakened it, disrupted the corruption."

"Rose," Rudy said with certainty. "She found their ritual site and sabotaged it."

"Which would explain why they took her." I stood, surveying the circle with renewed determination. "She was interfering with their plans, undermining the blood magic directly."

Something glinted among the stones nearby. I reached down and picked up a small silver object half-buried in dust—Rose's protective amulet, the one she never removed, inscribed with our family sigil.

"She was definitely here." My voice broke as I clutched the amulet, its familiar magic warming at my touch. "And she left this deliberately for me to find. It's not broken or torn—it was placed."

Rudy took the amulet, examining it carefully. "There's something inside." His fingers worked the clasp, revealing a hidden compartment containing a tightly folded piece of paper.

My hands trembled as I unfolded it, revealing Rose's precise handwriting:

El—Seven witches, nine wolves, one traitor. Look beyond the obvious alpha. Blood magic serves a greater power. Katz knows the truth. Trust only those whose bonds are freely chosen, not magically compelled. Seven, nine, one = moon's fullest light. —R

"A greater power behind the alpha?" Rudy read over my shoulder, skepticism flowing through our bond.

"I don't know," I admitted, studying the note again. "But Rose specifically mentions Katz. He must know something crucial about all this."

I slipped Rose's note and amulet into my pocket, drawing strength from having something of hers close. Her message confirmed our theory about the full moon ritual but added new layers of complexity. A traitor. A greater power. The game was bigger

than we'd realized.

As we turned to leave, a sound echoed off the quarry walls—stone shifting against stone. We froze.

"We're not alone," Rudy whispered, his body shifting protectively.

Through our bond, I felt his senses extend. "Pack enforcers," he confirmed quietly. "Watching the quarry. They know we're here."

I reached for my magic, feeling it respond with newfound steadiness. Since the mate bond, my power flowed predictably, the erratic surges that had plagued me since childhood now replaced by a constant current.

"Options?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

Rudy assessed the quarry layout. "They're blocking the main exit. But there's another way out through the upper ledges." He nodded toward a series of narrow paths cut into the quarry wall. "Used by the miners. Leads to the ridge above."

"Then that's our path." I squeezed his hand. "I'll cover our retreat."

His protective instincts flared, but to his credit, he didn't try to take charge. Through our bond, I felt his struggle between wolf-driven protection and respect for my abilities. The latter won, his nod conveying both trust and concern.

"On my mark," he murmured. "They're spreading out, trying to flank us."

We moved as one toward the quarry wall, keeping to shadows cast by massive stone blocks. I silently thanked Rose for the combat training she'd insisted on during my teenage years, lessons I'd complained about endlessly but now appreciated

desperately.

The first enforcer appeared at the quarry entrance—a young wolf with the telltale red glow in his eyes that signaled blood magic influence.

"Now," Rudy breathed, and we broke from cover, racing toward the narrow path up the quarry wall.

The enforcers spotted us immediately, howls rising as they gave chase. Two shifted into wolf form, while the third maintained human shape, hands glowing with borrowed magic.

"Blood witch," I identified, recognizing the unnatural signature. "They've got witch magic working through him."

The corrupted wolf-witch raised his hands, sending a blast of perverted magic toward us. I countered instinctively, my shield spell snapping into place with surprising strength. The collision of magics sent sparks showering across the quarry floor.

We reached the narrow path, Rudy taking the lead while I provided cover. The wolf enforcers scrambled up the quarry wall on either side, trying to cut us off. The blood witch hung back, gathering power for another attack.

"Keep moving," I called to Rudy. "I'm right behind you."

The next magical assault came as we were halfway up the path—a wave of corrupted energy seeking to unravel my protective spells. But my magic held firm, responding to my will with newfound precision. I countered with a binding spell, briefly immobilizing the blood witch.

One of the wolf enforcers reached the ridge above us, preparing to pounce as we

neared the top. Rudy sensed the danger, his warning flowing through our bond an instant before the wolf leaped.

I didn't think—just reacted. My magic surged outward, catching the enforcer mid-air and throwing him back with controlled force. The spell executed perfectly, without the wild fluctuations that had plagued me for years.

Rudy reached back, catching my hand to pull me up the final steep section. We crested the ridge together, emerging onto forested mountainside above the quarry.

"This way," he urged, leading us deeper into the woods where the trees would mask our scent.

We ran in silence, moving swiftly until the sounds of pursuit faded. Finally, we paused in a small clearing to catch our breath.

"That was..." Rudy studied me with newfound appreciation. "You handled that blood witch like he was nothing."

"My magic is different now," I explained, still processing the change myself. "Steadier. More responsive."

"The mate bond," he said. "It's stabilizing your power somehow."

I nodded, examining my hands where magic still tingled beneath my skin. "Rose always said witch magic was about balance and connection. Maybe having the mate bond—a permanent magical anchor—helps focus what was scattered before."

"We need to get to the second quarry site," I said, refocusing on our mission. The clock was ticking for Rose. "If they're watching this one, they might be monitoring the others too."

Rudy checked his phone. "The southern quarry is closer, but more exposed. The eastern one is farther, but provides better cover."

"Eastern," I decided. "Better to avoid another confrontation until we know more about what we're facing."

As we hiked through the forest, I turned Rose's note over in my mind, examining her cryptic warning.

"What Rose wrote about a greater power behind the alpha," I said. "What do you think she meant?"

Rudy frowned thoughtfully. "Pack structures are hierarchical by nature. Alphas lead, but they're not infallible. Sometimes outside influences can corrupt an alpha's judgment."

"Like blood magic."

"Yes, but Rose seemed to suggest something beyond that." He ducked under a low-hanging branch. "Someone directing the blood magic itself."

The implication was troubling. We'd been assuming the alpha was the central corrupting force. But if someone else was pulling the strings, manipulating both alpha and blood magic for some greater purpose...

"Whatever's happening at the full moon ritual must be the culmination of something bigger," I reasoned. "Seven witches, nine wolves, one leader—it's a powerful magical combination. That many practitioners could generate enough corrupted energy to affect supernatural communities far beyond Midnight Creek."

"A supernatural power grab," Rudy said darkly. "Using blood magic to create forced

loyalty on a massive scale."

"Which is why we need to talk to Katz." I touched Rose's amulet in my pocket. "If he knows what Rose discovered..."

The eastern quarry was smaller than the first, more overgrown with decades of neglect. But the signs of recent activity were unmistakable—broken branches, disturbed undergrowth, magical traces lingering in the air.

"More blood magic," I confirmed as we examined the site. "But different somehow. Not ritual preparation, but... experimentation?"

The quarry floor held scattered marking circles, smaller than the ritual formation we'd seen earlier. Each contained different sigil combinations, as if someone had been testing variations of the same spell.

"Look at this." Rudy crouched beside one of the circles, indicating scratch marks in the stone. "Someone was bound here. Struggling against restraints."

I swallowed hard, pushing down the image of Rose being used for magical experiments. Through our bond, Rudy sensed my fear, his presence offering wordless comfort.

"These are structured tests," I observed, examining the variations between circles. "Methodical. Scientific, almost."

"Not the alpha's style," Rudy agreed. "He's more direct. Brutal."

"So someone else is involved. Someone with a research approach to blood magic."

The implication hung between us. An academic, perhaps. Someone with access to

magical knowledge and a scientific methodology.

"Ready for the last site?" Rudy asked after we'd documented everything.

I nodded, checking the time. "We're losing daylight. The southern quarry is at least an hour's hike from here."

"We could come back tomorrow," he suggested.

"We don't have the luxury of waiting." My voice hardened as I clutched Rose's amulet. "The full moon is in two days. Rose has already endured too long in captivity. I won't leave her there another night if I can help it."

He nodded, his priorities aligning with mine. "But we approach carefully. No unnecessary risks."

The trek to the southern quarry took longer than expected. By the time we reached the site, twilight was gathering, shadows lengthening across the landscape.

Unlike the previous quarries, this one showed immediate signs of current use. Fresh tire tracks marked a service road. Wooden crates stamped with magical containment symbols sat stacked near a small outbuilding. Power hummed in the air, a mixture of natural ley line energy and something more disturbing.

"This is it," I whispered, my witch sight revealing layers of magical protections around the perimeter. "Their main base of operations."

We moved closer, keeping to the cover of trees along the quarry edge. From our vantage point, we could see into the main quarry floor, where a ritual circle far larger than the others had been meticulously carved into the stone. Seven crystalline pillars stood at points around the circle, each glowing with faint magical energy. Nine steel

cages—wolf-sized—waited empty nearby.

"They're preparing for the full moon ritual," I breathed, recognizing the magical configurations. "Those crystals are meant to channel and amplify witch power."

"And the cages are for wolves," Rudy added grimly. "Forced participation."

Movement below caught our attention—a figure in a tailored suit examining one of the crystal pillars, making notes on a tablet.

"Oscar Katz," Rudy growled.

I placed a restraining hand on his arm. "We don't know which side he's on yet. Rose's note said he knows the truth, not that he's responsible."

Before Rudy could respond, more figures emerged from the outbuilding—two pack enforcers escorting a woman whose hands were bound with spelled silver chains.

"Rose," I gasped, surging forward instinctively, a mixture of relief and fury burning through me.

Rudy caught me, pulling me back into cover. "Wait. We can't just charge in. Look at the security."

He was right, but it took every ounce of self-control to stay hidden when Rose was right there, so close I could almost call out to her. Beyond the visible enforcers, magical wards shimmered around the perimeter, and I could sense more guards stationed at various points. A direct rescue attempt would be suicide.

Rose looked thinner than when I'd last seen her, and her shirt and pants were torn and dirty, but she stood straight, her expression defiant as Oscar approached her. They

spoke briefly before the enforcers led her toward one of the crystal pillars.

"They're testing the channeling capabilities," I realized, watching as Rose was positioned beside the crystal. "Using her magic to calibrate the system."

Oscar made adjustments to the crystal, then stood back as Rose was forced to place her hands against its surface. Even from our hidden position, I could see her resistance, her refusal to cooperate fully despite her captivity.

Pride and rage warred within me—pride at her continued defiance, rage at those who dared to bind her. Through our bond, Rudy's emotions mirrored mine, his protective instincts extending to Rose.

"We need to get her out," I whispered fiercely. "But not like this. Not against these odds."

Rudy nodded. "We need reinforcements. Lola's loyal wolves, maybe. And a plan to counter those magical barriers."

"And we need to know exactly what they're planning." I watched as Rose was led back toward the outbuilding, her head held high despite the chains. "The full ritual, what it's meant to accomplish."

"Katz," Rudy growled, watching the professor continue his work. "He's at the center of this. Whether he's helping Rose or hurting her, he knows what's happening."

"We talk to him tomorrow," I decided. "Directly. No more speculation."

As darkness fell, we retreated from our observation point, careful to leave no trace. The trek back through the mountain forest was conducted mostly in silence, both of us processing what we'd seen, planning our next moves.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

Rudy

Midnight Creek College sprawled below Main Street, its campus a blend of modern buildings and restored historical structures. The supernatural studies department occupied Blackwood Hall, a gothic stone edifice that seemed more suited to an ancient European university than our small mountain town.

I kept my senses alert as we climbed the steps, tracking heartbeats and scents throughout the building. My wolf remained on high alert, protective instincts heightened since forming the mate bond with Elowen.

"His office is on the third floor," Elowen said, her determination flowing through our bond. "Charlotte says he's usually there before classes."

"You're sure about this?" I asked, not for the first time. Despite Rose's note mentioning Katz, distrust still coiled in my gut. I'd seen him at the quarry, handling the very crystals designed to drain witch power.

"I'm sure we need answers," Elowen replied, her steady pragmatism balancing my suspicion. "Whatever his role, he knows more than we do about what's happening to Rose."

We reached the third floor, following a corridor of carved wooden doors bearing professors' names in gold lettering. Oscar's corner office was distinguished by additional magical wards subtly worked into the doorframe—the kind designed to prevent eavesdropping.

Before we could knock, the door swung open.

"I was wondering when you two would come find me." Oscar stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed as usual. "Please, come in."

The office beyond matched the man—organized and tastefully decorated with supernatural artifacts and ancient texts. A massive desk dominated one wall, while comfortable seating near the windows suggested a space for longer discussions.

"We're here about Rose," I said.

"Of course you are." Oscar gestured to the seating area. "And about the blood magic corruption. And about the full moon ritual planned for tomorrow night. Please, sit."

We exchanged a glance, surprised by his forthright acknowledgment of the very issues we'd come to discuss.

"We saw you," Elowen said as we sat, keeping her voice steady despite the anger I could feel through our bond. "At the southern quarry. With Rose."

"Yes, I expected you might have." Oscar moved to a cabinet, retrieving an ancient-looking book bound in leather so dark it appeared almost black. "What you didn't see—couldn't see from your vantage point—was what I was actually doing."

"Which was?" I prompted, skepticism clear in my tone.

Oscar placed the book on the coffee table between us. Its cover bore no title, only a series of symbols that made my wolf instinctively recoil. Blood magic, old and powerful.

"Weakening the crystals," he said simply. "Altering their resonance patterns to

diminish their channeling capacity. Small changes, undetectable to those who don't understand the deeper principles of blood magic. But enough to ensure the ritual won't achieve its intended purpose."

Elowen leaned forward, studying the book without touching it. "Rose's note said you know the truth. That you know what's really happening."

"Rose is a remarkable woman." Something like genuine admiration crossed Oscar's features. "Brilliant researcher, exceptional witch. She recognized the pattern long before anyone else—the systematic corruption of supernatural bonds across multiple communities."

"And you?" I couldn't keep the challenge from my voice. "What's your role in all this?"

Oscar's gaze shifted to me, assessing. "I've spent decades studying blood magic corruption. Not to use it—to counter it. To understand how natural supernatural bonds can be twisted and how to prevent that corruption from spreading."

"That doesn't explain why you're working with the people who kidnapped Rose," I pointed out.

"I'm not working with them. I'm infiltrating them." He sat finally, his movements precise and controlled. "When Rose discovered the pattern of corrupted pack bonds and missing witches, she contacted me. My research was well-known in certain academic circles, though not my... personal interest in the matter."

Through our bond, I felt Elowen analyzing his words, weighing them against Rose's notes and our observations. Her natural skepticism was balanced by her analytical approach, searching for the explanation that best fit all available facts.

"Rose's note mentioned a greater power behind the alpha," she said. "Someone controlling both the pack and the blood magic. Who is it?"

Oscar's expression darkened. "Not who. What." He opened the book carefully, revealing pages covered in sigils that seemed to writhe on the paper. "Blood magic this sophisticated doesn't originate with wolves or witches. It comes from somewhere older. Something that feeds on corrupted bonds."

"Something like what?" I pressed, growing impatient with his cryptic answers.

"There are entities," Oscar said carefully, "that exist in the spaces between realities. Beings that hunger for power derived from supernatural connections. They can't access our world directly, but they can influence those susceptible to promises of power."

"And the ritual tomorrow night?" Elowen asked.

"Is designed to open a doorway." Oscar turned a page, revealing a diagram nearly identical to the ritual circle we'd seen at the quarry. "Seven witches to channel power, nine wolves to direct it, one leader to control the flow. Enough corrupted energy to create a temporary breach between worlds."

The implications were staggering. Not just a power grab within the supernatural community, but something far more dangerous—a potential invasion from beyond our reality.

"Why are you telling us this?" I asked, still not ready to trust his apparent candor. "If you're infiltrating them, why risk your cover?"

"Because I need your help." Oscar closed the book, his expression grave. "Tomorrow night, I'll be in position to disrupt the ritual from within. But I can't free Rose and the

other witches alone. The alpha and his enforcers will be watching me closely."

Elowen leaned forward. "You're proposing a coordinated effort. You sabotage the ritual while we extract the captives."

"Precisely." Oscar nodded. "I've already reached out to certain trustworthy faculty members, and Miss Evers has been invaluable in helping prepare countermeasures."

At the mention of Charlotte, I felt Elowen's surprise and concern. "Charlotte is involved in this?"

"Only peripherally. She's been researching protective magic with remarkable insight for a human." Oscar's tone softened slightly. "She doesn't know the full extent of what's happening, but she's helped develop spells that can temporarily neutralize blood magic effects."

I studied Oscar, trying to reconcile my instinctive distrust with the evidence before us. His explanation aligned with what we'd observed—his presence at the quarry, his examination of the crystals, his focus on blood magic research. But something still felt off, some aspect of him that didn't match his carefully constructed academic persona.

"Why should we trust you?" I asked directly. "You have access to blood magic knowledge that most academics would never touch. You've infiltrated a corrupted pack operation with suspicious ease. For all we know, you could be setting us up."

Instead of taking offense, Oscar smiled thinly. "Healthy skepticism. I'd expect nothing less from a wolf who's seen what blood magic did to his father's pack."

The casual reference to my past made me stiffen. Few people knew those details—Rose being one of them. Had she shared my history with Oscar?

"Rose trusted me," he continued, seemingly reading my thoughts. "Not blindly—she kept her own insurance policies. The note she left you being one of them." He gestured to Elowen's pocket where Rose's amulet rested. "But she understood that sometimes fighting corruption requires getting close enough to understand it. To counter it effectively."

Through our bond, I felt Elowen's decision forming—not blind trust, but calculated risk assessment. "What exactly do you need from us?"

Oscar unfolded a map of the southern quarry, marking key positions. "The ritual begins at moonrise. By then, I need you and whatever allies you can gather positioned here and here." He indicated entry points on the quarry's eastern edge. "The pack will be focused on the ritual circle. Most of the enforcers will be undergoing their transformation for participation."

"And Rose?" Elowen asked, her concern for her aunt uppermost in her mind.

"She and the other witches will be held here." Oscar pointed to the outbuilding we'd observed. "Spelled containment, but nothing that a witch of your lineage can't break."

The tactical analysis was sound. His knowledge of the security arrangements, the timing of the ritual, the specific magical vulnerabilities—all suggested legitimate inside access.

"I'll reach out to Lola," I said after a moment. "She can bring trustworthy wolves who've resisted the corruption."

"And I'll prepare breaking spells for the containment," Elowen added, committing to the plan despite her lingering reservations that I could sense through our bond.

Oscar nodded, appearing satisfied. "One more thing you should know." His

expression grew more serious. "The alpha isn't acting entirely of his own will anymore. The corruption has... changed him. Made him more vessel than leader. When you encounter him, don't expect rational behavior."

"Meaning?" I prompted.

"Meaning he might sacrifice his entire pack to complete the ritual." Oscar's gaze was steady. "He's that far gone."

The warning hung heavy as we finalized details of the extraction plan.

As we prepared to leave, Oscar handed Elowen a small crystal vial containing a swirling silver substance. "For the witches, after you free them. It will help stabilize their magic after the drainage effects of captivity."

Elowen accepted it cautiously. "What is it?"

"A restorative I developed based on Rose's research into magical healing." His expression softened slightly. "She contributed significantly to the formula before her capture."

We left Blackwood Hall with more information but not necessarily more certainty. Oscar's explanation fit the facts we knew, aligned with Rose's cryptic note, and provided a plausible framework for what we'd observed. But something about him remained enigmatic, his motivations not fully transparent despite his apparent cooperation.

"What do you think?" Elowen asked as we crossed the campus, heading back toward the bookstore.

"His plan makes tactical sense," I admitted. "And the information about entities from

beyond our reality explains the particular corruption signature I've been tracking. It's not just twisted blood magic—it's something foreign."

"But you still don't trust him," she observed, reading my emotions through our bond.

"There's something he's not telling us." I glanced back at Blackwood Hall, its gothic architecture suddenly seeming more ominous. "Something about himself."

"Rose trusted him enough to collaborate on blood magic research," Elowen reasoned.

"And his actions at the quarry match his claim of sabotaging the ritual preparations."

"True. But that doesn't mean his agenda aligns completely with ours." I took her hand as we walked, drawing comfort from the physical connection. "We proceed with the plan, but with our own safeguards in place."

Through our bond, I felt her agreement—not blind trust in Oscar, but pragmatic acceptance of necessary alliance.

"I'll contact Charlotte, see what she knows about his research without revealing too much."

"And I'll reach out to Lola. We'll need at least six wolves to counter the pack enforcers not participating in the ritual."

By the time we reached the bookstore, a plan was taking shape—not just Oscar's extraction strategy, but our own contingencies, backup measures, and safety protocols. Working together through the mate bond created an efficiency I'd never experienced before, our thoughts complementing each other without needing to verbalize every detail.

Daisy was rearranging books when we entered, her ethereal form shimmering slightly

in the morning light. "The mystery section is quite agitated today," she announced. "They sense approaching revelations but cannot agree on which secrets will remain hidden."

"Cryptic as always, Daisy," Elowen replied with unexpected fondness.

"Not cryptic. Precise." Daisy floated closer, her opal eyes swirling with unusual patterns. "Some mysteries are meant to unfold over time. Others reveal themselves only when necessary. The professor carries both kinds within him."

The observation aligned uncomfortably well with my own assessment of Oscar. "You know something about him," I realized. "Something beyond what he's told us."

"I know what the books know," Daisy replied serenely. "And they know that some beings cannot be fully understood through single chapters of their existence."

Then she wandered off again.

As night fell over Midnight Creek, Elowen and I sat together on the couch in the living room, the mate bond humming between us with newfound familiarity. Despite the circumstances of its formation, the connection had become a source of strength neither of us had anticipated.

Elowen curled into my side, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my forearm. "Do you think Oscar was telling the truth?" she asked softly, her voice laced with uncertainty.

I exhaled slowly, pressing a kiss to her hair. "I think he believes it," I admitted. "And it fits the evidence. The corruption I've tracked has always felt... foreign. Unnatural even by supernatural standards."

She tilted her head up, her breath warm against my jaw. "And if he's right about the ritual opening a doorway?"

I turned toward her, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger along her cheek. "Then stopping it becomes even more critical. But we focus on what we know we can accomplish. Free Rose and the other witches. Disrupt the ritual. Deal with interdimensional entities if and when we have to."

She nodded, but tension still coiled in her muscles, her thoughts tangled with unspoken fears. Through the mate bond, I felt the storm inside her—the weight of responsibility, the worry, the sheer magnitude of what tomorrow would bring.

I slid a hand down her back, pulling her closer until she was straddling my lap, her hands braced against my chest. "Elowen," I murmured, my voice rough with emotion, with want. "Tonight, just let me take care of you."

Her breath hitched, her fingers gripping my shirt as her eyes locked onto mine. "Rudy—"

I caught her lips in a kiss, slow and deep, coaxing her to unravel against me. She melted into me, her body softening, yielding. My hands roamed down her waist, slipping beneath her shirt, reveling in the warmth of her skin. She shivered, her hips shifting instinctively against mine, and I groaned at the delicious friction.

I pulled away just enough to catch her gaze. "I want you, but I want it to be different," I said. "Not like last time. Not against a wall in an alley, stolen and desperate. I want to give you this. Properly."

Her lips parted, her pupils blown wide with desire. "Yes."

Without hesitation, I stood, lifting her effortlessly into my arms. She gasped, clinging

to my shoulders, but there was no hesitation in the way she wrapped herself around me. I carried her through the apartment to her bedroom, my lips claiming hers again and again, each kiss filled with promise, with need, with everything I couldn't put into words.

I took my time stripping her bare, piece by piece, watching her unfold beneath me. She was so fucking beautiful, and I wanted her to know it, to feel it, to understand that she was mine in a way no magic could force.

When she reached for me, I caught her wrists, pinning them above her head. "Not yet, little witch," I murmured against her skin. "You don't touch me until I say."

Her breath hitched, but she didn't argue. Instead, she arched as I took my time exploring her body—trailing my mouth over her collarbone, teasing the sensitive peak of each breast with my tongue until she writhed beneath me, moaning my name. I wanted her trembling, undone before I even considered taking her.

My hand slid lower, fingers finding her slick and aching for me. I groaned, resting my forehead against hers as I teased her clit in slow, deliberate circles.

Her blue eyes darkened as I watched her. Then I slid down between her legs, pressing my lips to her sensitive core. Each flick of my tongue caused her to moan, pressing her thighs against me. She was my wonderful mate, and no matter what happened tomorrow, we had this moment.

She bucked against my touch, desperate for more, but I held her still, keeping her pinned beneath me as I worked her up, higher and higher.

"Rudy, please—" Her voice was breathless, desperate, and I knew she was close, teetering on the edge.

"Come for me," I commanded, my voice rough with need. "I want to feel you fall apart."

And she did. Her body clenched, shuddering as she cried out my name, her pleasure echoing through the mate bond, a wildfire of sensation that burned through both of us.

Only then did I slide into the bed with her. I lay on my back and guided her to straddle me. "Now you take me."

She hesitated, searching my face, understanding passing between us in a silent exchange. I was giving her control, giving her the choice. Not because I wasn't an alpha but because I was her alpha. Because we were partners, equals, and this was how I showed her.

She sank down onto me, taking me inch by inch, and fuck, I nearly lost it. But I let her set the pace, let her ride me, her fingers digging into my chest as she moved above me, as I watched her come undone all over again.

When she shattered a second time, I flipped her onto her back, driving into her with everything I had left. The words spilled out before I could stop them, raw and unguarded. "I love you."

Her breath caught, her fingers tangling in my hair. I felt the hesitation—a heartbeat of silence where the world seemed to hold still. Then, with quiet certainty, she whispered it back, soft but sure. "I love you, Rudy."

That was all it took. My release crashed over me, pulling her with me one last time, our mate bond sealing something deeper, something permanent between us.

As we lay there in the aftermath, tangled together in sweat and sheets and magic, I

pressed a kiss to her temple. "No matter what happens tomorrow, we have this."

She curled against me, fingers tracing lazy patterns over my chest. "Yes. We do."

With that, I finally allowed myself to sleep, holding her close, knowing that whatever darkness waited for us at the ritual, we would face it together.

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Elowen

The day of the ritual dawned with unnatural stillness. No wind stirred the trees outside my apartment window, no birds called from the forest edge. Even the air felt thick, as if the boundary between realities was already thinning in anticipation of tonight's ceremony.

I spent the morning reviewing Rose's research on blood magic countermeasures and practicing the breaking spells I'd need to free her and the other captive witches. My magic responded with newfound precision, the mate bond continuing to stabilize what had once been erratic power.

"The northern perimeter is the weakest point," Rudy said, returning from the kitchen with coffee. He'd spread maps of the quarry across my living room floor, marking guard positions based on our observations and Lola's intelligence. "Fewer enforcers, more natural cover. If we approach from here—" he traced a path with his finger, "—we can position Lola's wolves to create a diversion while we extract the witches."

I nodded, sensing his tactical mind working through contingencies. Through our bond, I felt his blend of confidence in the plan and concern for what might go wrong. The latter was focused primarily on me, though he was trying to keep that worry contained.

"I can handle myself," I reminded him gently, touching his arm. "Especially now that my magic isn't fighting me anymore."

His expression softened. "I know you can. Doesn't stop the wolf in me from wanting

to keep you safe."

"Just as long as keeping me safe doesn't mean keeping me sidelined." I raised an eyebrow, challenging but not confrontational.

"Partners," he affirmed, the word carrying weight beyond its syllables. "In this and everything else."

The mate bond hummed with sincerity. Whatever instinctive protectiveness his wolf nature triggered, Rudy was making a conscious choice to respect my capabilities. It made the bond between us feel chosen rather than imposed, despite its unexpected formation.

A knock at the door interrupted the moment. Lola stood outside, accompanied by three other wolves. Rudy had explained to me that they were all former lone wolves who had resisted the alpha's corruption and now looked to Lola for leadership.

"The others are watching the quarry," Lola explained as they entered. "Two more pack members approached me last night. They've noticed the alpha's... changes. They're questioning the blood magic."

"Can they be trusted?" Rudy asked, his tone neutral but his emotions cautious through our bond.

"As much as anyone these days." Lola shrugged. "They haven't been exposed to the strongest corruption yet. They've been kept on perimeter duty, away from the ritual preparations."

"We could use more eyes on the approaches," I acknowledged, marking additional positions on the map. "But they stay on the outer perimeter. No direct involvement in the extraction."

Lola nodded, seeming to approve of my caution. It struck me how quickly everything had changed—a week ago, I'd been a college student returning to find my aunt missing. Now I was planning a rescue operation with a pack of rebel wolves, linked permanently to a man I'd known for days, and facing entities from beyond our reality.

"Oscar's inside position is our greatest advantage," I explained, outlining what we'd learned from yesterday's meeting. "He'll sabotage the ritual crystals from within while creating a distraction for us to extract the witches."

"Can he be trusted?" Maya asked, the question directed at Rudy rather than me.

"His opposition to the blood magic seems genuine," Rudy answered carefully. "But we're not relying entirely on his actions. We proceed as if we're on our own, and any help he provides is bonus, not foundation."

The wolves seemed satisfied with this approach, and we spent the next hour reviewing the plan in detail. Lola's tactical experience complemented Rudy's, while I provided magical expertise on breaking the containment spells that would hold Rose and the others.

As the wolves prepared to leave, Lola held back, catching my eye. "A moment?"

I nodded, curious. Rudy sensed my apprehension and moved to give us space while remaining within sight—a compromise between trust and protective instinct that showed how quickly he was adapting to our partnership.

"The mate bond suits you both," Lola said without preamble once the others had stepped outside. "Even if its timing was... convenient for certain parties."

"You think we were manipulated into it?" The possibility had been nagging at me since our encounter with Mr. Cash.

"I think forces are moving that want both of you compromised or controlled." Lola's directness was refreshing after days of cryptic half-truths. "But I also think they miscalculated. It's become your greatest asset. Your magic is steadier. Rudy's instincts are sharper."

The observation aligned with my own assessment, but hearing it from someone who knew Rudy before me—who understood wolf dynamics better than I could—carried weight.

"Why tell me this?" I asked.

Lola's smile held surprising warmth. "Because tonight will test that balance. When you face the alpha, when you see what the blood magic has made him, maintaining your connection—your choice to be partners rather than protector and protected—will matter more than any spell or strategy."

She left me with that enigmatic warning, rejoining the others outside. When I returned to the maps, Rudy didn't press for details about our conversation, respecting my space to process.

The day passed in careful preparation. I packed a bag with magical supplies—breaking charms, protection amulets, the restorative potion Oscar had provided for the captive witches. Every item selected with Rose in mind, my determination to free her growing stronger with each passing minute.

As sunset approached, Daisy appeared in my living room without warning, her form more solid than usual.

"The fate threads tighten," she announced, her opal eyes swirling with colors I'd never seen before. "The romance novels wish you to know they're quite invested in your safe return. As am I."

The statement, delivered in her typically whimsical manner, carried unexpected emotional weight. "We'll be back, Daisy," I promised. "With Rose."

"Of course you will." She smiled serenely. "The mystery section has already reshelfed itself to make room for her return. But the threads show multiple paths forward from tonight. Some brighter than others."

"Any advice on how to ensure we take the brighter path?" Rudy asked, his tone revealing more acceptance of Daisy's strangeness than I'd expected.

"Remember that corruption feeds on fear and isolation." Daisy's form flickered slightly.

With that cryptic statement, she vanished as suddenly as she'd appeared, leaving behind only a faint scent of starlight and old books.

"Well, that was helpful in the usual unhelpful Daisy way," I muttered.

Rudy moved behind me, his arms encircling my waist as he rested his chin on my shoulder. "She's not wrong. Whatever they intended with Cash's interference, the mate bond has made us stronger together."

I leaned back against him, drawing comfort from his solid presence. "Partners," I repeated our earlier affirmation.

"Partners," he agreed, moving her shirt to press a kiss to my mate mark that sent warmth spiraling through our bond.

The moment of connection steadied something inside me. Whatever corrupted entities waited beyond reality's boundaries, whatever the alpha had become under their influence, we would meet it together—not as protector and protected, but as

equals with complementary strengths.

As we prepared to leave, I paused at Rose's desk, running my fingers over her research notes one last time. The aunt who had never given up on me even when I'd pushed her away—I would bring her home tonight. Whatever it took.

"She'd be proud of you," Rudy said quietly, reading my emotions through our bond. "How you've handled everything."

The simple observation nearly broke my composure. I blinked back tears, nodding without trusting myself to speak.

We drove toward the meeting point in silence, each lost in preparation for what lay ahead. The forests surrounding Midnight Creek grew darker as we moved away from town, the perpetual twilight of Shadow Valley's influence touching even here, miles from its borders.

Lola and her wolves waited at the forest's edge, their forms half-hidden among the trees. To my surprise, Charlotte stood with them, a bag of magical supplies slung over her shoulder.

"Before you object," she said as we approached, raising a hand to forestall my protest, "I'm not going into the quarry. I'll stay at the backup position, maintaining the protection circle while you do the extraction. But if anything goes wrong—if any of the witches need immediate magical stabilization—I've prepared everything necessary."

I wanted to argue, to insist she return to the safety of campus, but the determination in her eyes stopped me. Charlotte had been studying magic despite her human limitations, working with Oscar on protective countermeasures. She had earned her place in this operation, even if only at its edges.

"The backup position only," I agreed reluctantly. "At the first sign of trouble, you retreat without waiting for us."

She nodded, relief evident in her expression. "Of course. I'm not stupid, just stubborn."

"Like someone else I know," Rudy murmured through our bond, his amusement warming me despite the tension of the moment.

We reviewed the plan one final time as darkness deepened around us. Lola's wolves would create a diversion at the northern perimeter. While the enforcers were distracted, Rudy and I would approach from the east, using the cover of boulders and abandoned mining equipment to reach the outbuilding where the witches were held.

Oscar, already inside as part of the ritual preparations, would sabotage the channeling crystals and create additional confusion at the critical moment. If all went according to plan, we would extract Rose and the others before the ritual reached its culmination, slipping away while the alpha and his supporters dealt with the failing ceremony.

"Remember," Lola cautioned as we prepared to move out, "the alpha isn't himself anymore. Whatever the blood magic has done, whatever entity is working through him—don't expect rationality or mercy."

"We won't engage unless absolutely necessary," Rudy assured her. "This is extraction, not confrontation."

But we all knew that plans rarely survived first contact with reality. Particularly when that reality involved corrupted pack bonds, captive witches, and entities from beyond our world seeking entry through blood magic.

As we moved through the darkened forest toward the quarry, I felt my magic responding to the growing tension, power gathering beneath my skin like an approaching storm. Unlike before the mate bond, this energy flowed in controlled currents, responsive to my will rather than fighting it.

Beside me, Rudy moved with predatory grace, his senses extended to track any approach. Through our bond, I felt his wolf side close to the surface, alert and ready but not frantic or aggressive. Like my magic, his wolf nature seemed more balanced since our bonding, the partnership between man and beast more harmonious.

The southern quarry came into view, its white stone walls ghostly in the darkness. Magical lights glowed at various points around the perimeter, marking guard positions and ritual preparations. In the center of the quarry floor, the seven crystal pillars now pulsed with eerie light, forming a circle around a central dais where a hooded figure stood motionless.

"The alpha," Rudy breathed, his enhanced vision identifying what I could only sense magically—corrupted power radiating from the figure in waves that distorted the air around him.

From our hidden position, we could see other preparations underway. The nine steel cages had been arranged in a precise pattern around the crystal circle, each large enough to hold a shifted wolf. Pack members moved between stations, some setting up magical barriers, others preparing ritual components under the direction of Oscar Katz.

Even at this distance, I could see the careful precision in Oscar's movements, the way he adjusted components in ways that would appear correct to observers, but would subtly undermine the ritual's effectiveness. His infiltration appeared genuine, his sabotage already underway.

"There," Rudy pointed toward the outbuilding we'd identified earlier. Two guards stood outside, their posture alert, but not alarmed. Through a small window, I caught glimpses of movement inside—captives, including Rose.

My heart leapt into my throat. Rose was right there. So close I could almost call to her. I forced myself to stay focused, to stick to the plan despite the desperate urge to rush in immediately.

"Lola's diversion should start any minute," I whispered, checking the time. "Then we move."

As if on cue, howls erupted from the northern edge of the quarry, followed by the distinctive sound of wards being breached. Pack enforcers rushed toward the disturbance, shouting alerts. The ritual preparations paused, attention diverted to the unexpected threat.

"Now," Rudy said. We moved as one, sliding from cover to cover with seeming practiced coordination.

We reached the outbuilding's eastern wall without detection, pressing ourselves against the rough stone as voices argued inside. One of the guards departed, leaving only a single enforcer outside the door.

Rudy caught my eye, a silent question passing through our bond. I nodded, gathering magic for a quick incapacitation spell. As he created a distraction with a thrown stone, I released the spell, watching with satisfaction as the guard slumped silently to the ground.

Inside, we found what we'd feared—seven witches, including Rose, bound to stone chairs with spelled silver chains. Their magic had been partially drained, feeding the crystals in the ritual circle, but they remained conscious, their expressions showing

defiance despite their captivity.

Rose's eyes widened when she saw us, recognition followed immediately by concern. "Elowen? What are you—" Her gaze shifted to Rudy. Understanding dawned in her expression. "Of course. The threads Daisy mentioned."

Relief and determination surged through me at the sound of her voice. Despite her weakened state, she was still my Rose—sharp-minded, observant, already connecting pieces of a puzzle I didn't fully understand.

"Explanations later," I murmured, already working to break the containment spell on her chains. "We're getting you all out."

The spell yielded to my magic more easily than expected. As Rose was freed, she immediately moved to help with the others, her own magic weaker than normal, but still effective.

"Oscar?" she asked quietly as we worked.

"In position," Rudy confirmed, keeping watch at the door. "Sabotaging the crystals."

Rose nodded, unsurprised by the information. "Be careful with him. He's more than he appears."

Before I could ask what she meant, shouts from outside indicated our presence had been detected. The diversion had worked longer than expected, but our time was running out.

"We need to move," Rudy urged as the last witch was freed. "Lola's wolves can only hold their attention for so long."

I distributed the restorative potion Oscar had provided, watching as color returned to the witches' faces and their magical auras strengthened. Not to full capacity, but enough to defend themselves if necessary.

"The western exit," Rose directed, moving with surprising strength for someone who had been captive. "There's less ritual activity that way. The pack focused their preparations on the eastern approach."

We moved quickly through the outbuilding, Rose leading the way with the confidence of someone who had studied her prison carefully. The other witches followed, their movements growing steadier as the restorative took effect.

Outside, chaos had erupted across the quarry. Lola's wolves had penetrated deeper than planned, engaging directly with pack enforcers in a series of running battles. Near the ritual circle, Oscar appeared to be arguing with the alpha, gesturing emphatically at the crystals, which now pulsed with unstable energy.

"Something's wrong," Rose murmured, pausing to study the scene. "The ritual—it's accelerating despite the sabotage."

As if confirming her words, the air around the ritual circle began to distort, reality itself seeming to bend and warp. The alpha raised his arms, his hood falling back to reveal a face no longer fully human—features elongated and shifted, eyes glowing with sickly red light that had nothing to do with normal wolf characteristics.

"It's coming through," Rose whispered, horror in her voice. "The entity—it's using him as a conduit even without the full ritual. We need to disrupt the circle completely."

I felt the truth of her assessment through my magical senses. Whatever lay beyond our reality was pushing through the weakened boundary, using the alpha's corrupted

form as an anchor point.

"The extraction—" Rudy began, his protective instincts flaring through our bond.

"Will fail if that thing fully manifests," Rose cut him off. "Get the others out. Elowen and I will disrupt the circle."

Though everything in him rebelled against the idea of leaving me, Rudy recognized the necessity. Through our bond, I felt his struggle and his ultimate decision to trust my strength and Rose's experience.

"I'll create a distraction to cover you," he said, already shifting his approach. "Get to the circle, break it, then retreat immediately to the western exit. I'll meet you there."

The plan adjusted on the fly, we separated—Rudy leading the other witches toward safety while Rose and I moved toward the increasingly unstable ritual circle. Through our bond, I maintained awareness of Rudy's position and status, the connection providing reassurance even at a distance.

"The crystals are the key," Rose explained as we darted from cover to cover. "They're channeling the entity's essence. Break the pattern, and the connection destabilizes."

"Oscar was supposed to be sabotaging them," I said, watching as the professor continued his apparent argument with the transformed alpha.

"And he has been," Rose confirmed. "But something's accelerated the process. The entity must be stronger than we anticipated."

We reached the edge of the ritual area, hiding behind abandoned mining equipment as corrupted pack members gathered around the circle. The nine cages stood empty—whatever role the wolves were meant to play in the ceremony had either

been abandoned or changed in response to the accelerated timeline.

Oscar finally backed away from the alpha, his expression revealing genuine concern beneath the academic facade. For a brief moment, his gaze found ours, recognition flashing across his features before he deliberately looked away, refusing to betray our position.

"We need to break the crystal directly across from us," Rose whispered, pointing to the furthest pillar. "It's the anchoring point. Disrupt it, and the others will destabilize."

"How do we get there?" The space between us and the target crystal was exposed, crawling with corrupted pack members and increasingly distorted by whatever was attempting to manifest.

Rose smiled grimly. "Directly. With everything we have." She took my hand, her familiar magic connecting with mine. "Let me guide your power. Together, we can channel enough force to break the crystal from here."

I understood immediately.

We joined hands, Rose's familiar magical signature merging with mine as we had practiced countless times in training. But this time, instead of the usual resistance and unpredictability, my magic flowed smoothly, responding to her direction with perfect harmony.

Together, we gathered power, drawing from the ley lines that ran beneath the quarry, channeling energy through our combined witchcraft. The spell built between us, focused and controlled, aimed directly at the anchoring crystal across the circle.

Just as we prepared to release the gathered magic, a howl of rage split the air. The alpha had sensed our presence, his distorted face turning toward our position with

supernatural awareness. Through whatever connection he shared with the entity attempting to manifest, he had detected our magical gathering.

"Now!" Rose commanded, and we released the spell together.

Power erupted from our joined hands, a concentrated beam of witch-magic that streaked across the ritual circle and struck the anchoring crystal with pinpoint accuracy. For a heartbeat, nothing happened—then the crystal fractured, spiderweb cracks racing across its surface before it shattered completely.

The effect was immediate and catastrophic. The remaining crystals pulsed erratically, their carefully calibrated energies thrown into chaos. The air around the ritual circle warped violently, reality itself seeming to tear and mend in rapid succession.

The alpha screamed—not a human or wolf sound, but something otherworldly and terrible. His body contorted as whatever had been using him as a conduit fought to maintain its tenuous connection to our world.

"Time to go," Rose urged, pulling me away from the rapidly deteriorating ritual site. "That won't hold it for long."

We raced toward the western exit, pack members too distracted by the collapsing ritual to pursue effectively. Through our bond, I felt Rudy's relief at our success and his anxiety for our safety, his position ahead of us with the other rescued witches.

Behind us, a final, reality-bending explosion erupted from the ritual circle as we reached the edge of the quarry. The shockwave threw us forward, magical energy washing over us in a tide of corrupted power before dissipating into the night.

When I looked back, the ritual circle lay in ruins, the crystals shattered, the elaborate magical constructs collapsed. The alpha was nowhere to be seen, though several pack

members lay unconscious around the periphery.

Oscar stood amidst the destruction, his carefully maintained academic demeanor finally showing cracks. For just a moment, something else showed through—something ancient and powerful that had nothing to do with his human disguise. Then it was gone, the facade restored as he methodically began checking the fallen pack members.

"Come on," Rose tugged my arm, drawing my attention away from the enigmatic professor. "Questions later. Safety first."

We reached the western exit where Rudy waited with the other witches and several of Lola's wolves. The relief that flooded through our bond when he saw us approach was overwhelming — his joy and pride at our success washing away the lingering effects of the corrupted energy.

As we retreated into the forest, leaving the quarry and its ruined ritual behind, I felt something shift in the fabric of reality around us. Whatever had been trying to break through had been thwarted—for now at least. The boundary between worlds had been maintained, though not without cost.

Rose walked beside me, leaning slightly on my arm as the adrenaline of escape gave way to exhaustion. But her eyes were clear and alert, her mind already processing what had happened and what it meant.

"You have quite a story to tell me," she said quietly, glancing meaningfully at Rudy who walked ahead of us, constantly scanning for threats.

"Several stories," I agreed, feeling the weight of everything that had happened since her disappearance. "But they can wait until you're safe."

She smiled, squeezing my arm gently. "I'm already safe. Thanks to you and your unexpected wolf."

The simple acknowledgment meant more than I could express. Rose had been my anchor since my parents' death, my teacher despite my magical inconsistencies, my family when I had no one else. Having her back, knowing she approved of the unexpected turn my life had taken—it settled something deep inside me that I hadn't realized was still unsettled.

Through the bond, I felt Rudy's response to my emotional shift, his warmth and support flowing back through our connection. Partners in this as in all things.

Whatever challenges waited ahead—the pack's recovery from corruption, Shadow Valley's ongoing struggles, the mysterious entities that had nearly broken through, Oscar Katz's true nature—we would face them together. As a family, chosen and forged through crisis but continuing by deliberate choice.

That, I was beginning to understand, was the strongest magic of all.

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Elowen

Two weeks after the failed ritual, Rose's bookstore maintained a cautious normalcy. The damaged books had been repaired, the shelves reorganized (at least three times, thanks to Daisy's evolving system), and the protective wards reinforced to levels that would make most supernatural beings think twice before attempting any mischief.

But outside the safety of those wards, Midnight Creek remained a town divided.

I noticed it as I restocked the mythology section—the way customers carefully timed their visits to avoid encountering certain species. A vampire left hurriedly when two witches entered. Later, a werewolf family waited outside until a coven member had completed her purchase.

"The prejudices shift but don't disappear," Rose observed, joining me after the werewolf family finally entered. "The ritual's failure may have prevented catastrophe, but it didn't address the underlying disease."

"I thought things might improve after what happened," I admitted, shelving a rare volume on forest spirits. "After everyone saw what blood magic corruption leads to."

Rose's expression turned wry. "Fear can unite people temporarily against a common threat. But once that threat recedes..."

"Old prejudices resurface," I finished, thinking of the cold stares Rudy and I had received at the Silver Flask just last night—from both wolves uncomfortable with his choice of mate and witches who considered me a traitor to my kind.

Our bond was a reminder of the complicated political position we now occupied. Neither fully accepted by either community, yet connected to both.

"The books sense lingering corruption," Daisy announced, floating past with an armful of ancient texts. "Not the obvious kind from the blood ritual, but something more insidious. Older. Patient." Her opal eyes swirled with troubled patterns. "The romance novels are particularly concerned about it."

Before I could question this cryptic observation, the bell above the door chimed as Rudy entered. Through our bond, I felt his tension from navigating the increasingly chilly reception on Main Street, though his expression remained neutral as several customers watched his arrival with thinly veiled disapproval.

"Lola sends an update," he said, joining me by the mythology shelves. "The pack is stabilizing physically after the blood magic exposure, but the politics are... complicated."

"Meaning?" Rose asked quietly.

"Meaning half of them think working with witches to stop the ritual was necessary but temporary, while the other half think any cooperation was a betrayal of pack interests." His jaw tightened. "The alpha's disappearance has created a power vacuum, and those most resistant to interspecies cooperation are gaining influence."

The news wasn't surprising, but it was disappointing. I'd hoped that jointly facing an existential threat might have created some lasting bridges between communities.

"And Shadow Valley?" I asked.

"Even more isolated than before. The Glitter & Stone is one of the few establishments still serving mixed clientele." A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Though Mr. Cash claims it's purely business, not principle."

"Of course, he does," Rose said dryly. "Self-interest is the only constant in that creature's moral compass."

The bell chimed again, this time admitting a flustered Charlotte, her arms laden with books and papers. "Sorry, I'm late," she announced, dropping her academic burden onto the counter. "Professor Katz kept me after our research meeting to discuss some fascinating anomalies in the ley line configurations under the north campus."

I moved to help her organize the chaos of materials, noting the titles of several advanced magical theory texts that would be challenging even for a trained witch, let alone a human researcher. "Oscar has you studying some heavy material," I observed.

"It's incredible, El." Charlotte's eyes shone with academic excitement, oblivious to the subtle stiffening of several witch customers nearby. "The ley line network under the college predates Midnight Creek itself. Professor Katz thinks it might be connected to why supernatural tensions run so high here—that the energy patterns somehow amplify natural species distinctions into active antipathy."

Through our bond, I felt Rudy's interest sharpen. "Oscar's researching why supernatural species can't get along in Midnight Creek? That's... convenient timing."

Charlotte frowned slightly. "It's legitimate research. He's been studying inter-species magical dynamics for decades."

"I'm sure he has," Rose interjected smoothly, though something in her tone suggested reservations. "His academic credentials are impeccable. Almost suspiciously so for someone whose published work spans only twenty years."

Before Charlotte could defend her mentor further, the bell chimed yet again. Oscar Katz himself stood in the doorway, his academic robes exchanged for a more casual but still impeccably tailored suit. As always, something about him seemed slightly misaligned with his surroundings—like a translation that captured the meaning but

missed some essential nuance.

The atmosphere in the bookstore shifted immediately. Two witch customers moved closer together, their postures defensive. A young werewolf browsing the history section edged toward the exit. Whatever supernatural politics divided the town, Oscar somehow managed to make everyone equally uneasy.

"Ms. Montgomery," he greeted Rose with a slight bow. "I've brought the texts you requested on interdimensional boundaries." He placed a leather satchel on the counter. "As well as some additional references that might interest you, given recent events."

"Very kind, Professor." Rose accepted the satchel, her fingers brushing the clasp with a hint of magical assessment. "Will you join us for tea? I have questions about your observations during the ritual."

Oscar hesitated, his gaze briefly finding Charlotte, then shifting to me and Rudy. Something flickered behind his carefully composed expression—concern, perhaps, or some deeper emotion I couldn't identify.

"Another time, perhaps. The department meeting begins shortly, and the current... political climate requires careful navigation."

"Politics?" Charlotte asked, looking confused. "Is there trouble at the college too?"

Oscar's expression softened fractionally when addressing her, I noticed—a barely perceptible change that nonetheless caught my attention.

"The supernatural faculty are choosing sides, Miss Evers. The ritual's aftermath has accelerated existing divisions rather than healing them." His tone was clinical, academic, but I sensed genuine regret beneath the professional facade. "Several wolf professors have requested transfer to departments with fewer witch colleagues, while

the coven-affiliated faculty are pushing for restricted access to certain magical archives."

"That's ridiculous," Charlotte protested. "After everything that happened, they're still letting these prejudices divide them?"

"Some would argue that what happened only confirms their suspicions," Oscar replied carefully. "The witches blame wolf involvement in the blood ritual, while the wolves point to witch vulnerability to magical corruption. Each sees the other as the primary threat."

"What do you see, Professor?" Rudy asked, his tone neutral despite the challenge in the question.

Oscar regarded him steadily. "I see patterns repeating across centuries, Mr. Kane. Divisions exploited, natural wariness transformed into active hostility." Something ancient flickered in his eyes. "I see a game board where the pieces move themselves, never questioning who designed the rules of play."

The cryptic response hung in the air, disrupting the bookstore's magical harmonies enough that several volumes on nearby shelves rearranged themselves nervously.

"But enough metaphysics for one afternoon," Oscar continued, his academic persona firmly back in place. "Miss Evers, shall we continue our research after your visit here? The northern quadrant mapping should be completed before the equinox if we're to document the seasonal flux properly."

"Of course, Professor." Charlotte gathered her materials, her excitement about the research momentarily dampened by the sobering conversation about campus politics. "I'll just be an hour or so."

After Oscar departed, the atmosphere in the store gradually relaxed, customers

returning to their browsing with only occasional wary glances at our unusual gathering—a witch, a werewolf, a human researcher, and whatever Daisy actually was.

"He's hiding something," Rudy said quietly once we had relative privacy behind the counter. "Something beyond academic interest in supernatural politics."

"Everyone hides something," Rose replied, unpacking the books Oscar had delivered. "The question is whether his secrets threaten or protect."

"It's the ley lines," Charlotte interjected earnestly. "His research could change everything about how we understand supernatural conflicts. If these tensions aren't just cultural or historical, but actually influenced by the magical geography beneath our feet—"

"Then someone might be able to manipulate those influences," I finished, the implications suddenly clear. "For better or worse."

Rose's expression turned thoughtful. "Control the ley lines, control the supernatural dynamics of the region." She glanced toward Charlotte with newfound concern. "A powerful knowledge for anyone to possess, let alone share with a human student."

"I can handle it," Charlotte said, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. "Professor Katz wouldn't involve me if he didn't think so."

Through our bond, I felt Rudy's protective instinct stir at the mention of Charlotte potentially becoming entangled in dangerous knowledge. "Be careful," he advised. "Academic interest isn't always purely academic, especially in Midnight Creek."

"Says the werewolf mated to a witch," Charlotte countered with a small smile. "You two aren't exactly following conventional wisdom either."

She had a point. Our own situation hardly gave us standing to question unexpected alliances. Through our bond, I felt Rudy acknowledge the irony with reluctant amusement.

As evening approached and customers dwindled, Rose insisted we take time for ourselves, claiming she and Daisy had matters under control at the store. "Go. Enjoy dinner at the Silver Flask. Show the town that your bond isn't weakened by their disapproval."

"Public opinion isn't exactly supportive right now," I warned. "We're getting cold shoulders from both sides."

"All the more reason to be visible," Rose replied firmly. "Change doesn't come from hiding in safety."

Before we left, she handed me a small package that had arrived earlier. "From your roommate Toni. She seems to be having her own inter-species adventures."

The package contained a small crystal carved with protection sigils and a note in Toni's distinctive handwriting:

El,

Call it witch's intuition, but I sense your life has taken some unexpected turns. This protection amulet is specifically designed for bonds across species—a little something my grandmother taught me before the covenant's restrictions tightened.

Gideon and I are thinking of visiting Midnight Creek once the semester ends. The covenant's disapproval of our relationship is getting exhausting, and honestly, we could use some solidarity. From what you've told me, sounds like you understand exactly what we're facing.

Solidarity forever,

Toni

"Another witch-non-witch pair facing prejudice," I murmured, showing the note to Rudy. "Seems like we're not alone in challenging traditions."

"Small comfort when facing the daily reality," he observed, though I felt his appreciation for the connection through our bond.

"But you know," I murmured, tracing my fingers over the mate mark on my shoulder, "I always thought if magic ever truly changed my life, it would be because I lost control of it. But that's not what happened." I met his gaze, warm and knowing. "I wasn't bewitched. I was bewolfed."

Rudy grinned, squeezing my hand.

As we prepared to leave, Daisy materialized beside us, her form more solid than usual. "The romance novels have been consulting with the prophecy section," she announced. "They believe Professor Katz and Miss Evers stand at a similar crossroads to your own, though with... complications unique to their circumstances."

"What kind of complications?" I asked, curious despite myself.

Daisy's smile turned enigmatic. "Some secrets aren't mine to reveal. But the threads of their story intertwine with yours in ways even the mystery section finds intriguing. Watch the northern ley lines when the semester changes. Magic rises there that hasn't stirred in centuries."

With that cryptic pronouncement, she vanished back into the stacks, leaving Rose to shake her head fondly. "She's been even more mystical than usual since the ritual disruption. But her insights are rarely wrong, just unhelpfully phrased."

Outside, Midnight Creek's magical layer shimmered visibly to my witch sight—the wards stronger in some ways since the ritual's disruption, different in others. But beneath that surface stability, currents of tension flowed through the town like invisible rivers, separating communities that should have been united.

A witch mother pulled her child closer as we passed. A werewolf shopkeeper pointedly turned his back. Small gestures of disapproval that accumulated like tiny cuts.

Rudy's hand found mine, warm and solid, our bond humming with shared determination despite the silent hostility. "Still glad you came back to Midnight Creek?" he asked, only half-joking.

I thought of Rose safely home in her bookstore. Of the blood magic corruption stopped, at least temporarily. Of the unexpected connection I'd found with a lone wolf who understood the value of freely chosen bonds.

"I'm exactly where I need to be," I answered, squeezing his hand as we walked proudly down Main Street, ignoring the stares. "Whatever comes next."

Thank you for reading Elowen and Rudy's story.

If you're not ready to leave Midnight Creek, check out Oscar and Charlotte's story, *My Professor is a Demon*.

And don't forget to check out *Bespelled*, Toni and Gideon's story.