



Love Potions and Moonlight (Cauldrons and Kisses)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Autumn Sinclair owes it to his coven to be the next witch in an arranged marriage. Realizing he can't escape fate, he wanders into Rooks Apothecary, searching for a love potion that will help him fall in love with the man he'll be forced to marry.

Rook is a wolf who can't hide his beastly appearance. Which is fine. He has his shop, his best friends, and his secret crush on the beautiful man who walks by his window every day. That is, until one morning, Autumn walks into Rook's shop.

Welcome to Heart's Hollow, a magical small town where all paranormals and humans can walk around openly and be true to themselves.

Total Pages (Source): 15

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:23 am

Marriage among witches means sharing power.

It is our duty as Sinclairs to keep the magic alive.

-Entries from the personal diaries of John Sinclair, the founder of the Sinclair Coven.

(Six months ago)

Magic is wondrous and infinite, like the ocean and its depths. We, as witches, have only explored the surface like a sailor's ship at sea. But just like the ocean, magic can be dangerous, dark, and unforgiving.

A witch's power stems from their family and is passed on through the generations. And it just so happens that my family, the Sinclairs, are some of the most powerful witches here in the United States.

Every family has its traditions and rituals on how exactly that magic is passed on from person to person, but since my family comes from such a prestigious line of witches, that also means our traditions are a little...archaic.

This means a Sinclair from each generation needs to marry to keep the magic alive; it's our biggest stipulation. That responsibility usually falls on the firstborn, but my older brother has been missing for the better part of a year. According to my family, he ran from his responsibilities. Which, unfortunately for me, means marrying for love is no longer an option.

Hence why I'm sitting at my favorite gazebo in the park, waiting for my blind date to

show up. All around me, people go about enjoying their day, walking in and out of the colorful shops of downtown Heart's Hollow. A dragon shifter with translucent purple wings enters the apothecary just across the street. Off to my left, a group of three teenage witches practice their spell work by making the leaves and branches levitate a foot or two off the ground.

My attention flickers back to the beautiful plant that climbs up the gazebo. Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back and savor the refreshing scent before the rain.

A throat clears. I glance up and do a double-take. Orson Bastone, my brother's betrothed. Orson smirks that familiar lopsided grin. His blond hair falls forward just so. The man thinks he's a dreamboat, but he's always seemed a little off. A little too perfect with his square jaw and calculating eyes. But even so, all I see now when I look at Orson is my missing brother.

I offer him a small smile. "Orson, how are you?"

"Good, good." He sits next to me, pressing in close so that our thighs touch. "You look beautiful as always, Autumn."

My shoulders tense, and I scoot over a few inches. Okay. That's new. The man had never flirted with me before.

Orson doesn't seem to notice my discomfort.

"I'm so sorry, Orson, but I'm actually waiting for someone." I chuckle, trying to act casual. "You know how my mom is, always worried they won't find me a husband in time."

His grin widens. "Actually, that's why I'm here."

“What do you mean?” My stomach twists. Oh gods, please don’t let him say what I think he’s going to say.

“I’m your blind date.”

My lips purse and I scoot even further away from his knowing gaze. “What are you talking about?”

“Your mother, I convinced her to set us up.”

I shake my head in horror. “But you’re promised to my brother.”

He waves a hand in front of him. “What brother?” Orson glances around dramatically and even peers under the seat as if my brother might appear. “I don’t see him here to claim my hand.”

Keeping my mouth shut, I don’t reply. How could I? Anger sizzles through me and I have to sit on my hands to hide the magic trying to spark from my fingertips. ‘What brother?’ Is he serious?

That creepy, unsettling feeling I always get around Orson is back. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the brother you’ve been looking for... supposedly. I mean, you’re the one in charge of his search party. I would hope you know what brother I’m talking about.”

Orson’s eyes narrow, not used to me snapping. I’ve always been the quiet brother. The pretty, delicate, demure Sinclair. Well, news flash, I’m not that way when it comes to protecting my family.

Just as Orson opens his mouth to speak, his phone rings. He swipes ignore only to have it ring again.

“Do you need to get that?” I nod at his phone. “Looks important.”

Orson stands, eyes still suspicious. His phone rings again, and he growls with frustration. “Yeah, give me a minute,” he says in a sharp tone. Looks like the flirty Orson is gone. I shudder. Good riddance.

As soon as he walks out of earshot, I slip my hand into my pocket and pull out a little bottle with the red potion I’ve spent weeks making. Perfect timing. A moment like this is rare, and I need to take advantage of the fact that Orson and I are alone.

I pop the lid off, pouring the slick liquid into my cupped palm and immediately start chanting. The potion shimmers and evaporates, turning into smoke and floating toward its target. Orson paces back and forth, but the potion finds him easily, and he breathes it in without realizing it.

I continue to chant, repeating the spell just in case.

“Sorry about that,” Orson says, rushing back to me and pocketing his phone.

I offer him a wide smile, hoping it distracts him from how upset he was with me just moments before.

Orson’s eyes linger on my lips, and I try not to squirm.

Instead, I stand. Meeting him at the opening of the gazebo, I lean against the white wood rail. I grace my fingers over his hand, knowing my potion will work better if there is contact before I begin my line of questions.

“I’m sorry about snapping at you,” I say, hoping my tone is flirty. “I’ve been on edge. I just miss my brother so much. Has there been any progress, or have you found any clues on his whereabouts?”

I don't actually need Orson to answer my questions. It's not like I slipped him a truth serum. No, this potion is something special I found in the family grimoire. This potion works together with the protection wards that are placed all around Heart's Hollow.

Even though Heart's Hollow is a sanctuary town, the protection wards have their limits. It kicks people out of the town or prevents them from entering if they mean harm to anyone who lives within its borders, but if that person means harm to someone outside of the borders, well, the spell can't really detect that.

My potion will temporarily help extend those wards to a specific person. As long as I can get Orson to focus on my brother, then I can see if he means my brother harm.

"Nothing new. Your brother just really doesn't want to be found," Orson replies. His answer isn't a surprise. It's nothing new, but the big beads of sweat that break out over Orson's upper lip are.

"Do you think something bad has happened to him?" I ask, careful not to accuse Orson.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Orson's breathing comes out a little shaky.

My eyes widen when he pulls out a teal silk handkerchief and dabs his forehead. He's totally fucking guilty. Damn. Why the hell did I not give him truth serum, too? "I don't know, something bad. Maybe he got hurt, or someone is holding him against his will?"

Something flashes in Orson's eyes. His body gives a violent jerk. Orson catches himself by grasping the railing of the gazebo.

That isn't good. At. All. He knows something.

My heart begins to pound. I don't want Orson to be suspicious of me. If he's holding my brother captive or knows where he is, I need to be on Orson's good side.

I trace my fingers over Orson's cheek before trailing them down to his hand. "You said you talked my mom into this blind date?"

His mouth falls open as he studies my fingers lacing with his. After a moment, he shakes himself out of it. Sweat beads across his face and stains are forming on his dress shirt. I get the feeling my potion isn't just working with the wards, but that it's trying to push him out of Heart's Hollow.

"Yes, but I think I'm going to have to take a rain check," he pants. "I'm suddenly not feeling so good."

Panic takes over my mind. This is the closest I've ever felt to getting any answers. I'm certain that Orson knows where my brother is. Not wanting this opportunity to slip past, I pull Orson into a hug. I try not to react when his disgusting wet shirt hits my cheek.

At first, he doesn't respond, but then he wraps his arms around me and returns the hug. Before he can sense what I'm doing, I silently chant the beginning stages of a tracking spell. I slide my hand up to his hair and grasp his sweaty scalp. I pluck out a couple of hairs. It'll take all night for the spell to take place, but at least I'll be able to track him.

As long as he doesn't go too far past the town limits, it should be easy to find him. The spell itself will only last about two or three days, but that should be plenty of time to help my brother.

Orson says his goodbyes and stumbles away, unaware that he's acting strange.

The moment I step out from under the gazebo onto the grass, fat raindrops greet my face. I raise my eyes to the sky and watch the dark clouds as they roll closer. Looks like the storm is arriving sooner than expected.

My fingers caress the beautiful purple wisteria growing on the gazebo. Sending a spark of magic into its flowers, the magical plant sways with happiness before climbing a little higher. I've been growing and nourishing these flowers for the past year. It's a silent message to my brother, telling him not to give up hope. Reminding him I'm still searching for him, and won't give up.

I thought that the tracking potion with Orson's hair might take a full day to brew, but when I wake up the next morning, I notice it's ready.

Eagerly, I open the Sinclair grimoire and flip the pages until I see the correct spell. There. 'To Find the One You are Seeking.' I pull out my map of Heart's Hollow and the surrounding cities, then reach for my clear quartz. This crystal clears any clutter or distractions from my mind and will help me find Orson.

With my eyes closed, I position the crystal on the map and begin chanting. As it searches for its target, the crystal scrapes against the paper loudly.

Found him. I gasp. Orson's shape is vaguely discernible in my mind's eye. He's moving through a dimly lit room. It's impossible for me to see his surroundings or any furniture around him.

Finally, Orson flips on a light, and I see him.

My brother.

My complete focus is on the two of them, carefully listening to their muffled words.

Tears fill my eyes. This whole time, my brother has been held captive and tortured by Orson this whole fucking time.

Orson mocks my brother and leans in to whisper something inaudible. I catch a glimpse of a blade, but the distortion makes it difficult to make out. My brother reaches for the blade and uses it to stab Orson.

My heart is beating rapidly.

There's no way he's going to escape. Orson heals himself quickly.

As I'm about to abandon all hope, a whirlwind of shadows appears and screams pierce the silence. The image blacks out and I gasp.

Oh gods. Orson's dead.

My vision is consumed by darkness before I pass out.

I come to a while later.

What the hell were those shadows? Did they hurt my brother too?

Leaping to my feet, I hurriedly make my way to my desk, battling against a sudden bout of dizziness. Yanking the drawer open, I rummage around until I find the item I'm looking for. My brother's wallet. The one father gave him before he passed. It's how I know something happened to him. There's no chance in hell he'd willingly go anywhere without it.

Praying to all the gods, I close my eyes and chant. After a year of failing, the spell finally works. Whatever was blocking me from finding my brother before is finally gone.

Orson is really gone. He's dead. And my brother? The magic of my spell allows me to feel his presence. He's alive.

Happiness and other positive emotions threaten to make me light-headed again. My brother is okay. I sense his guilt and torment clearly through the magic, and I am convinced that my brother is too ashamed to return home.

He needs time.

As long as he's alive and healing, I can give him that. It was wrong of my mom to force him into an arranged marriage, but our family will soon run out of time. The core Sinclair magic living inside of Nana will need to be transferred.

I can do that for my big brother. I'll find someone to marry so he doesn't have to.

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Chapter one

Rook

Wolf shifters possess the magical power to shift into their wolf's form whenever they desire. On the other hand, werecreatures are doomed to transform every month when the full moon rises. Werecreatures are commonly known as Moon Cursed.

-From the Encyclopedia of Otherworldly Creatures

The musical chime of the grandfather clock strikes right at seven. Two hours until I have to open the apothecary. Every morning I wake up at six, shift, go on a quick run through the forest before heading back home, shower, and eat breakfast. It's a simple routine I've done for years.

Then, a little over a year ago, I noticed a gorgeous auburn-haired man—no, witch—making his way to the park's gazebo. Every morning since, he's gone to that same gazebo, sparking beautiful purple magic into the vines and helping the magical plant grow.

Rain or shine, it doesn't matter. Every morning, the beautiful witch starts his morning in that same gazebo. And every day, my morning won't start until I see my crush using his magic to help the wisteria grow.

A smile threatens to break across my lips as I make my way across my shop. I practically lean against the window like an eager puppy.

“Seriously?” I grumble to myself as my wolfy tail begins to wag. Just because I’m a wolf shifter doesn’t mean I have to act like a dog. Still, I wait by the glass, enraptured.

Today, the witch is wearing a royal green peacoat that falls to mid-thigh, and black jeans tucked into a pair of scuffed black boots.

Fuck.

He’s gorgeous. But what intrigues me even more than his beauty is the kindness I see when he smiles at the flowers. Witches, especially powerful ones, can communicate with plants. I’m not exactly sure how, but they can sense the plant's emotions and the magic within.

What’s the story with this witch? Why does he visit it every morning? I’ve wasted an absurd amount of time weaving whimsical stories about why he could be found beneath this particular gazebo tending to those particular flowers.

Is he nourishing all those flowers in order to make the perfect potion that will put me and any other nearby magic shop out of business?

Did he lose his familiar, and this just happens to be the last place he saw it?

Or maybe he’s there waiting for his long-lost love? Then again, is he even old enough to have a lost lover? The stunning witch looks like he could be twenty-two to my thirty-five.

As usual, the witch walks past my shop, crosses the street, and makes his way to the park. This morning he takes his time caressing the vines under his fingertips, and I swear I’ve never been more jealous of a freaking plant before.

The back door of my shop slams, causing me to jump. I jerk my head back and scowl playfully at my sister.

“Oh gods, please don’t tell me you’re staring at that witch again.” Lyla chuckles, placing a new shipment of glass bottles on the counter. Her chocolate-brown eyes, which look so similar to mine, sparkle.

I shrug, ignoring her question and distracting myself by pulling the colorful bottles out of the box.

“Why don’t you just go out there and talk to him?”

My head jerks up. “What? No. Are you crazy?” I couldn’t. Not when I look like—what could he possibly see in a huge, cursed wolf like me? I shake my head. “Uh-uhh. No way. He would run screaming.”

Lyla frowns. “I don’t get you, ya know? Just because you’re a wolf shifter doesn’t mean—”

“That’s the thing, Lyla. I’m not just a wolf shifter. A shifter can change at will. A shifter can pass as a human or a witch. They can live anywhere in the world. I’m not like you. Not anymore.”

She sighs. It’s a conversation we’ve had many times. My sister and I come from a strong line of wolf shifters. A proud pack that is so pure, they don’t even entertain the idea of mating outside of the wolf community. About eight years ago, my sister and I went running in a nearby forest. She’d received some bad news from our father and needed to relieve some stress. Unfortunately, neither of us paid attention to the moon cycles. Why would we?

It was a full moon—something that doesn’t normally affect shifters. But werewolves?

That's a different story. A newly turned werewolf attacked Lyla during our run. I was able to save her in time, but I was scratched and bitten numerous times.

Usually, lycanthropy isn't something a shifter needs to worry about, but apparently, I have a dormant gene that was magically activated under a full moon. Activate said gene, throw in some moonlight, bite me a few times, and... voilà. You have me; a cursed wolf hybrid who can't hide his appearance.

"Rook..." My sister's tone is soft. Hushed.

No, no, no. I can't take it when my little sister gives me that tone. I'm her protector, not the other way around. "Lyla. I don't want your pity."

"It isn't pity," she snaps. "Wake up, Rook. It's why we're here." She waves a hand around at my shop. "That's why we left our pack and came to Heart's Hollow. Everyone in this town is accepted for who they are. No one even bats an eye at someone's appearance. That's why it's called a sanctuary town."

No one bats an eye at her. But I see the way the witches avoid our shop. I see the extra stares and feel their judgment. I don't have the heart to fully explain that to Lyla. She's biased, and we're family. She has to defend me.

"There is a vast variety of paranormal creatures that live here," she says. "All of which can't hide their appearance, either. You don't see Zero complaining about the amethyst scales that adorn his skin. Or his translucent wings."

I scoff. Zero is handsome and charming. Sure, he's a dragon shifter, but my bestie has no problem flirting with anyone. Not with his good looks.

Lyla continues, trying to make her point. "You don't hear Cass whining about his demon tail, or the pixies crying about their sharp teeth. Or—"

“Okay, I get it.” I hold a hand up to stop her from listing every damn creature in town. “It’s just hard. I wasn’t always like this.” I scratch at the fur that trails up my arms before waving one toward the window and in the direction of the auburn-haired witch still sitting at the gazebo. “Someone as pretty as that witch can have anyone. Anyone. I doubt he’d look twice at a cursed wolf.”

She sighs. “You’re handsome, Rook, and you’re very lucky, considering everything you went through. You still look human enough. You aren’t stuck in some full werewolf form. Sure you have wolf ears, a tail, and some fur—”

I cock a thick brow.

She laughs. “Alright...a lot of fur. But you have all those man muscles and whatnot. People go crazy for that shit. If I was attracted to men, I’m sure I would be going crazy for that stuff, too.”

I roll my eyes. “Ew, don’t even say that.”

“Not attracted to you!” she screeches. “I meant attracted to big muscles, in general. Jeez.” Lyla hits me playfully.

She stands there for a minute, and I see the change come over her slowly. Her lips tip down and her shoulders slump. “It’s my fault,” she whispers. “If I just listened to Father and mated with the pack leader, we’d still be there. You’d still be just a shifter.”

That’s when the guilt kicks in. How long has she felt this way? I pull her into a tight hug. “Don’t say that, Lyla. None of this is your fault. We both went running. Seriously, I thank all the gods I was there that night. I can’t even imagine what I’d do if I lost you.”

“But—”

I squeeze my sister tighter. “No buts. I’m sorry for being so emotional about my appearance. The important thing is you’re alive. I’m alive. We are together in a town that seems to be quite...wonderful.”

She nods against my chest.

“Plus,” I say. “You were the one who picked Heart’s Hollow. You’re the one who encouraged me to go after my dream and finally open up my shop. Rook’s Apothecary wouldn’t exist without you. You pushed me toward my dream. If I was back home with the pack, I’d be bored doing the alpha’s dirty work.”

“You’re more than just muscles. They wasted your talent back home.”

“This is our home now.”

“True,” she replies, squeezing me one last time before pulling out of my embrace. “Come on. Help me unpack the rest of this box. I need to go to the next town over for our new shipment of candles. And you have a new employee coming in soon.”

I check my watch. “Yeah, he should be here in twenty minutes. The guy’s tall for a witch. Close to my six-foot-five. Thank the gods I’m not the only tall guy here. Maybe hiring an elemental witch will encourage other witches to grace my doorstep finally.”

“Gods, let’s hope so.”

We walk back over to the counter and put the rest of the bottles away. My sister knows me well. I love a well-organized shop. I can’t stand clutter and have this crazy need to put things away immediately.

Once we're finished, I walk Lyla out back to her car. "Take your time. I saw you flirting with Ruby the last time we visited her candle shop." I wink.

Lyla blushes and ignores my words as she leans against the driver's door. "Cass told me the new guy is his fated? Is that true?"

I nod, thinking about the way Cass reacted when I told him I hired Blaze. "Yup. If it's the right guy. Cass hasn't even seen him yet, but he said Blaze is his mate. I didn't even realize a demon could be fated to a witch."

"Hmm," she hums. "Me either. Okay. Keep me updated if anything crazy happens. And text me if you need me back here sooner."

"Yeah, yeah. Have fun with Ruby," I tease, as she unlocks her car and hops in.

One of us deserves to find love.

Ten minutes later, I hear the bell at the front door chime.

"Hello?" a gruff voice calls out.

"Hey, Blaze. Come on in. I'm back here sorting the magical herbs and flowers you found yesterday."

Blaze ducks his head as he walks into the back room. His dark red shaggy hair falls into his face. Like me, he's tall and muscular and honestly looks more like a bear shifter rather than a witch. When he stopped by yesterday to interview for the elemental witch position, I was shocked.

Not only did he seem friendly and approachable, he was smart. Quick. I decided to extend the interview and see if he could find me some magical herbs or flowers for

the shop.

Since elemental witches can sense the magic growing within the plants, they are able to tell which plants and herbs will be the best to harvest for spells. I might have a passion for spellwork, but I can't sense just how powerful the magic within a plant actually is. Not until I brew the potions and test their potency.

Blaze smiles when he sees which herbs I'm handling. "Ah. Thyme is great for healing potions. Can I help you with that?"

"Sure." I grin. "Let's finish this up in here, then I can show you where I store everything. I need to make a few potions today so we can go over my process. Afterward, I can give you a tour of the shop. How does that sound?"

"Great."

Over the next two hours, we effortlessly establish a pleasant rhythm. We sift through mystical flora, handpicking the most powerful herbs for crafting potions. Together, we brew a few simple spells that always sell out and work together to bottle them.

We multitask by chatting and working simultaneously. Blaze has a knack for learning things quickly and comes across as genuinely sincere. I have no doubt that he'll quickly become friends with Lyla and Zero. And if he really is fated to Cass, then all of us will definitely become close friends.

"That's the last of it," I say, placing the poppies into a vase. "If you're unfamiliar with Heart's Hollow, you'll learn that the town has special protection wards surrounding the forest. So, as long as the plants are still growing, they will be in season all year long. The rest of the town might experience the seasons, but we don't have to worry about the flowers in the forest dying in the winter or drying up in the summer."

Blaze chuckles. “I’m familiar with Heart’s Hollow. I know I just moved into my new place, but I actually grew up here.”

“That’s great. I’m hoping that since you’re a witch, it might work in our favor. The other witches tend to avoid my shop.”

“Wait, what? Why would they avoid the apothecary? You clearly have a passion for potions and spellwork. You’re probably the best in town, if I’m being honest.”

My tail wags at the compliment, and I duck behind the counter, not wanting Blaze to see. “Let’s just say I’m tired of people judging me based on my appearance. I’d rather they look past my wolf features.”

“Seriously? People shouldn’t be judging you for your appearance. They’re idiots.” Blaze shakes his head. “I’m serious, Rook. We only just met, but you’ve shown more love for the craft than anyone I’ve seen. And you aren’t even a witch. It’s really impressive.”

“Thank you. Since we’re talking about it, I’m hoping you might be able to tell your old friends or family to stop by?” I pose it as a question, looking at him hopefully.

Blaze’s lips twist. “About that. I was hoping we could keep it a secret that I’m working here. I have some things I need to sort through first.”

I scrunch my forehead. “I don’t know, Blaze. I don’t feel comfortable lying to people.”

“No, not a lie. Just give me some time to get settled. I promise. Just three weeks? Maybe less?”

I nod slowly, studying him. “Are you safe? Is anyone going to come searching for

you, or anything like that?” I think about my pack that rejected me but continued to search for my sister until she gave them the middle finger. The nice thing about living in a sanctuary town is that I know the magic would kick Blaze out if he was thinking about hurting anyone who lived here. But just because I feel relatively safe around him doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want him to feel safe too.

“I’m safe. You and your shop are safe. It’s just...personal. I promise I’ll explain when I’m settled.”

“Alright. Just let me know if you need anything. I’ll give you three weeks to get settled. If you need more time, let me know. And if you need someone to talk to, my wolf ears are great for listening.” I clap him on the back and nod.

Blaze relaxes, sighing in relief. “Thank you.”

“Come on, let’s put the remaining supplies away. I prefer keeping a few plants in their natural state. Instead of using up all my stock for potions, I sell some ingredients whole too. This allows the townsfolk to have ingredients for their own spells if they ever need them.”

“So,” Blaze says when we finish. “Tell me more about yourself. Are you mated? Married?”

For some reason, an image of the auburn-haired witch flashes in my mind, causing my cheeks to heat. “Uh, no. Not married and definitely not mated.”

“Anyone special?” Blaze grins. “You’re blushing.”

As I examine Blaze more closely, I notice that his hair is nearly the exact same rare shade of red. Could they be related? Is my beautiful witch one of the ‘ personal things ’ that Blaze needs to deal with?

“It’s not a big deal,” I say, waving my clawed hand in the air.

Blaze grins again and nudges me. “Oh, come on. Tell me.”

“I don’t even know his name.” My blush travels down my neck. Gods, I’m so embarrassed. “We’ve never actually met.”

Blaze’s eyes sparkle. “Okay, and what makes him so special?”

“He’s a witch. He walks by the apothecary every morning. It’s kind of the highlight of my day.” Ah, shit. Did I really just say that out loud?

Blaze chuckles. “Okay, go on.”

“It’s the way he pays particular attention to the wisteria in that gazebo.” I point across the street toward the park. “There’s something enduring about it. About him.”

“Your witch takes care of the wisteria?” Blaze asks in a far-off tone. He’s staring out the window at the gazebo, but it’s almost as if he’s lost in thought.

“Yeah. See how the trees surrounding the gazebo are starting to change colors? The leaves are turning yellow and orange, but the wisteria is still that stunning shade of purple. It’s because he uses his magic to nourish the plants. It might even be similar magic that’s used to protect the forest from the weather.”

Blaze continues to stare at the gazebo, lips parted with shock. Finally, he shakes his head, as if waking from a dream.

His hazel eyes meet mine. “I think you should go for it. Introduce yourself.”

“Fuck, you sound like my sister.”

“She must be a smart lady.”

“Gods, don’t let her hear you say that. You’ll meet her soon enough. But really, I can’t just introduce myself, Blaze. This witch...he’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.” Exhaustion hits me. I don’t really want to repeat everything I said to my sister.

Blaze nods. “You mentioned earlier that you don’t like it when people judge you for your appearance. That you want people to see past your wolf. Don’t you think there might be a chance your witch might be tired of being judged for his appearance, too?”

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Chapter two

Rook

There's no such thing as a love potion because there's no enchantment more powerful than love. Unless, of course, you're fortunate to find love with your fated mate.

-On Love Potions and Romance. (Dating the Modern Witch)

My face breaks out into a grin, and a little zap of excitement rushes through me. It's almost noon. Cass should be starting his shift soon.

When the tiny demon discovered I had hired Blaze yesterday, both Zero and I had to stop the excited little thing from running out of the shop to go after him. Blaze has no idea he has a mate, according to Cass. Since Cass wanted to make a good impression, I'm pretty sure chasing after the witch like a demon possessed wouldn't be the best impression, though. Zero agreed.

Cass confessed that they'd met before and things didn't end well. In fact, it ended with Cass not being able to find his mate for six months. Any supernatural being capable of sensing the fated mate's pull, would find a six months separation unbearable.

Soon after giving us the details, Cass quickly left the shop to search for his mate. He needed to know if the Blaze I hired was the same man he met all those months ago.

"So," Blaze says. "You mentioned another co-worker?"

I nod, pretending to arrange the flowers in front of me. “There are two, actually. My sister, Lyla, who’s out of town at the moment, and Castiel.”

“Castiel,” he repeats, awe evident in his voice.

I bite back a smile. Wow! They really must be mates if Blaze is impressed with just his first name.

“Well, he goes by Cass,” I explain. “He’s a sweet demon with a hyper yet happy personality. Never met another demon so jovial. He might look as angelic and innocent as anything, but Cass is stronger than most of the paranormal beings here in Heart’s Hollow.”

There’s nothing wrong with me bragging about my friend, right? If anything, it will hopefully give Cass some extra brownie points. If anyone deserves to be with their mate, it’s Cass. Gods, I love playing matchmaker.

“A demon. Huh.” Blaze rearranges one of the spellbooks on the shelf, clearly lost in thought. “And what does Cass look like?”

I cock a brow and grin. “He’ll be here any moment. I asked him to clock in late today. I didn’t want you two getting...distracted.”

“Distracted?”

“Nothing.” I wave his concern away and laugh. “You’ll see.” Trust me, it will be worth the wait. Gods, how wonderful would it be to find my fated?

“Okay, because that isn’t ominous,” he grumbles.

I pick up the last of the glass potion bottles and place them on the shelf in the front

window display. Movement catches my eye and I peek over my shoulder at Blaze.
“Oh, speak of the devil.”

The bell chimes as Cass nervously walks through the front door. His blond hair is parted to the side, and his blue shirt clings to his slim, toned frame. Looks like someone dressed up for his mate, and he’s so pretty, swishing tail and all. If Blaze doesn’t trip all over himself at the sight of Cass, then he’s a fool.

The demon is so tiny compared to Blaze, but despite that, I know Cass could easily take Blaze down.

So many emotions flicker across both of their faces. Awe. Confusion. Curiosity. Happiness. Lust.

Jealousy zings through me, and I know I’m intruding on a private moment, but I need to make sure that both Cass and Blaze will be okay. I already care for my friend, of course, but I’ve felt a strange bout of protectiveness when it comes to my new employee. It could be the fact that we’ve spent hours opening up to each other, or maybe it’s because he has such a strong resemblance to the witch I have a crush on.

I’m not really sure. Either way, I want this reunion to go really well.

“Hi,” Cass says, biting his lip. It’s not something he does often. Cass is usually all happy sunshine and smiles.

“This is Cass,” I announce, feeling out of place, just standing there and staring.

They both blink, looking adorably awkward and nervous.

“Hi,” Blaze finally replies. “Are you the person I met at the park yesterday?”

Cass nods. I wander to the back of my shop to give them privacy.

A moment later, Cass calls out. “We’ll be right back, Rook.”

Peeking into the hallway, I chuckle silently as Cass reaches for Blaze and they hurry out the front door; the bell chiming as they leave. Cass lives upstairs in the apartment I rent out above the shop. I just hope that whatever they do up there, I can’t hear it.

“So, that’s the fated mate, huh?” Zero, my best friend, materializes mysteriously from the shadows. Alright, he doesn’t really materialize. That’s more of a Cass, demon ability thing because he can actually manipulate his shadows and appear out of thin air.

Zero, on the other hand, is a dragon shifter. While his training with the Elite Guard makes him deadly, he actually lacks the ability to materialize.

“Yeah. What are the odds of the demon reconnecting with his fated in my store?”

I study my best friend and notice the bags under his dark violet eyes. Zero collapses his tall frame onto the plush reading chair in the corner of my shop. He rearranges himself so his powerful thighs are draped on the arm of the chair.

I make my way over to the small countertop that acts as a coffee, tea, and potion bar. Pulling out the ingredients I need, I pour them into a large mug and turn on my electric kettle. “How was your last mission with the Elite Guard?”

Zero growls, balling up his fists and pressing them into his eyes. “Killed one vamp. He was a nasty fucker. Turned a group of college women who were out celebrating their exam results. They were just celebrating their schoolwork, for fuck’s sake.” He shakes his head and glances up at me, anger swirling in his eyes. His amethyst scales ripple across his arms. “I just wish all vampires were wiped from this realm.”

“You know,” I say slowly. “A vampire moved here to Heart’s Hollow recently. They aren’t all evil. He walked through the protection wards without an issue.”

I might as well rip off the band-aid and tell Zero now because I really don’t need my dragon friend attacking some innocent creature when he moves to town.

Zero waves my words away. I understand my best friend’s anger toward the vamps. Wolves and vampires don’t usually get along, but vampires and dragons are sworn enemies. To add salt to the wound, when Zero was a teen, his childhood friend was kidnapped by a nest of rogue vampires. Calix was taken right in front of him. To this day, Zero searches for the vampire who stole his friend. Over the years, he’s honed his skill and is now considered the Elite Guard’s most dangerous rogue vampire hunter.

When the tea is done brewing, I add a little honey and hand the big mug to Zero.

He hums in appreciation before taking a tentative sip. “Gods, this is good. It always settles my nerves. Thanks.”

Zero places the mug on the end table next to him. He pulls a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and waves it back and forth. “By the way, that douche, Meyer Cunningham, taped this flyer to your door.”

My eyes widen. A growl rumbles from my throat before I can stop it. Snatching the piece of paper from his grasp, I peer down and read it.

Tired of overpaying for simple ingredients?

Overcharged for basic spells?

Head over to Witchful Thinking, where everything is affordable, and provided by a

real witch.

“What the hell is this Meyer guy’s deal?” I growl, crumbling up the paper. “Gods, I wish I was half dragon just so I can spit fire at this thing.” I toss the balled-up flyer into the trash bin behind the front counter.

“You’re a threat to his magic shop,” he replies with a shrug. “He’s a typical sleaze, trying to undermine your business before you can do the same to his.”

“But I’m not trying to undermine him, or whatever. Plus, I was here first and I’m not complaining. Why can’t we both have our business here?”

Zero purses his lips, amused.

“I just don’t get it. We only overlap with a few ingredients and potions. The rest of our inventory is so different.”

“I only met him once, but he’s a classic scam artist. If the two of you happen to become peaceful, just be careful not to actually recommend people to his shop. I’m pretty sure the guy is hiding something.”

I chuckle. “Did you already start investigating the guy?”

Zero rolls his amethyst-colored eyes. “Of course. You’re my best friend. I gotta scope out the competition.”

“Maybe I’ll go introduce myself tomorrow and make sure he understands there’s enough room in Heart’s Hollow for both our shops.”

He barks out a laugh. “Yeah. Good luck with that.”

The next morning, I go about my usual routine; shift, run, shower. It feels like a perfectly normal start to my day until my shower head breaks and ends up spraying water all over the place. Somehow, I spent even more time than I expected soaking up the mess. So, by the time I got to the shop, Cass and Lyla were already there.

Walking over to the front window, I casually look toward the park. Disappointment fills me. The gazebo is empty.

“He isn’t there, big guy.” Lyla pats me on the shoulder before walking into the back room.

Of course, I missed my pretty witch. ‘My witch.’ I scoff internally. Gods, I’m losing it.

“Hey, boss. Can I take another one of these flowers? My mate seems to really like them.” Cass’s tail caresses one of the white ranunculus with the red-and-pink tipped petals. The demon has a sweet, far-off look on his face and my heart melts.

“Of course,” I smile over at my friend. “You look really happy, Cass.”

“I am. Blaze is sleeping upstairs. I told him he could sleep in until he needs to get up for work. He starts his shift in about an hour. Gods, I miss him already.”

I chuckle.

“Damn. You just saw him,” Lyla says as she brings in a box of candles. “Talk about whipped.”

Cass giggles, whipping his tail so it makes a snapping noise. “ So whipped.”

Lyla laughs. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

I point at the huge grin on my sister's face. "You look happy, too. I'm assuming things went really well with Ruby?"

Somehow Lyla's smile grows even brighter, and her brown eyes sparkle. "We have a date on Friday. We're going to dinner and the movies."

"Good for you."

Cass appears by my side. "You know what this means? It's your turn next."

I grin, shaking my head. "No. I'm good."

"Umm, nuh-uh. We aren't taking a no from you."

"That's right. Lyla and I have decided to be the good meddling friends we are and give you a push."

Cass nods happily. "The bestest meddling friends anyone can ask for."

I bark out a laugh. I can't help it. Sometimes they are absolutely ridiculous. I point at Lyla. "But she's my sister."

She waves my words away. "Okay then, meddling sister. And you know how well I have that down pat."

"We have a challenge for you," Cass continues, as if they have every word choreographed. "Do you accept our challenge?"

My eyes bounce between the two of them. This is a game that the three of us play from time to time. Kind of like a game of dares. Only, we have to accept the challenge, not knowing what it is, and we follow it up with a compulsion potion

before the challenge is said out loud. It's been a while since I've taken any, and I know Lyla and Cass won't let me off the hook this time. "Fine," I say, as Cass begins to jump up and down. "But," I hold up a hand. "I have some rules beforehand."

"Aw, boo." Cass's tail whips back and forth. "How the hell is it a challenge if you go in with a bunch of rules—"

Lyla hip bumps Cass, which causes him to shut up. "That's okay, Cass. Let Rook issue out his rules."

I don't like the way her eyes sparkle with mischief. It's times like this that I wonder how in the hellhounds we are related. "Alright," I say carefully, holding up my hand to start ticking off my rules.

Cass rolls his eyes and takes a seat in the plush reading chair.

"One." I hold up my index finger. "I will not be hooking up with some random stranger. You know I don't do one-night stands. Not my jam. Two, I'm not going to ask Daniel out." Daniel is the gorgeous Black man who owns my favorite bookstore in Heart's Hollow. "Everyone knows he has a crush on Jenny, who owns Coffee's Brew down the street."

I hold up a third finger. "Three, I will not go to the bar and flirt with someone. Four—"

"Oh, for shit's sake, is this a damn rule book?" Cass whines.

Lyla walks over to the chair Cass is sitting in and leans against the armrest. "No, no. It's fine. Please continue, Rook. Four?"

I swallow hard. "What the hell are you up to, Lyla? I don't like that calculating look."

“Four?” she repeats.

Cass narrows his eyes.

I sigh. “Four, I will not be joining some dating app or speed dating thing.”

She smiles, blinking innocently. “Anything else, dear brother mine?”

Thinking back over my words, I repeat the rules I came up with. There aren’t that many ways to meet people here in Heart’s Hollow. Yet, by the evil smirk she’s giving me, I can already tell somehow my sister has won.

“Five...” I hesitate. Fuck. What else can I say? Then, the idea slams into me. “I will not be going out on any blind dates or any type of setup.”

“That’s fine,” Lyla replies, glancing down at Cass and winking. “Do you accept our challenge?”

Wracking my brain even more, I can’t think of anything else to add. “Fine. I accept your challenge.”

Lyla stands, sashays to the back room, and returns with a swirling purple potion in hand. “Drink up, Rooky Pooh.”

I pop the cap off the bottle and down the cool liquid in one go. It’s sweet and tastes like apples. The potion is a simple one. A kids parlor trick that usually wears off in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. It only compels a person to follow up on a task or challenge. The person who takes it isn’t forced to do anything, especially if it’s dangerous. It just encourages the person to follow through with their promise or makes them feel itchy until the task is either completed or the spell wears off.

The frustrated, scrunched-up face Cass was making falls away. In its place is a wide smile. He giggles. “Damn, Lyla, you’re good.”

My eyes widen. “You two played me, didn’t you?”

Lyla ignores my words. “We challenge you to have a five-minute conversation with the auburn-haired witch the next time you see him.”

The magic of the compulsion spell twines around me, swirling around in my stomach before wrapping invisible tendrils around my heart, sealing the deal.

My eyes pop wide. “Fuck,” I say out loud. My sister really is good.

When Lyla issued the challenge of talking to my witch, I assumed that would be the end of it. I’d have a little less than a day to think of the perfect thing to say in the morning when I finally walk up to him and say hi. But I didn’t prepare for all three of my employees to be this excited for me to talk to my crush.

Blaze, Cass, and Lyla look up at me and start giggling. It’s been hours since I accepted the damn challenge and they can’t stop glancing over at me and smirking. Especially once they filled Blaze in on what was happening.

“Ugh. Is this the way my life is going to be from now on?”

Blaze chuckles. “What do you mean?”

“Now that the three of you are all happy, the shop will be filled with conspiratory giggles until I’m mated... or dead?”

Cass laughs. “I think you need to get out of here, boss man.”

“Who knows, maybe you’ll run into a certain witch?” Lyla singsongs.

I’m going to kill them all. Soon enough, I’ll be the only employee in this damn apothecary. Checking my watch, I notice it’s noon. Only four more hours until the shop closes. There are only a few customers in the shop. Would it hurt to go home early?

The more I think about it, the nicer it sounds. I could swing by Bountiful Books, pick up my latest order, get a coffee, and maybe some lunch before spending the day buried in an uber-spicy story. That sounded like a lot of fun, actually.

“Okay. Yeah, if you guys are okay with it, I think I might head home early. Haven’t done that—”

“Like ever. Haven’t done it ever,” Lyla says.

Blaze and Cass chuckle.

“Alright, alright, troublemakers. I’m outta here. Don’t destroy the place while I’m gone.”

I gather my things and trudge out of the shop. It’s a little gloomy outside, with light grey clouds covering the sun. The air is crisp and refreshing, with that earthy smell of approaching rain. Out of habit, I glance across the street at the gazebo. Laughing and chattering happily, a family of five gathers under the white wooden roof.

Was my witch aware of the joy he brought to the park by nurturing those lovely flowers and vines that now adorn it? The orange and yellow leaves that have fallen around the gazebo create a striking contrast to the vibrant purple wisteria.

My creative mind whirls and my fingers itch for a paintbrush. I’d love to paint a

portrait of my witch surrounded by all those stunning colors.

As soon as I walk through the front door of Bountiful Books, Daniel glances up and greets me. “Rook, how are you?”

Daniel is standing behind the checkout counter, clicking around on his laptop. He smiles as he taps a few keys and peers at the screen. “Looks like your book is here. Want me to go run to the back and grab it?”

“Yes, please.” I nod eagerly. “I need to find out what happens when Urbano enters the City of the Lost.” Yup. It has nothing to do with how excited I am to see how Urbano will react when he walks in on his long-lost love, naked in the river. It’s just a happy coincidence that this book was rated five out of five chili peppers.

Daniel gives me a knowing smile, his warm chocolate eyes sparkling. “Just give me a minute. I’ll go look for it.”

“Sure thing,” I say, making my way to the romance section. “I’ll just be browsing around.” Turning the corner, I smack straight into someone, my big frame causing them to stumble to the ground. “Oh gods, I’m so sorry, I—”

All the air is sucked from my lungs.

I shut my mouth abruptly when I see who is splayed out in front of me. Large green eyes blink up at me innocently. Oh gods. I just bumped into the gorgeous man I have a crush on, and he’s even more beautiful up close.

Don’t drool. Don’t you dare fucking drool. I plead to all the gods, praying my werewolf instincts don’t emerge now.

Eyes wide, I help the auburn-haired witch to his feet. Without thinking—yes, I’m in

full-on panic mode—I run my clawed hands all over his lean body, blue jeans, and emerald green peacoat, trying to help him get all the debris off his clothes.

When a breathless gasp leaves his plush lips, I yelp. What have I just done? Stupid . Stupid . Stupid . Did I just feel him up? How is this my life right now? Without another word, I bolt around the corner and duck behind a bookshelf, hoping he doesn't go looking for me.

And just as quickly as everything started, that itchy sensation to complete my challenge takes hold. Oh gods, the potion. I need to have a conversation with my crush, whether or not I'm ready to.

Fuck.

Why did I just run away from him like a crazy person?

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:23 am

Chapter three

Autumn

Sinclair magic is broken into two components. The main component, and the heart of the family's magic, is referred to as the core magic. The second component is the family grimoire, a spell book that has been guarded for over two centuries. Following tradition, one individual will serve as the conduit of the core magic, containing most of its power, while another will be assigned the guardian, in which they protect the grimoire.

-Entries from the personal diaries of John Sinclair, the founder of the Sinclair Coven.

One minute, I'm minding my own business, browsing the romance section of my favorite bookstore, and the next, a brick wall is slamming into me, chucking me to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Okay, I kind of stumbled on my own feet when said wall hit me, and I didn't really fall that hard.

But seriously, what just happened?

A deep, breathy voice rumbles, causing goosebumps to break out across my arms. "Oh gods, I'm so sorry, I—"

He stops talking abruptly, and a shiver slides against my spine as I take in the man—no, the wolf above me. Whoa. He's handsome, with his white button-up dress shirt straining against his muscled chest and thick arms. I barely have time to take in his clawed fingertips before his strong hands are wrapping around my forearms and

he's lifting me like I'm as light as a feather.

In one swift motion, I'm upright and breathless, standing, and peering down at the guy's werewolf feet. Even his thighs are thick, tucked in snug under a pair of form-fitting dress slacks. What the hell... I've never seen a wolf hybrid in real life, but that's when he has to be, right? Half shifter, half were? And why is he so hot?

His clawed hands are all over me, brushing off the dirt as he rambles apologetically. The cutest blush rises to his cheeks, and suddenly, I'm transfixed. Mesmerized by how well this handsome yet bashful creature plays my body. I gasp. It's almost as if he was plucked from my wildest fantasies.

Deep, chocolate-brown eyes meet mine. Smiling, I'm about to say something to him when he takes off around the corner and disappears. I'm left here trembling with lust and wondering if I maybe fell and hit my head. Because the hot wolf-man has to be a figment of my imagination. It's the only explanation for what I just experienced.

After a minute, I shake myself out of my trance and bend down to pick up the books I dropped.

"Oh, no. Let me help. It's my fault."

My heart skips a beat at his deep, masculine voice.

The wolf is back, and he's already bent in half, picking up my mess. A moment of panic zips through me. Oh gods, he's going to see that book. I have a thing for steamy erotic romances, but then, I calm down when I realize the only way the wolf might recognize the really obscure cover is if he reads this stuff, too. And the chances of that are—

"Here you go." He hands me a few books before pausing over the spiciest. That

adorable blush spreads further and his cheeks are splotchy and red.

I grin. Holy shit. I can't believe it. He totally knows what's inside this book. Damn, why do I find that so... so... I don't even know what to think, but I kind of like it. I don't have many friends who read the stuff I do.

“Um—uh.”

The rambling, nervous wolf is ticking all my boxes.

“Thank you.” I reach for the last book and smile at him. He stops everything he's doing and blinks at me. He scratches his arm, before I see his hand trail to his back before he scratches that, too.

I expect the wolf to tuck tail and run again, but to my surprise, he gives me a shy smile and points at my pile. “So, you like Abigail Skin?”

My smile widens. “I do. She's such a talented writer. What about you?”

He nods. “Have you read her book ‘Trapped at the Lakehouse?’”

“I did! It's one of my favorites.”

“Mine too!”

Our eyes meet, and I guess I can blame it on all the cheesy romances I've ever read, but I swear we share a moment. This is the part in the movie where birds would start chirping, or some ridiculous music would start playing. I bite my lip, trying to stop myself from chuckling at my wayward thoughts.

He clears his throat and scratches his head nervously. I notice a combination of

wolf's fur and hair cover his thick forearms. His sleeves are rolled up just below the elbow. I'm tempted to run my fingertip against his fur just to see if it's as soft as it looks.

His chocolate-brown eyes are so warm. "Have you read Helena Hurt?"

I shake my head. "No. Not yet. Is she any good?"

His smile widens. My face mirrors his when he places his big werewolf hand on the small of my back and guides me deeper into the romance section, his sharp claws lightly grazing my back.

A shiver runs down my spine.

We pause in front of a huge display with Helena Hurt's books. "Now, I don't mean to be alarming," he whispers, leaning in as if he's about to tell me a secret. "But Helena's books are way better than Abigail's."

I gasp, appalled. "No! You take that back. There's—"

He holds up a hand, silencing me. I momentarily distracted by the black pointed claws again.

"I know. Trust me. I didn't believe it either." He grins down at me. "I thought there was no way in hell I would like someone more than the queen of fantasy herself."

My lips twitch. "What made you give her stories the time of day?"

"It was when I finished all of Abigail Skin's books and didn't have anything to read."

"Wait." My eyes widen. "You've read every book by Abigail? There are so many!"

The wolf blushes again. The blush travels from his cheeks and spreads down his neck before disappearing behind a sexy tuft of wolf fur. I've always had a thing for chest hair, but damn, this wolf makes everything hotter.

“And what about you? How many of her books have you read?”

I smirk. “All of them, of course.”

He barks out a laugh.

We chat about some of our other favorite authors for a moment and I love how well we seem to click.

Gods, he's sweet, bashful, and is a total reader? How many times have I dreamt of flirting with someone in between the shelves of a bookstore? Because that's what we are doing, right? Flirting? And how refreshing is it that we're talking about books? He doesn't seem to care that I'm a Sinclair or hell, maybe he doesn't even know.

Would he change when he found out? People are always after our magic in one way or another. If it isn't to try to downright steal it, it's to gain magical favors, or get access to our family name.

The curiosity becomes too much, and I finally ask him what's on my mind. “What's your name?”

“Rook. What's yours?” He swipes a nervous hand through his rich brown hair.

Rook. Why did that name sound so familiar?

I smile. “My name is Autumn.”

“Autumn,” he breathes, taking a step closer. “That’s beautiful. Very fitting.”

The world around us seems to fade away; my sole focus is on this wolf. “How so?” I whisper, curious how he thinks my name is fitting. I’ve never been complimented over my name before.

“Your hair.” Rook holds up a hand as if he’s going to run his fingers through my strands. “The color is a unique blend of reds and oranges, reminiscent of fall leaves. And your eyes...they are captivating. Gorgeous greens and golds. Paired with your pretty freckles, it’s as if you are an fall deity personified.”

My breath catches.

His hand falls away before making contact.

“Excuse me,” Daniel, the bookstore owner, says as he approaches us. “Oh look, my two favorite customers chatting. How wonderful.”

“Yes, Rook and I just met.” I glance over at the wolf and he looks pale. His eyes are wide as he stares at the book Daniel is holding.

My lips twitch when I see the cover. Unlike my steamy, obscure cover, this one leaves no room for imagination. It’s pure erotica. Nothing but fun smut with a light fantasy plot in the background. It’s kinky and fun, and absolutely delicious. I would know, I’ve read it multiple times.

“Here’s your special order, Rook.” Daniel hands the book to the wolf before disappearing behind another shelf.

My phone begins to ring. I fish it out of my back pocket and glance down at the screen in disappointment. I have to go. I promised my mother I’d be there today for

some family obligation. Is it weird that despite only spending thirty minutes with Rook, it feels like we have a deeper connection? It's like I've been friends with him for years. That's crazy.

"I'm so sorry, Rook. I need to go. Duty calls." I wave my phone at him as it continues to flash.

His face falls, and I'm glad I'm not the only one who seems disappointed. Rook's eyes flicker to something behind me.

"Hey there, Autumn."

Turning, I see a familiar face grinning at me. "Lucus? Oh my gosh, hi." I throw my arms around my old friend. "How are you?" It's been a while since I've seen Lucas Briar. We were childhood friends who ended up going to different universities. We still occasionally keep in touch.

"I'm good."

Lucus jumps into some story about his travels overseas, but I'm distracted by the handsome wolf, who is slowly backing away. From the corner of my eye I see Rook tuck his book behind his back. Suddenly, I'm sad about the poor timing.

"Since you're here," Lucas says, searching for something in his satchel. "I might as well give this to you in person. My family said you're searching for another wealthy witch to marry." Lucas chuckles.

My face heats, and my eyes immediately bounce to Rook. Gods, I sound like a gold digger or something.

Lucus hands me a fancy white envelope. It's addressed to me and my address. I break

open the seal and pull out the thick cardstock inside. “What’s this?”

Lucus gives me a confused look. “It’s an invitation to your party next week. Hence the whole ‘husband search.’”

“Ah, of course. Will you excuse me, Lucas? I have to meet with my family. I have some grand party to plan after all.”

When I glance over at the spot where Rook had been standing, I notice it’s empty. I spin around, searching for the big wolf. The handsome guy is huge, for fuck’s sake. How did he sneak out?

I finally spot him at the front of the bookstore, chatting with a cute demon at the front of the line. Rook notices me and his face turns red again as he hides his book behind his back. Well, I can’t have that. No one should be shamed by their reading choices. Especially when it comes to fiction. The demon turns to see who Rook is looking at. I don’t want to interrupt, but when the demon waves with a huge grin on his face, I feel like I’m safe.

“It was nice meeting you, Rook,” I call out. “I’m sure we’ll see each other soon. Until then, enjoy your book. It’s one of my favorites.”

Rook’s brown eyes widen before his pupils darken. He looks adorable and flustered. Who knew I’d have such a kink for big, bashful wolves who look like they can toss me around?

With one last glance, I let my eyes drop back down to his book before trailing back up to his lust-filled gaze. Then, when I’m absolutely sure he’s looking at me, I wink.

My boots click against the wet cobblestones as I make my way back to the Sinclair Estate. I’m clutching the envelope I took from Lucas in my hand. I can’t believe my

mother went behind my back to set up a party. What the hell did she say while issuing them? Because she had to have said something to make the Briar family tell Lucas I was hunting for a freaking husband.

How embarrassing.

My anger and frustration are simmering by the time I make it to the house. With its towering columns and lavish windows, the house resembles more of a mansion than anything.

“Mother?” I shout as I march through the front door of our house. “What the hell is this?” I hold up the RSVP, half tempted to shred it into teeny tiny pieces and toss it in the air like it’s glitter confetti.

Nana chuckles from the sofa where she's using magic to knit a shimmery orange scarf. Her beautiful, long gray hair is thrown into a messy bun, and there's a steaming mug of coffee next to her on the end table. Five bucks says there’s a shot of whiskey in the mug along with her caffeine.

“Mother!” I call out again, waving a pearl white envelope in my hand.

“I knew you weren't going to like it.” Nana shakes her head with a small smile on her face.

“You need to marry,” Mom says as she steps into the room. She’s wearing a well-tailored navy pantsuit that makes her look more like a high-powered CEO rather than a witch. Similar to Nana’s hair, my mom has her hair tossed up into a pretty bun, only there isn’t a strand out of place.

“And you said I could do it my way.”

Mom sighs. “Honey, no offense, but your way sucks.”

“Mom!” My mouth falls open right at the same time Nana chuckles.

My head whips over to my grandmother. “Hey! Whose side are you on?”

Just then, something soft brushes against my leg. Maple, my fox familiar, weaves between my legs.

“Aww, who’s a good boy? Of course you’re on my side, aren’t you, Maple?” I coo as I bend down to give Maple scratches behind her left ear. It’s not my fault that every witch I’ve dated made it clear they were after my magic, our family money, or both.

Nana places her scarf on the end table and peers over at Mom. “Tell Autumn about your magic, Lucy.”

My head ping-pongs between the two of them. “What’s going on with your magic?”

Mom sighs. She reaches for both of my hands and tugs me over to the sofa. I collapse on the cushions, already knowing I’m not going to like what she has to say.

“What’s going on with your magic, Mom?” I repeat.

Mom’s matching hazel eyes bore into mine. “Your father and I were out shopping when it started to rain. I tried summoning an umbrella...”

I nod encouragingly. “Okay. And?”

“It wouldn’t work.”

The blood drains from my face. “Wha—what do you mean it wouldn’t work?”

Plucking a normal household item out of thin air is a simple conjuring spell. A Sinclair can do it without even having to chant out loud.

“Just that, honey. It wouldn't work. I couldn't do it.” She squeezes my hands tighter.

I nod slowly, understanding dawning on me. “The Sinclair magic is seeping out of Nana. And because you already have adult children, the magic is skipping you. It needs to go to either me or my brother.”

“Autumn, he left us.”

I rip my hands away from my mother's. “No. He didn't, Mom. You don't understand.” Gods, we've had this conversation so many times. “I don't understand why you don't have more faith in your own son.”

“Honey,” Mom says slowly. “I don't understand because you won't tell me anything. I don't know what happened to him. I don't know where he went or where he is now.”

“It isn't my story to tell.” Frustrated tears fill my eyes, and images of Orson hurting my brother fill my mind. “It's really bad, mom. Honestly, the things I saw, it's something a mother should never see.”

This time Mom's eyes fill with tears. It's hard to see. Mom has always been so composed.

Nana stands from her spot and rubs small circles on mom's back. “It's true, Lucy. I did a spell last year. I saw what happened. You don't need to know.”

Mom trembles and I lean forward, pulling her into my arms.

“And you’re sure my baby boy is safe?” she asks, voice quivering.

I nod frantically. “He’s safe, Mom.”

She lets out a deep sigh and pats my leg. I lean back in time to see her swipe her tears and compose herself. “Okay. I trust you both. I just miss him. But enough of that.” Her gaze meets mine. “Autumn, I understand you are protecting me and your brother. But if he doesn’t come home soon and marry, then you need to. It’s either that or we lose our magic.”

“How much time do I have?” I ask, determination filling me.

“No, honey, listen to me,” Mom says. “You’ll need to make an important decision. I’ll support you either way. If you’d rather marry for love, I understand. I shouldn’t have sent those invitations without asking. I was very fortunate to meet your father. I love him deeply, and our love is worth more than any magic. It will be hard, but I don’t want to push you away like I did with your brother.”

“It’s okay. Next time, just talk to me first.” I purse my lips. “How much time do I have?” I repeat.

Mom glances over her shoulder at Nana, and I peer over at her. Can she feel the magic leaving her body? Does she know exactly how much time we have left before all the magic is gone? Or is this just a guess?

“Two months, maybe three. So far it’s just been your mother who was affected, but she’s been able to do other spells since then. When every Sinclair family member can’t do a simple summoning spell, then that’s when we need to worry.”

I nod, giving Mom and Nana a tight smile. “In other words, we have time, but not too much time.” Damn. As much as I hate to admit it, I understand why mom sent out the

invitations.

“Okay, that should be enough time for me to figure things out. I’ll keep looking for the right husband, but I also want to work on getting my brother home.”

Nana leans over and squeezes my shoulder.

“Thank you, Autumn,” Mom says. “What about the party? Should I cancel it?”

“No. I’ll go to the party. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet someone special.” As soon as the words leave my lips, the image of a certain wolf man fills my mind.

Once I’m upstairs in my bedroom, I lock the door. Already knowing what I need, Maple trots over to the window and nudges the folded map.

Gods, all I want is to talk to my older brother. Pulling out his wallet, my crystals and all the ingredients I need for the spell, I set everything up. Ever since my brother escaped six months ago, I’ve performed a weekly spell just to check that his aura is safe and to see what town he’s in. Some people might think it’s an invasion of privacy, but I just need to make sure he’s safe.

Last week, though, I performed a nudging spell. It’s a straightforward spell that gives a person courage to do something. I nudged my brother to come home. If he didn’t want to come home, then the spell wouldn’t work. However, if there’s a chance he wants to come home, but was nervous, then this spell will give him a little nudge or maybe even the courage to do it.

Before I begin, I light my candle and sit on the floor, legs criss-crossed. I start by adding the magical herbs and rose petals to my glass bottle. When I finish, I add a

dash of pink salt and begin to chant. Maple crawls into my lap, helping me connect with my magic.

“Alright, Maple. Now we just sit and wait.” When I searched for my brother all those months ago, the spell I had to use was a draining one. Since Orson had so many spells in place that blocked my brother from my view, it was hard to find him. Now that my brother is free, those obstacles aren’t present. I just have to be patient while the spell brews.

Maple mews. I look down at her and scratch under her chin. Her ears wiggle with happiness. I lean down and press a kiss to the top of her head. Every witch will do a summoning spell for their familiar when they turn eighteen. When I was little, I always imagined my familiar would be a black cat, because why wouldn’t every little witch want a black cat to aid them in their magical journey?

They say the familiar always chooses the witch, so when Maple walked through that summoning spell and into my open arms, it felt like a little piece of my soul returned to me.

Sensing my mood, Maple lightly paws at my cheek. “If my brother doesn’t want to marry, I’ll do it. After Orson, I don’t ever want him to feel pressured.”

Maple coos, squirming on my lap.

“Tomorrow we’ll go visit a few of the local apothecaries and magic shops. I know it probably doesn’t exist, but I want to see if anyone has a love potion.”

Maple growls.

“I know, girl. It’s a long shot, but I want to experience love. If there’s something I can take that will help me fall in love with my future husband, then it’s a win-win. I

get to fall in love, all while saving my family's magic.”

A scraping noise captures my attention. My crystal stands upright on the map, indicating that it's ready and the spell is done brewing. I chant, sinking my fingers into Maple's fur. Her magic swirls with mine as she guides me. The spell is over quickly.

Opening my eyes, I peer down at the map. Then, I smile.

My big brother is home.

Blaze is somewhere in Heart's Hollow.

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Moonlight shines through the branches as the trees sway in the wind. The inky-blue sky is adorned with stars, creating a mesmerizing backdrop. I'm not entirely sure how I got here, but I know I'm safe as Maple guides me through the forest.

We take a winding dirt path that seems to stretch on for hours, but I don't mind since the scenery is so beautiful at night. As we approach a clearing, the full moon comes into view, and my thoughts stray to Rook.

Does the full moon affect him? Is he forced to change into a werewolf?

Maple jogs ahead before settling in the middle of the open grass. Laughing, I join her, and together we wait. Again, I'm not entirely sure how I got here or what I'm waiting for, but a thrill thrums through my blood.

The air is sweet, reminding me of earthy pines and cherries. I sit there in the soft grass while my fingers stroke Maple's red fur. As the trees around me dance to some silent music only they can hear, my thoughts stray back to the man I met in the bookstore.

That's when I see it.

A wolf.

It's massive. In this position, with me sitting on the floor, it towers over me. Its rich brown fur glimmers in the moonlight.

I don't think it's spotted me yet, and before I can think of a way to escape, Maple

stands and bolts straight toward the big creature. Maple yips happily, her small frame easily weaving between the big wolf's legs.

My heart pounds.

The wolf eyes Maple for a moment before finally greeting it with a sweet nuzzle to Maple's cheek.

A sigh of relief escapes me.

The wolf's head jerks up. I'm met with a pair of familiar, beautiful eyes. Eyes that remind me of warm chocolate. Eyes that are so friendly and imploring.

I gasp. "Rook?"

The wolf's eyes widen.

I grin.

I'm vaguely aware of Maple fading away like a shadow floating on the wind.

Purple tendrils of magic swirl around him. One moment I'm staring at a gorgeous wolf and the next I'm looking at Rook; naked and devastatingly handsome.

Rook's thighs are thick and well-defined. So is his chest. And since he's naked, I can see the brown fur that covers his chest. It's even hotter than I imagined. His stomach is chiseled and bare, but there's a prominent strip of fur that runs down the middle of his groin, enticing me to look at his very impressive cock.

Let's just say that Rook appears more human than werewolf, but the wolf features are clearly visible.

That adorable blush that stains his cheeks is back, but his cock grows the more my eyes drink him in. He might be shy, but he likes the attention I'm giving him. And something about that combination has my own cock growing hard behind the zipper of my jeans.

“Gods, Rook. You're beautiful.”

Before either of us can say anything else, everything around me blurs, clueing me into the fact that this is a dream.

As I lie in bed, my heart pounding, and my body turned on, something tells me that Rook is in an equal state. My lips tilt into a smile. I'm pretty sure I just experienced my first shared dream.

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Chapter four

Rook

Conversation and a hearty meal are the surefire way to capture a witch's heart. But if you want to truly impress a witch, our culture values the act of courting one another with a magical flower.

-On Love Potions and Romance. (Dating the Modern Witch)

My heart is racing.

Glancing down, I check my watch for the fifth time before jerking my head back up to the gazebo. It's ten minutes past seven and Autumn isn't there yet. I wait about ten more minutes before that sense of defeat washes over me.

He isn't coming.

Fuck, did I really meet him yesterday? Because now I'm pondering the actual effects that potion may have had on me as I made my way to the bookstore. Did I imagine the whole thing? And what was with that dream? I have never had a dream that felt so... real.

Could it have been a shared dream?

No.

That's impossible. Shared dreams are only experienced between fated mates, and I never heard of a wolf being fated to a witch before. Even though Cass is a demon, I make a mental note to talk to him about his experience of finding his fated, before I continue with my daily tasks.

One of the apothecary's most popular magical plants is the rose, which I carefully prepare. The nice thing about the flower is that there are dozens of ways to prep it, depending on the user's goals. Some roses need to be preserved and whole, while certain potions might only require a few petals. Every part of the rose can be used in many different ways.

First, I focus on making several bottles of rosewater, saving some of the roses for the drying process, and preparing some rosebuds for certain potions. Then I work on clipping and bottling some thorns, because yes, even those can be used for certain spells. I'm halfway through preserving my remaining stock when Cass and Blaze walk through the door.

"Good morning, you two."

"Hey there, boss," Cass greets.

Blaze's eyes widen when he takes in my mess on the counter. "Wow! You've been busy. Did you do all of this today?"

I glance at all the roses and wince. I've easily done three days of work. None of it will go to waste, thank goodness, but yeah, it's a bit much.

I shrug. "I had a lot on my mind."

Cass and Blaze share a look, but I try to ignore it.

“So, how did things go this morning? Did you go visit your witch at the gazebo?”
Cass asks.

“No,” I grumble. “He didn’t show up today.”

Blaze walks over to the window and stares at the park across the street. He’s so lost in thought that he jumps when Cass approaches and rubs his back. They don’t even really know one another yet, but seem to be so in sync with each other’s emotions. The power of a fated mate is a beautiful thing to witness, but I don’t really think I can handle seeing it today.

“How do you two feel about working together in the forest this morning?” I point between the two of them.

A small smile touches Blaze’s lips, and Cass completely lights up, nodding eagerly. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, you can go with Blaze and help him gather some plants. We’re running low on lavender. I’m hoping you two can also find some more snapdragon while you’re out there.”

The demon’s tail whips behind him excitedly. “Sure thing. Want me to bring any seeds to plant?”

Just because we gather plants from a magical forest doesn’t mean there is an endless supply.

“Good idea. Bring some seeds with you and find the perfect place to plant them. Maybe show Blaze the different paths through the forest and how to seek help in case he gets lost.”

Blaze chuckles. “I should be fine. If I get lost, I know a few spells that should be able to help me out of the forest.”

I shake my head. “No. It’s better to know just in case. The magical trees can confuse anyone, and a witch, no matter how powerful, can’t always rely on his magic.”

Blaze’s eyes widen with shock. I repeat the words in my mind, but I have no idea what I said to make him have that type of reaction.

“What’s wrong?” Cass asks, instantly by his side. “I can feel the panic through the bond.”

Blaze shakes himself out of his thoughts and lets out a long sigh. “I need to contact my family soon. It’s just something Rook said. It reminded me that there are some unresolved issues with my family and I need to figure things out.”

Cass nods. “I’ll be here when you’re ready. You don’t have to go alone. Unless you think I would make things worse?”

I scrunch my brows. “How would you make it worse?”

Blaze reaches for Cass’s hand.

“Some witch families don’t react well to different supernaturals,” Cass explains.

Understanding hits me. Growing up in such a prestigious pack means I heard it all. Everything from racist remarks to talking down about the women in the pack. There was no way my old pack would approve of me crushing on a witch. Or befriending dragons and demons either, for that matter.

Blaze glances at Cass before tucking him in against his side. “I don’t think you have

to worry about my family. I just think they'll just be more upset that I've been missing for so long."

Cass tugs on his mate's hand. "Come on, let's go take a walk in the forest. We can chat about how to approach your family while we gather supplies."

Blaze smiles down at Cass and nods. As they leave the shop, I'm left staring at all the roses I've started working on. Red roses are a symbol of love and romance. I don't want to be jealous of my friend, but I am. Will I ever find anyone who will look at me the way Cass and Blaze look at each other?

The bell chimes and several customers walk in. I guide a sweet pixie with green hair over to our reading nook, where she happily picks up a spell book and begins flipping through the pages for a perfect spell.

At one point, Lyla walks in for her shift and quickly goes about helping people. This shop has been my dream for so long, and as I think about the last several days, I realize I'm happy with what I've created here. Heart's Hollow is a wonderful town. It might take a while for the witches to realize I have a reliable apothecary, but at least the other inhabitants have already grown to trust me.

In the midst of brewing one of my favorite potions, I'm only somewhat aware of someone coming closer until they clear their throat.

Autumn appears by my side. All the air rushes from my lungs. How is it that someone so much smaller than me can have this effect on my body?

He smiles up at me; a light blush dusted across his cheeks, blending in with his freckles. "Hi, Rook."

"Autumn," I breathe, swallowing hard. Gods, he's beautiful. Today he's wearing a

navy peacoat and a black scarf. His auburn hair is styled back, and his green eyes look vibrant. He has a big spell book clutched in one hand and a dainty-looking leash wrapped around the other like a bracelet. My gaze follows the leash, only to startle when I see the little red fox from my dream last night.

My heart thrums wildly in my chest. It's pounding so hard that I'm half afraid Autumn can hear it.

"This is Maple. She's my familiar." He scratches behind her pointy ears.

I take a step back, not wanting to frighten the little creature. Usually, other animals are scared of me and my wild appearance, but the familiar doesn't seem to be bothered as she yips and headbutts my leg.

"She likes you," Autumn chuckles. His laughter is smooth and sensual, which causes my groin to pull in tight. Autumn steps forward and traces a finger along the brown fur on my arm. Is Autumn... flirting with me?

Gods, it's been so long since I've done this. Back when I was just a normal shifter that could change forms, I could easily blend in with the humans. I was confident and knew how to flirt.

But now? I'm just shocked. It's been years since anyone hit on me, assuming that's what Autumn is doing. With my luck, I'm thinking maybe I had a dried leaf, or a wayward magical ingredient stuck on my arm from all the work I did earlier.

I crouch down to pet Maple. She jumps up, placing her tiny black front paws on my knees and leaning against me to lick at my face. Glancing up at Autumn, I realize that kneeling this close to the witch I've been crushing on is giving me all kinds of ideas.

I clear my throat. "What brings you in today? I don't think I've ever seen you here

before.”

Autumn shakes his head. “No, I usually have everything I need at home, or know how to search for any missing ingredients. Although—” he taps his chin playfully. “This shop is really impressive. It's only my first time visiting you, but I can tell I'll be here more often.”

His words of praise send a little thrill of excitement through me. My tail begins wagging, and I can't even hide the damn thing.

“I'm looking for something specific, though. I think I'll take a quick look around.”

Maple continues to jump on me. The little fox is melting my heart. “Such a good little familiar, protecting your witch.” I haven't had affection from anyone other than my sister and her hugs for longer than I care to admit. “Mind if I carry her?”

His lips twitch. “Go ahead.”

When I scoop Maple into my arms, she curls against me and coos. She leans into my touch as much as I lean into hers, cradling this precious animal to my chest. Autumn casually walks forward, dainty leash still in hand, as he leads us through my shop. He browses the shelves, occasionally pausing to run a slender finger across a glass bottle or a book spine, murmuring more praise as he strolls.

The whole time, I'm cursing my body's strange reaction to the beautiful witch. I'm half hard following him around. That damn leash might as well be looped around my neck.

“Is keeping Maple on a leash necessary? I thought familiars are well behaved with their witch.”

Autumn grins at me from over his shoulder as he waves a hand in the air. “Oh, Maple is very well trained. The leash is mainly for decoration and to assure the town that I don’t have a wild magical fox roaming around. She can snap it easily.”

I grin. “I can’t imagine anyone finding Maple a threat.”

Autumn fully turns, facing me now. He props himself against the armrest of the chair in my reading nook. “Trust me, the amount of magic coursing through Maple is extremely dangerous. Don’t judge someone by their appearance. There’s more under the surface.”

I blink, Blaze's words from the other day slamming into me. ‘Don’t you think there could be a chance your witch might be tired of being judged for his appearance, too?’ Guilt swirls in my stomach. Here I am, checking Autumn out, making assumptions about his familiar, and all while being embarrassed of my own appearance.

“I’m so sorry. I know looks aren’t everything,” I reply, pouring as much sincerity into my words as possible.

Autumn’s bright green gaze travels down my body before slowly climbing back up to my eyes. He offers me a sweet smile. “No. Not everything,” he says mysteriously. A blush blooms across his cheeks as he speaks, but despite that, he still looks confident.

My own face heats in response.

Maple squirms in my arms and licks my nose.

Busted.

I chuckle before placing her back on the ground. “You know, you never told me what you were looking for.”

Taking a step back, the blush on Autumn's cheeks deepens. His shoulders tense for the first time since I've met him.

Why does he suddenly seem nervous and shy? It's almost as if he's embarrassed to admit what he's looking for. I'm about to tell him he doesn't have to tell me if he's uncomfortable, but his words freeze me in place.

"A love potion."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm looking for a love potion." Autumn bites his lip, eyes on the floor.

Something inside me hardens. An image of Lucus, the handsome witch who spoke with Autumn yesterday, flickers in my mind. "Ah, yes. Your friend mentioned you were looking for a witch to marry," I reply, my words sounding distant, almost as if I'm not the one speaking.

Is that his plan? Find some witch and get them to drink a love potion so they fall in love with him? Sadness overwhelms me and I take a step back. My wolf claws clink against the tile floor, a stark reminder that I'm not what Autumn is looking for. I'm no witch, and I'll never fit in with one.

"You don't need a potion to make someone fall in love with you. They just need to meet you," I whisper like a hushed confession. I take another step back.

Autumn's green eyes widen. "No, it's not like that. I mean, it's—I know love potions never existed before. But I read an article earlier this year that there are advanced potions that have made great progress and making a person feel like they are in love—and I wanted one just in case I—"

“No,” I interrupt. “There’s no such thing. I don’t care what the articles say. It’s a lie. A person might feel obsession, or maybe happiness, but not love. Not true love. Anything else is fleeting or a lie.” My voice is clipped. Cold.

His whole demeanor sags. Even knowing he wants a love potion to give to someone else, it hurts me to know my cruel tone and words hurt him. Gods, doesn’t he know how amazing he can be? Sure, I might not know him, but for the first time in years, this pretty witch has made me feel seen. I’m scary-looking and abrasive. I’m huge, with werewolf feet and fur in random places. I even have wolf’s ears for fuck’s sake. And yet... yet , Autumn has made me feel human. In just two chance meetings, he’s made me feel worthy.

“Please, you don’t need to do this.” I make sure my voice sounds confident despite my pounding heart. “If they just took the time to know you, Autumn. To speak with you and see the way you—”

“Excuse me.” A handsome blond man in a sharp-looking suit appears by my side. He’s staring at Autumn with a twinkle in his eyes. “Did you say a love potion?”

Autumn blinks. “Well, yeah, but I know they aren’t real. I just wanted to experience what it was like to—”

“Nonsense.” The man strides forward, his strong, flowery cologne swirling around and assaulting my sensitive nose. Damn. Did the man pour the whole bottle on himself? “I have exactly what you’re looking for.”

Something about this attractive man, with his perfectly styled hair and slimy smile, screams red flags.

“This shop is a complete joke, anyway,” the man says, tone growing louder. “The magic shop down the street has affordable ingredients gathered by a real witch. And

the potions don't lack luster or look watered down like these.” He waves a hand at the shelf right next to me.

I start to growl. Mature, I know. But I can't help it. This man is talking shit, and my shop doesn't deserve it. “My potions aren't watered down. At Rook's Apothecary, we take a lot of pride in using the finest ingredients.”

A few of our customers have stopped what they were doing and are now glancing our way, whispering.

“Oh, of course.” The man places a hand over his heart and pretends to be sincere. “My deepest apologies. I'm sure for a cursed... creature, subpar magical plants are fine. But only a true witch can find the most potent plants while still growing.”

I hate this man, but what I hate even more is that he's right. A witch is the only being who can feel the magic in a plant while it's still growing. I don't know who the fuck he is, or why he's talking like this, but as I continue to growl, I feel like I'm only proving him right. The witches here are never going to take me seriously, and if this asshole keeps talking, I might end up losing my non-witchy customers, too.

“We only provide the best plants and supplies here in my shop, thanks to our numerous tests. But even so, we recently hired a powerful witch to help us seek the best ingredients.”

“And where is this wonderful witch you speak of? Who are they? What coven are they from?” The man waves a hand around.

The blood drains from my face. I promised Blaze I would keep his identity a secret, but denying who he is will only hurt my shop at this moment. Still, I made a promise and intend to keep it. I stand up taller and step closer to the man.

He steps back, closer to Autumn. “Sir, you don’t need to threaten me. I was just trying to speak with this witch.”

My mouth falls open when he flinches back as if I were about to strike him. Murmurs can be heard all around us now. Everyone in the shop is staring. A few have even pulled out their cell phones.

Autumn clears his throat. “Did you say you have a love potion?”

The man turns a dazzling smile toward my pretty witch, and I find myself growling again when Autumn places a hand on the man’s forearm. “Let’s go then. Mind if I get your name?”

“Ah, yes. How rude of me. My name is Meyer. Meyer Cunningham. I own Witchful Thinking , the magic shop just down the street.”

This time I snarl. This is the asshole who’s been trying to destroy my shop and boost his?

“Okay,” Lyla says, clapping her hands together in one loud, sharp crack. “Show’s over. Mr. Cunningham, you need to leave.” She walks to my side and arches a brow at the man.

Meyer gives my sister an appreciative look. This time she growls, causing Meyer to throw his hands up in the surrender motion.

“Shall we go?” Meyer turns back to Autumn.

To my dismay, he nods. Meyer leads the way, but Autumn looks back briefly, mouthing an apology before exiting the apothecary, leaving me filled with anger and heartbreak.

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Chapter five

Autumn

Love potion rumors debunked. A witch in the Philippines claimed to have discovered the perfect ingredient for a love potion. After conducting several tests, during which the individual failed to develop a genuine connection with their colleague, it is evident we must resort to finding love in the traditional manner. The probability of crafting a powerful love spell or potion remains nonexistent.

-Article by Agatha Perry, Magic This Weekly Magazine

Keeping my composure while this man talked shit about my wolf was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

My wolf.

Gods, I don't know where that thought came from, but I like the sound of it. I never saw myself as the type to be protective, except when it came to Maple and my family. However, when Meyer intentionally said malicious and hurtful things to Rook, I felt compelled to defend him. I had to get this man away from the shop—and quick.

Let's ignore the fact that I thought Rook's growling was hot.

A cool breeze caresses my face as soon as we step out of Rook's Apothecary. Orange and yellow fall leaves crunch under my boots as I walk down the cobblestone path, Maple trotting next to me, and Meyer leading the way. He peers over at me and I

swear his white teeth sparkle unnaturally.

Wrapping my black scarf tighter against me, I pretend not to be bothered by the older blond man. “So, you mentioned having some type of love potion available?”

He gives me a huge, over-the-top grin, but before he can reply, Maple weaves around his legs, causing her leash to wrap around him. When he isn’t looking, I send her a silent message down the bond. ‘Stop that, troublemaker.’

She yips at me.

‘I know the guy is a sleaze. Trust me, I won’t be taking any of his potions. No matter what he says.’

What the hell was I thinking? I know better than to be hopeful for something so childish. While studying at a secret witch university and researching the family grimoire, I discovered that true love potions don’t actually exist.

Any fleeting spell I might take is exactly as Rook explained. It would either lead to an unhealthy obsession or mimic the feeling of shallow happiness. Nothing more. It might be ridiculous, but I just want to feel something for the person I’m forced to marry. Because, at the end of the day, I’ll choose marriage over being the reason my whole family and coven lose their magic.

“I did,” he finally replies as he untangles the leash and hands it back to me. “I mentioned a love potion. Can you tell me who it’s for? Because I’m sure you won’t need a strong spell to get what you want.” He waggles his eyebrows and places a hand on the small of my back.

Luckily, we make it to the front of his shop, so it gives me a good excuse to put some distance between us. I step away from Meyer’s touch. The guy reminds me of that

bastard, Orson, and it's unsettling my nerves.

Maple tugs on the sleeve of my peacoat. Suspicion and worry pulsing through our magical bond. Bending down, I scoop her up into my arms and she curls against me. Maple has the ability to change sizes depending on her mood. Even though she seems upset, she shrinks down into the size of a small cat as she burrows against my scarf.

"It isn't for anyone specific. I just wanted options."

Meyer nods, holding the door to Witchful Thinking open. As soon as we walk inside, my eyes are assaulted by bright lights and white walls. Where Rook's Apothecary is warm and inviting with a woodsy aesthetic, this store is cold and clinical, like an overpriced pharmacy.

"Welcome to Witchful Thinking . We provide some of the most affordable ingredients for your spellwork and potions here in—oh. It's just you," a young woman says from the cash register. Her eyes droop as if she's bored and about to fall asleep.

"Jeez, Shelly. Enthusiasm, enthusiasm, enthusiasm." Meyer snaps his fingers three times as if all the repetition will drill it into her head.

Shelly just rolls her eyes before her attention returns to scrolling on her phone.

"Ignore her," Meyer says, touching my back again and guiding me to a shelf in the middle of the store. "This is what you're looking for."

The shelf is lined with bottles of various sizes, but he reaches for an obvious heart-shaped one with a cloudy pink liquid in it. Meyer plucks it off the shelf, gives it a swirl and hands it to me with a huge smile.

I blink, glancing down at the bottle. Something glittery swirls inside.

Is this guy serious? He must mistake me for a human, or an inexperienced witch, because I can tell from here there is little to no magic pulsing in this glass jar. “And what exactly is in this?”

My gaze bounces over to the other potions on the shelf, and I bite back a laugh when I notice the sparkling liquid has settled at the bottom of the glass. I’m pretty sure it’s edible glitter.

“Well, a true potion expert doesn’t share his secrets.”

“Right. And what is this potion supposed to do to someone who drinks it?”

His eye twitches. “It imitates the effects of falling in love, causing the user to be infatuated with the person who hands them the bottle after chanting the proper spell.”

“So you lied,” I reply in a blunt tone before placing Maple on the floor next to me. She grows back to her full size, only a little taller than a normal full-grown red fox.

“Well, no. Of course not. I—”

“You said, and I quote, ‘Nonsense. I have exactly what you’re looking for.’ I’m looking for a love potion. Not something that causes temporary infatuation.” The vengeful side of me wishes there were customers in the store, just so I can raise my voice the way he did in Rook’s Apothecary.

“Look, you mentioned yourself that you knew love potions weren’t real. That wolf back there wasn’t offering you anything. I’m here giving you a solution.”

“Fine. Mind if I test the potion?”

Meyer's eyes pop wide, his grin completely drops from his face. There aren't many witches who can test the power of a spell. It's a rare ability that can only be found in pure bloodlines like the Sinclairs.

"Um, sure, of course."

Maple presses against me, silently pouring her magic into me. Not that I need her help, I just get the feeling the little brat is showing off just how powerful we are.

Cupping the bottle in my open palms, I let my magic swirl around me as I silently chant. Purple threads of magic surround me like shimmering liquid smoke. I bite back a smile when Meyer's eyes follow the sparkling display. That's right, buddy, way more impressive than edible glitter.

I close my eyes and concentrate. Dissecting such a simple spell is almost a joke, but I let my magic hang in the air for a moment longer.

When I open my eyes, I'm shocked to see Meyer isn't pissed. No, he looks almost... impressed.

"Magical Rose water to boost happiness. Spelled sunflower petals. Lavender to help reduce stress." I smirk. "Roasted rice and matcha, I'm assuming to help the spell feel natural while also increasing dopamine in the body. Smart. I have a feeling your shop is popular with getting wonderful results from basic humans who have no idea magic is real."

Meyer's lips purse into a smile. He nods his head. "Impressive. I'm starting to understand why you might need a potion to make someone fall in love with you. You have a magical way of making a guy feel like he got kicked in the balls. If you'll excuse me for a moment." He rushes off.

As soon as he turns the corner, I chuckle. Maple snickers—yes, foxes snicker—a delightfully amused sound.

“Well, now. I’ll take that as a compliment. Come on, girl. Let’s get out of here.” I make a mental note to talk with my college friend from the Elite Guard. Usually, I’d mind my own business, but the fact Meyer literally tried to poach me from another shop only to sell me something with false claims is concerning. What other potions and items does he have in his shop that don’t do what they are expected to do? How many are dangerous?

Deep in thought, it isn’t until Maple is tugging on her leash do I realize she led us back to Rook’s Apothecary. I bend down with a smile and give her some scratches under her chin. Is she just as excited to get back to Rook as I am, or did she tap into my feelings and lead me here because she knew this is where I wanted to be?

We step through the front door together, and I notice only a few people lingering around the reading area. This shop really is beautiful, with its rustic ambiance and woodland vibes. Magical plants decorate the shop. Not only are they for sale, but they are part of the aesthetic. Earlier, when I first walked into the shop, I was surprised at how welcoming the place was.

That familiar home-baked goods scent permeates the air, reminding me of fresh cookies. I’m not entirely sure if the scent is from the candles behind the register or if they actually bake dessert in the back room.

“You’re back.”

A woman who looks to be a few years older than me is standing a few feet away with her arms crossed. “We don’t have what you’re looking for.” Her voice is cold and clipped. Damn. She saw me leave with Meyer earlier.

Movement catches my eye and I see Ruby rush over to us. “Babe, do you know who this is?”

Ruby is a stunning Asian woman who owns a candle shop the next town over. I try to visit her shop as often as possible. Being half witch, half mage, Ruby makes some of the best candles and wax melts with just the right amount of magic blended in.

My eyes bounce over to the candles behind the register. “Ah Ruby, I should have known you were responsible for that heavenly smell.”

Ruby smiles and gives me a hug.

“I don’t care who he is. He caused a scene in our store earlier. He’s the one I told you about.”

“Lyla!” Ruby hisses. “Autumn is a Sinclair.”

My head snaps up. “No, it’s okay Rubes.” I turn toward Lyla. “I’m pretty sure I’m the guy who got the asshole to leave.”

Lyla blinks.

I figure now that I have her attention, I should continue explaining while I still have a chance. “That Meyer guy was talking crap and starting a scene, all while trying to promote his magic shop. A few people had their phones out. Not to mention, Rook was getting all hot and growly. He doesn’t need any negative attention on him or his shop.”

Ruby rubs small circles on Lyla’s back. Lyla relaxes against her touch before her lips twitch. “Did you just call my brother hot?” She smirks.

“Wait, what? Your brother?” I squeak. As soon as the words leave my lips, I see the resemblance. The same shade of brown hair, and almost identical eyes. But where Rook looks like a werewolf, Lyla looks human.

Lyla’s eyes flash, and I see the predator within. Then her words slam into me. Oh gods, I just told Rook’s fierce-looking sister that I think he’s hot.

Growling starts up by my knees, and Lyla glances down. “Who do we have here?” Lyla squats down and holds her hand out to Maple. He must have picked up on my discomfort because he continues to growl.

“It’s okay, girl. This is Rook’s sister.” I squat down and pet my familiar. “We like Rook. Remember?”

Lyla’s face softens. Ruby winks at me from behind Lyla before walking up toward the front of the shop.

Scratching my head nervously, I give Lyla a sheepish look. “Is Rook here?” I whisper.

Lyla shakes her head as she continues to study me. We both just squat on the floor, petting Maple as she eats up the attention, no longer caring that Lyla just embarrassed the crap out of me. ‘Traitor. You’ll do anything for pets.’

Maple just purrs in response.

“What do you want with my brother?”

I bite my lip, wondering how much of the truth I should give her. She already knows I’m attracted to her brother. But what about the fact that I can’t stop thinking about the handsome wolf? Or why maybe I want a love potion and how it’s for me and not

someone else? “I want to explain. I realize I left abruptly earlier, but in all honesty, I really was trying to get Meyer out of here. The asshole had the balls to try to give me some fake love potion when we left.”

“That’s right,” she replies, shoulders tensing.

I get the feeling reminding her what I was originally looking for a love potion was a bad idea.

Lyla purses her lips. She continues to pet Maple, looking deep in thought. “So, what do you need with a love potion? If you really are a Sinclair, then you know better than me that there is no such thing. Gods, haven’t you ever seen that movie Love Potion No. 9 ?”

I chuckle. “I love that movie.”

“So does Rook.” She grins, and I return the smile.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to explain things to him first.” I pause, thinking over my words. Why did I feel like I owed Rook an explanation? Could it be this strange pull I feel toward him? Or maybe it’s because I’m pretty sure we shared a dream last night?

“Alright, then.” Lyla stands, brushing off her hands on her jeans. “He’s under the gazebo.”

Excitement swirls in my stomach, like magical tendrils spiraling until they wrap around my heart and tug. The need to stop everything and go see Rook is irresistible. I stand, giving Lyla a thankful nod. “I’m going to go chat with him.”

Nerves wrack my body as I make my way across the street. Lyla offered to watch over Maple, not knowing that Maple’s leash really is just for show and she could take

care of herself. Nevertheless, Maple wanted to stay behind for all the head scratches and pets.

I'm almost at the gazebo when the sight before me knocks the wind from my lungs. Rook is sitting on the bench looking so masculine and devilishly handsome. His white button-up is pulled tight across his muscular chest and arms. His legs are spread wide, and his head is tipped back, enjoying the fresh air on his face.

Rook looks so damn peaceful that I almost turn around and leave, not wanting to interrupt him. But then I notice something on the bench next to him; my spellbook I was carrying earlier.

My heart skips a beat. Did he come here hoping I'd show up? I glance behind me and note that the gazebo is in the direct line of sight of Rook's window. How many times has he spotted me here, sitting just like he is now, head tipped back and a small smile on my face?

Before I can chicken out, I step closer. I have this crazy need to tell him why I said I was looking for a love potion. There's something deep inside of me telling me to trust Rook.

Once I step under the gazebo, Rook's brown eyes pop open, his gaze searching.

I give him a shy smile and a wave.

He's silent for a moment before he speaks. "You look happy. Did he give you what you're looking for?"

Gods, why do I want to tell Rook I'm happy because I found him ?

"No," I sigh, sitting next to him. "I'm pretty sure Meyer is a fraud. The only reason I

left with him was because I wanted to protect you and your shop.”

His head jerks my way and our eyes meet. “Is that true?”

“Yes.” I scoot closer. “It was foolish of me to ask for a love potion. I know deep down there wouldn't be anything out there. I was just a little...desperate.”

He shakes his head. “I don't get it. Why would you want a love potion? Part of the fun is the experience of falling in love.”

A little zap of jealousy zings through me. Has he been in love before? “Rook, you don't understand. I would never give an innocent person a potion like that against their will, not unless it was life or death.” My thoughts momentarily stray to Orson and how I needed to protect my brother. “That potion would have been for me.”

His mouth falls open. It seems like I shocked the big wolf again. “Why the hell would you take a love potion?”

“Have you heard of the Sinclairs?” When he nods, I continue. “That's my family. I'm a pureblood Sinclair. I'm not sure how much you know about witches. But do you know how our magic transferred?”

“I really never paid attention to those born with magic. My studies and passion have always been in spellwork and potion brewing. As a shifter, we can sense certain magic, but nothing compared to a trained witch or mage.”

I nod, loving how Rook's passion comes through even now. “Nana holds the majority of our family's power within her. It's called the core magic. The power remains contained as long as she acts as its vessel. Every time a person from our family or the Sinclair Coven summons magic, she can feel its presence. Without a vessel, the magic will fade away or search for a new host.”

Rook nods. “Okay, I’m following so far.”

“Eventually, the magic will slowly leave Nana’s body, the older she gets.”

“So, when a vessel starts breaking down, the magic needs to find a new host?”

I nod. “Exactly.” Happy that he’s following along. “Generations ago, the leader of the coven, John Sinclair, made certain rules and stipulations. Since my family had so much magic, other members were afraid of one witch having so much power. While the core magic remains with the host, another member will be the guardian of the grimoire. The remaining magic that can’t be contained by one host will be divided up into several magical pendants that act as conduits.”

“That makes sense, but why would you need to take a love potion?” Rook asks, his thick brows scrunched in confusion. Gods, even like this, he’s so handsome.

“For the core magic to be inherited, there’s a stipulation that states a Sinclair needs to marry in order to become a host.”

Understanding dawns in Rook’s eyes. I can’t believe I’m telling him all of this, but I have a feeling I can trust Rook. Something inside of me needs him to understand.

“I think it had something to do with being able to continue the family line with babies or something like that. John Sinclair, however, was smart and made sure to include adoption as being acceptable as long as we performed the proper ceremonies. The leader wanted to make sure that if a Sinclair couldn’t produce a baby, or in my case, happened to not be attracted to the opposite sex, a non-blood member could still continue the coven.”

“You’re the next host.” Rook swallows hard. “You need to marry so you can inherit the core magic and act as its vessel.”

I close my eyes, wishing Maple was here to comfort me. The weight of my responsibilities has been weighing down on me lately. “It’s not a big deal. It’s just that I wasn’t prepared for this. Usually, a Sinclair is trained for years on what to do and how to inherit the magic. I, on the other hand, was trained to be the guardian of our family grimoire. I know it’s selfish, but I always thought I’d marry for love. I want to experience love at least once in my life.”

Rook scoots closer and I open my eyes. Carefully, he wipes away a few stray tears with his clawed finger. “It isn’t selfish,” he whispers. “It’s admirable. It’s a beautiful wish worth experiencing.”

I lean into his touch before he pulls away.

“Who was supposed to be the original host?”

“My brother. Blaze Sinclair.”

Rook’s eyes widen with shock. “You have a brother named Blaze?”

I nod, curious about his reaction.

“I’m sorry about the way I acted at the apothecary earlier. I was just trying to protect you.”

It’s true. I could tell he was trying to stop me from making a mistake. Sure, he looked upset, but he also looked worried.

And his words. Gods, his words. Has anyone ever said anything so sweet to me? Okay, yes, it’s obvious now that he was trying to protect me from making a mistake. But the way he whispered, “You don’t need a potion to make someone fall in love with you. They just need to meet you.”

Swoon.

“It’s okay.” I reach out for his hand and squeeze it. “I know you were.”

Rook blushes and clears his throat. “Anyway, you, uh, left this at my shop.” He picks up the spell book and hands it to me. “I was hoping to find you, but when I peeked into Meyer’s shop, I didn’t see you.”

I grin. “We must have missed each other.”

“Why is the book so light? Please don’t tell me it’s your family grimoire.”

I bark out a laugh. “Oh, gods no. The title is a simple witch’s guide to spellwork. But it’s actually for you.” I hand it back.

“For me?” His forehead scrunches.

Leaning forward, I press a finger against the wrinkled lines on his face. He laughs and relaxes his brow.

Rook flips open the book and gasps. The pages inside are carved out.

“The other day you told me you wished you were able to read one of your romance books during downtime at the shop, but didn’t want others to know what you’re reading.”

Rook nods, an amused sound leaving his lips. “Gods, it’s true. Cass and Lyla already make fun of me. As much as I love them, I don’t always need them up in my business.” He smiles, and I like the way his voice is filled with fake annoyance. It’s clear he cares about them. I like a guy who is sweet to their family.

“Well, this book is spelled to be really light to carry. But the fun part is when you place one of your romances inside the carved out part, it will attach itself to the spell book. To others, it will look like a simple textbook, but to you and me, it will be whatever romance you place inside.”

“Gods, this is genius. Lyla is always spying over my shoulder when I’m trying to read on my tablet or phone. I love this! Thank you, Autumn.” His brown eyes sparkle. “It was very thoughtful.”

My chest warms at his happiness, and I can’t fight the huge smile on my face.

“You know what,” Rook says. “I have something for you, too. Would you like me to show you my place? I didn’t plan to give it to you right away, but this is the perfect time.” He waves his new spell book. “And I can test out my new gift.”

He got me something?

“Alright, yeah. Let’s do it.” Even I can hear the giddiness in my tone.

“My cabin is just through the woods.” He pauses. “Okay, wow. That sounded super creepy. I promise I’m not the big bad wolf.” He winks as he stands.

I laugh. But just like Little Red Riding Hood , I’d follow this big wolf anywhere.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:23 am

Chapter six

Rook

A utumn stands and stretches. My face heats and I avert my eyes, not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable by my ogling. Damn, anyone would think I'm a teenager lusting after his first crush.

I clutch my new gift to my chest. "Let me just swing by the store and tell Lyla where I'm going."

Autumn nods, pausing as soon as we step out from under the gazebo. "Just a second," he says as he analyzes the wisteria dangling from the gazebo's roof. He reaches out and traces his fingers over the vine.

Purple swirls of magic leave his fingertips. I stare in awe, realizing this is the first time I get to see him nourish the plants up close. The magic changes from various shades of purple and pink; magenta, amethyst, lavender, and violet.

The magic dances in Autumn's hand before diving into the plant. The vines are wiggling and the flowers seem to sway, as if a sweet breeze is caressing their petals. Autumn closes his eyes and extends a hand toward them. To my shock, several flowers lean into his touch.

Carefully, his magic cuts the stem of dangling flowers and Autumn catches them in his open palms. He opens his eyes and smiles up at me.

“What’s that for?” I point at the pretty purple buds in his hand.

His lips part, and his green eyes sparkle. “I like to collect flowers that represent the special moments in my life.”

I blink. Special moment. Did Autumn think this moment between us was special? My heart pounds. No, there’s no way. I’m misunderstanding. Although, if someone were to question the significance of this moment, then yes. It matters to me. It’s very special.

“So,” I hedge, scratching the back of my neck. “What was so special about this moment that it needs to be celebrated?”

Autumn reaches for my fingers. He grasps one of my large, clawed hands in both of his, looking me deep in the eyes. “I don’t tell anyone about my family obligations, let alone spill family secrets about our magic. But something is telling me I can trust you, Rook. I’ve never told anyone my true feelings on the matter. Only you.” He lets go of my hand.

Something about his confession lights me up inside. “Yes, you can trust me, Autumn. I promise I will never betray that trust.”

He smiles, and my hand itches to grasp his hand in mine. It’s been years since I’ve been affectionate with someone, and even longer since I’ve displayed it in public.

We walk across the street and right up to the front entrance of the shop. My hand hovers above the doorknob.

Screw it.

I spin around quickly and face him. “You know what? Let’s skip going back inside.

I'll just text my sister. I'd rather spend this time with you than get a million questions."

Autumn's lips twitch. "Yeah, she seems a little protective of you."

I groan. "Oh gods, what did she say?"

Autumn bites his lip and giggles. "She tried to kick me out of the shop. She overheard the entire exchange with that Meyer guy. She also didn't seem to like the fact that I was looking for a love potion."

I groan again. "Damn. How embarrassing."

Autumn laces his fingers with mine and tugs me away from the apothecary's door. His fingers are warm in mine. The touch is so innocent, yet somehow lights me on fire. My gaze jumps to the front of my shop. Sure enough, I see Lyla and Cass staring at me through the window. When they see me looking, they both giggle and wave.

Oh gods.

Not letting go of Autumn's hand, I tug him around the back of my shop. If Cass is back, there's a good chance Blaze is inside as well. I know Blaze claimed to be a Sinclair when I interviewed him, but I kind of thought he was just part of the Sinclair Coven, not an actual blood-related Sinclair. I'll keep my promise to Blaze, but now that Autumn is in my life, this puts me in an uncomfortable position. I don't want to lie to Autumn.

The Sinclair family is a big deal in the supernatural community. I never really paid attention to any of their first names, especially since people just referred to them as the Sinclair brothers. Not only is Autumn's family very powerful, but if I'm not mistaken, the Sinclairs are one of the founding families of Heart's Hallow.

Their magic surrounds the town with its wards and protects us from discovery or danger.

We turn the corner and I lead him to a dirt path behind my shop. Autumn holds my hand as I lead him into the forest, where we're surrounded by thick, green trees.

"It's beautiful here. There's always been something about a magical forest compared to a normal one."

"I know," I reply. "The magic tugs at my heart and makes my wolf want to run through its depths and howl at the moon."

My thoughts stray to my dream. The memories of running through this very forest, and following an intoxicating scent until my wolf led me to Autumn in that clearing. Maybe someday I can take him to that exact spot where we met our dreams.

"Did you... Did you visit me in my dreams?" I blurt.

"I did." He stares at me quizzically, almost as if he's unsure of the answer. "I was curious if it was a shared dream between us."

"Huh. I didn't realize a witch could do that."

"Apparently, I can. I definitely need to look into it. Maybe there will be some answers in the family grimoire, an entry that talks about dreams. Somehow, I just knew we were both experiencing it at the same time."

"It was so vivid. I've never experienced a shared dream before. It's usually something very meaningful between shifters."

He scrunches his brow. "But I'm not a shifter."

“Either way, I’m glad my first shared dream was with you.”

“Welcome to my little cottage,” I say as I hang the keys on their hook by the door. I place the spellbook Autumn gave me on my coffee table and gesture at the sofa. “Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. Your gift is in my room. I’m just going to grab it real quick.”

“Thanks,” he replies, glancing around with a curiosity that reminds me of a cat. “Hurry back. I’m excited to spend more time with you.”

I bite back a grin as I jog to my room. Fuck, how does this little witch always make me feel so damn giddy? He’s always been so pretty, but I can’t get over how sweet and enchanting he is when he flirts. I never thought he’d flirt with me, let alone make me feel so happy and young.

Autumn might be the younger one of us, but there’s something about him that screams charming and in control. I like that.

Once I’m in my bedroom, I make my way over to my bookshelf and pick up the gift-wrapped book. The other night when I met him, I came back home and wrapped up my favorite Helena Hunt book. I was excited to give it to him this morning, but chickened out at the last minute. A gift seemed a little forward for strangers. But then, when he gave me that spellbook under the gazebo, I swear my heart melted. He thought of me, just like I thought of him. When I step back into the living room, I’m shocked to see he isn’t sitting on the sofa.

Instead, he’s standing by my entertainment center, elegant fingers trailing the shelves as he looks at the photos I have displayed there. I stop and take in his appearance. Why does it feel so right that he’s in my house like this?

Fuck, slow your roll, Rook. Calm down before you scare him away.

He smiles as he glances at a photo of Lyla, Zero, and me. Zero has thick arms around both of us with a happy, sloppy smile on his face. As if sensing me, Autumn looks over his shoulder. “Who is this?” He points at the picture.

I walk over to his side, leaning my arm against his. He presses back firmly and my heart skips a beat. “That’s my best friend, Zero. He’s an amethyst dragon.”

“Ah, that’s why he looks so familiar. I think I saw him walk into your shop the other day.”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “That was probably him. Big purple wings and scales along his arms and face?”

“Yup. That’s the guy.”

“You’ll probably meet him soon if you keep visiting my shop. He’s trying to get permission to move here in Heart’s Hollow.”

“Permission? Why would he need permission to move to a sanctuary town?”

I place the photo back on the shelf and nod. “Yeah. He’s a vampire hunter for the Elite Guard. They have to vet any town he wants to make his permanent residence.”

“Holy shit. That Zero? He’s famous. And he’s your best friend?”

A little zing of jealousy zips through me, but then I remember Autumn is supposed to marry another witch to save his coven’s magic. I don’t think I need to worry about my friend. Although, they would make a stunning couple. I shove the stray thought away. No. Now that Autumn is finally in my life for however long that is, I’m not going to ruin it.

“He is. I love him like a brother.”

Autumn stares up at me with something akin to awe. “Good. I like the way you are with your family.”

“Thank you, Autumn. Want something to eat? I was thinking of tossing together a big salad for lunch. All the ingredients are fresh, and I don’t want anything too heavy right now. I’m thinking some arugula, mixed greens, and dried apples. I like to finish it with blue cheese crumbles and a vinaigrette.”

“A salad sounds great!”

When I hand him the wrapped book, my chest warms when his whole face lights up. “Open it tonight when your’re home. It’s one of my all-time favorites.”

He grins. “Thank you, Rook.”

A shiver runs down my spine when he says my name. I point at the flowers he’s still holding. “Do you want me to preserve them? I have a really pretty bell jar that matches the color of the petals.”

Autumn nods eagerly, grinning. “A bell jar? Yes, please. If you’re sure? I know some of the magical ones can be pricey.”

Tipping my head to the left, he follows me into my spare room. “They can be very pricey, but I’m resourceful.” I wink.

He gasps when he takes in my shelves that line the room.

“I collect the glass lids for cheap, then I hand carve the base. I usually polish them. Sometimes I carve patterns on the sides.”

“These are stunning.”

“Here we go,” I say, pulling down a set with a polished white base that has green vines and purple wisteria painted on the sides. Maybe someday I’ll admit that his gazebo inspired this design. It’s only fitting that I give it to him.

“Wow,” Autumn whispers, handing me the flowers. Although I’m pretty sure he’s more skilled at performing a conserving spell than I am, I admire his willingness to give me a chance. I cup my palms and blush when I see the stark contrast between the delicate wisteria and the black-tipped claws of my werewolf hands.

Shame burns through me, and I look away as I begin chanting the spell. Green wisps of magic float in the air, twirling around the plant and using its magic to keep the plant in pristine condition. When I’m finished, I place the stem in the bell jar and chant another spell that causes the stem to float under the glass.

“That’s impressive. You’re good with plants.”

“Thanks.” I hand him the jar.

“Can I ask you a question?” Autumn’s green eyes sparkle. He studies me quizzically, causing me to squirm under his gaze. This is usually the part when people ask about the curse and if there is any way to lift it. If there’s any way to ‘fix me.’

“What’s it like, being a hybrid?”

“A hybrid? You mean Moon Cursed?”

He frowns. “I’m so sorry. That was really insensitive of me. I assumed you were a born hybrid. I didn’t think you were cursed.”

“I was. It’s why my pack kicked me out and why Lyla left.”

Autumn narrows his eyes. “Assholes.”

“Come on, follow me to the kitchen. I can make our salad and tell you more about it.”
I lead him back to the kitchen and pull out all the ingredients.

“You don’t have to if it makes you feel uncomfortable. I promise. I didn’t mean anything bad by it. And your old pack is a bunch of fools for letting such a talented potion maker go.”

I bark out a laugh. “They didn’t care that I could brew potions or create spells. They used me for my muscles.”

“Then they’re idiots. The lot of them!” There’s humor in Autumn’s tone, and I appreciate it.

Idiots. I chuckle, remembering Blaze saying something similar.

I chop everything up and toss it into a huge serving bowl. While I’m dicing, I end up telling him all about my pack, their expectations, the work, their prejudice, and even some things I never told my sister. As we eat our food on my back patio, I tell him about how Lyla and I were attacked and how it changed my life forever. We chat for over an hour. Talking about things that are probably way too serious, yet somehow feel right. Telling him my secrets was as easy as it seemed to be for him.

Not only is he easy to open up to, but I love how he makes even the hard topics easier to talk about. To my surprise, we have or had a lot in common. We both understand what it’s like to have certain expectations attached to our names.

We’ve only seen each other twice now, well, three if you include the dream. Is it

crazy to think there is some kind of spark between us? All those times I've been crushing on him from afar and maybe, just maybe, there's a chance there can be something more?

“I don't know what it is about you, but it feels like we've known each other for years.”

“Yes! Exactly.” I'm caught up in his pretty eyes. The green is stunning, but the gold and brown flecks really make them stand out. “I really like you, Rook.”

Truthfully, I'm a selfish wolf, but if Autumn is willing to give me the time of day, then I want to use this time getting to know him. Both as the powerful witch and charming person I know he is. I want to spoil him until he's forced to marry someone else. This might lead to my own heartbreak, but I have this crazy feeling that if I don't have Autumn in my life at all, that would be far worse.

“I really like you too, little witch.”

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Maple trots along the dirt path ahead of me. She leads me through a thick copse of trees. The only things guiding my way are the moonlight up ahead, the witchlight stone in my hand, and my hyper little familiar leading the way.

The last several days have sped by in a whirlwind of party planning. I haven't seen Rook in person since we went to his cottage in the woods. But in our dreams? We've seen each other every night since.

Like usual, Maple acts as my dream guide, weaving between trees and leading me down a path only she knows until we spot Rook. And just like usual, he's in his wolf form. His wolf always takes my breath away. Coming up to my shoulders and thick enough that I can easily climb on top of his back and ride him like a horse.

I giggle at the thought.

Rook's brown eyes snap up, and he runs toward me like an eager dog. I love seeing him greet me this way, like he's as desperate to be by my side as I am to be near him.

I sprint toward my wolf until my arms wrap around his thick neck and my fingers tangle in his soft, silky fur. Like this, Rook always lets me touch him, hug him, and hold him. But once he shifts, he's always more reserved. Lingering in the feel of him for a moment longer, I tighten my hold.

When I finally pull away, he shifts to his normal half-were side. A part of me is a little sad that he figured out how to place dream clothes on his body in the blink of an eye, but not today. Today he's even more handsome than usual.

He's wearing a sexy pair of jeans and a white T-shirt that clings to the muscles in his chest. These dreams usually all start off the same. Maple guides me to my wolf and fades away when we're reunited. We usually spend this time walking around the forest hand in hand, just chatting and getting to know each other.

Lately, we've come up with a game of sorts. We ask each other a random question that launches us into our discussion. The whole thing is so sweet and I don't know if he realizes just how romantic all of this is, but I can easily say that I'm starting to fall for my big stoic, shy wolf.

"If love potions were real, what would you think it's made of?" he asks as soon as we take the familiar path that leads us to a beautiful clearing in the woods.

"Well," I tap my chin with the finger of my free hand. "Definitely rose petals. Roses are universal in the magic of love."

"Okay, but that's a little obvious." He squeezes my hand with a laugh. "We're making a love potion here. What else would you add?"

I chuckle. "Someone's feeling playful. Alright, Mr. Potions Master. I would add apples to our elixir. In fact, magical apples will be the base of my potion. A lot of people don't realize it, but apples are not only tied to love, but they symbolize passion, sensuality, and affection."

Rook guides me deeper into the forest. "Impressive. I did know that. Did you know that there's a reason apples appear in so many fairytales and love stories? People always remember pomegranates, but no one talks about the significance of apples."

My heart skips a beat. Only Rook and I can flirt with storytelling. "I'm aware of its importance in stories, especially in myths like how Dionysus would give apples to Aphrodite to try to woo her." I glance up at Rook and our eyes meet.

“What would you add to our love potion?”

“I would switch things up too. I propose using apples instead of rose water as the base of our spell, incorporating apple juice and sliced apples to our base. To enhance romantic feelings, I’d incorporate a hint of ginger and a few drops of vanilla for added sweetness. And cinnamon is often included in spells for desire and passion, so I would definitely add that. We need to add a little spice to our potion.”

Something about the way Rook says that has my heart skipping another beat. Damn, what is it about this wolf? And why do I suddenly find myself wanting to drink love potions with him?

I squeeze his hand. “Oh! What if we added an aphrodisiac, like magical jasmine? This actually sounds really yummy.”

“Perfect.” He tugs me into the clearing where a blanket is already spread out for us. “If you could share a love potion with anyone, who would it be?”

My face heats. No way am I telling Rook I want to share it with him. I don’t want to put any weird expectations on him. “I don’t really have a celebrity crush. So maybe Cinder?”

His grin is wide. “Cinder from *Fire in His Wake*?” Rook makes a tscking sound. “That’s a very, very naughty book.”

I laugh, really enjoying this playful side of Rook.

“What about you? Who would you share a love potion with?”

“Gods, I would want to share it with someone who already likes me. Someone who shares my love for spellwork. Someone who can make me smile and laugh.”

Check. Check. And Check. That could be me he's describing. Gods, I want it to be me. Suddenly, my heart is pounding with excitement. "Alright then," I hedge. "Why don't we do that? This is a dream, after all."

"You mean drink our potion together?" His tail is wagging, and I always find it so damn endearing when that happens. "It does sound awfully delicious."

"Right?"

"Let me think about it. Maybe I can make us dinner sometime and we can make our elixir together."

I offer him a smile. I love that he's willing to entertain the idea. If we ever did make it together, I know we wouldn't be adding all the magical properties to it, but just enjoying it for the beverage it's meant to be.

"Okay. Next question. It's your turn."

"If you could wish for anything, what would it be?"

"I would wish for the moonlight to bless me so that I was no longer cursed."

I'm taken aback by the sudden shift in seriousness.

"As a born wolf shifter, there's this natural pull to the full moon. We are drawn to it. The moon was always something I used to celebrate. But in this form, the moon is something negative to me. I'm tired of hating the moon. I want to celebrate it again."

The longing in his voice breaks my heart.

"That's understandable." I scoot closer to him on the blanket. "Can you tell me how

exactly you're cursed? According to what you told me before, the moon doesn't force you to shift. There's nothing painful tied to the moon, so how are you cursed?"

Rook closes his eyes as if in pain. "Look at me, Autumn." He gestures at his body and waves a hand down at his werewolf feet. "I'm a monster."

"No," I snap. "You are not a monster. Don't you dare fucking say that. I've met a monster, and you're nothing like him." My thoughts momentarily stray to Orson torturing my brother. Images pop into my mind against my will.

Rook's hand is suddenly on my back, rubbing soothing circles that bring me back to reality. His claws graze against my skin and I shiver as my nipples pebble. Fuck, what would his claws feel like in bed? I know he files them so they aren't sharp. Just sharp enough to feel good.

"We can talk about that last statement some other time, if you want."

I nod, thankful he isn't making me explain right now.

He offers me a smile that makes me melt.

"You aren't a monster," I say, smoothing back a lock of his brown hair. "I kind of like the way you look."

Kind of is an understatement. There's no kind of about it. I'm wildly attracted to Rook Hawthorne.

He leans into my touch. "What about you? What would you wish for?"

Gods, now that I'm getting to know him, it's even more embarrassing to say out loud, but when I'm being honest with myself, all I want is to be in love with my husband.

Considering my circumstances, it almost sounds immature to say I want to marry for love. Not when I can save my whole coven from losing their magic. So instead, I go with a partial truth. “I wish I could go on those really cheesy, over-the-top romantic dates. I don't think I'll get to experience anything like that with my future betrothed.”

A smile tips his lips and his brow does that cute little crinkle. “What kind of over-the-top cheesy?”

“You know, things you would find in a rom-com movie, or in one of the romances we read. Something like sharing spaghetti, Lady-and-the-Tramp style. Or having a picnic next to a waterfall.”

“There aren't even any waterfalls that I know of in Heart's Hollow. And I'm pretty sure I've run through every inch of this town as a wolf.”

I laugh. “I know. It's stupid. It's the first thing that came to mind, but I still think it would be really romantic.”

“Well then, why don't we do it?”

“What?”

“Let's do it. Here in our dreams. Let's go on these over-the-top romantic dates together. We can make a list. You have the ability to come to me in my dreams. So, let's make it happen.” Rook snaps his fingers.

A table appears in the middle of the clearing. In the center of the table are a lit candle and one heaping plate of spaghetti. It looks absolutely delicious.

“Oh my gods. How long have you been able to do that?”

He smiles, his brown eyes sparkling. “Do what?”

“Just snap your fingers and make things appear.”

“It’s something I remembered when learning about dreams between fate—” Rook stops mid-sentence. “It’s a shifter thing, but I’m pretty sure you can do it, too. Go on, you try it.”

Rubbing my hands together with excitement, I clear my mind. Then pause. “I’m not exactly sure how different it is from summoning a simple item. How do I know I’m not just doing my normal witchy thing?”

Rook laughs. “What if you try something not-so-simple?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t summon a simple item. Try changing something you know you wouldn’t be able to do in real life.”

I think for a moment, then grin. “Okay. Got it.” I close my eyes and concentrate. Then I snap my fingers.

Rook gasps, and I open my eyes. The full moon is larger than normal and glows so brightly, it helps illuminate our entire table in the dark. There are more stars dotted in the sky, but adding to the ambiance are our green and magenta wisps of magic flying around us like fireflies.

“I’ve never seen the full moon look so beautiful before.” Rook’s eyes water as he stands, looking around. “You did this for me?”

I nod, standing as well. I hope I didn’t just fuck things up. I know Rook said he

wanted a reason to celebrate the moon again. “Is this okay? I just thought—”

Rook pulls me into a hug. “Thank you, Autumn. This is beautiful.” He clings to me tightly and I hold on to him, realizing that this moment carries a greater significance to Rook than I can truly comprehend. As we separate, our eyes lock together. The moonlight shimmers and dances in his gaze, and somehow I know he sees it in my eyes, too.

Taking a deep breath, Rook clasps my chin in his clawed fingers. He’s so fucking careful and there’s something so damn hot about the way he’s looking at me; like he wants to devour me.

Like he’s a wolf and I’m his prey.

Fuck.

My cock grows hard, responding to the lust I see in his gaze.

His fingers tighten their grasp, and he tilts his head, sniffing the air. His eyes dilate. Oh gods. He’s smelling my arousal. With a growl, he yanks me to him at the same time I stand on my tip-toes, crashing his lips to mine.

Kissing Rook is captivating. No, it’s more than that. It’s intoxicating.

His lips press against mine as his hand that was grasping my chin slides behind my head and holds me in place. I moan into the kiss and he takes advantage of my parted lips and slides his tongue against mine.

Maybe it’s because we’re in a dream, or it’s because it’s the last thing I was thinking about, but he tastes like our made-up love potion. He tastes like apple cider with a hint of vanilla. We groan at the same time.

A twig snaps in the distance, and it's startling because I know we are supposed to be the only two people here. Rook growls by my side, stepping in front of me, ready to pounce. Maple emerges from the trees.

An image travels through my familiar bond and into my mind. It's a picture of Rook and I sharing our spaghetti, us leaning across the table as we both nibble and suck from the same spaghetti noodle.

Rook laughs. "Did she just tell us to get on with our Lady-and-the-Tramp date?"

Maple yips.

I giggle. "Oh gods, you saw that?" She must be able to send him images in our dreams, too.

"Well, you heard the lady." Rook holds bows at the waist and holds his hand out to me. "Shall we?"

I grin, eyeing Maple. "We better, or she might end up eating our spaghetti before we can."

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Chapter seven

Autumn

The sun peeks through my bedroom window as I wake up. Rook visited me in my dreams. Or maybe I visited him? Either way, we spent time together, and something about that fact makes my chest warm with happiness.

I lean across my bed and reach for the notebook I keep on my nightstand. I get the impression that since these dreams are more real than not, they won't fade like normal dreams. But just in case, I flip open my notebook to an empty page and begin to write.

Over-The-Top To-Do List:

Eat Spaghetti Lady-and-the-Tramp style. (Check)

Dancing in the rain

Stargaze in the bed of a truck.

Have a Picnic in a meadow

Receive a magical flower from a witch someone trying to court me.

- Get to know each other over coffee. Have sex on the beach.

A thrill of excitement shivers down my spine as I cross out the last item and write, 'Have sex on the beach.' Oh, gods. Can I even show this to Rook? And why do images of Rook taking me on the sand or in the ocean make me so damn hard?

Last night was overwhelming, but in all the best ways. We shared our spaghetti just like I imagined, but what made it even more special was when Rook snapped his fingers and a dish appeared for Maple. For the rest of the night, Maple sent me happy and satisfied thoughts through our bond.

She likes Rook. A lot. And so do I.

Oh gods, so do I.

We shared more about ourselves than we ever have before. Rook told me more about the night of the attack, informing me that his father and their pack leader were trying to force Lyla into an arranged marriage. He confessed that his old pack leader was not a good guy, and he was afraid for his sister's life. An image of Lyla and Ruby happy together popped into my mind, and I knew Maple was pleased that Rook protected his sister.

I shared things about my situation, told him about my brother and how he was tortured by his betrothed, so I was happy nothing like that happened to Lyla. Rook seemed startled over my brother's kidnapping and torture, and I remembered how he reacted last week when I brought up Blaze. Before I could ask him anything, I started to fade out of the dream, indicating that I was waking up.

There's a knock at my bedroom door. "Honey, can you join me and your Nana downstairs in ten minutes? We wanted to talk to you about something," Mom calls out.

"Sure thing, mom. Be there in a few." I hop out of bed, accidentally yanking the

blankets that were cocooning Maple in a perfect little blanket nest. She growls.

“Sorry, Maple.”

I rearrange the blankets as best I can, and she shrinks down into her small cat size before burrowing in a ball. Once dressed, I make my way downstairs and find Nana in her usual spot on the sofa and notice that she’s knitting a green scarf now. I guess she finished the pretty orange one.

As I eye the material on her lap, something about it makes me smile. It reminds me of Rook’s green tendrils of magic.

“You look happy,” Mom says, placing a platter of muffins onto the coffee table and pouring me a cup of tea.

I sit across from Mom and Nana with a grin. “I guess I am.”

Nana studies me. “Who has my youngest grandson smiling like that?”

A blush heats my cheeks, and I smile into my teacup.

“Well, now. Isn’t this interesting?” Mom chuckles. “Don’t keep us in suspense, honey. It’s part of why we wanted to chat with you. Don’t think Nana and I haven’t noticed you smiling like that the last several days.”

Gods, where do I begin? Mom and Nana have always been open to me dating anyone I wanted, but does that extend to a shifter? And what about someone who might be ten years older than me? Damn. I really need to ask Rook for his age. I keep meaning to, but I always chicken out at the last minute. I don’t want to give him more excuses of why we shouldn’t be together.

“What’s got you looking so worried over there?” Nana asks, placing the scarf she’s working on next to her on the sofa.

“His name is Rook. He’s a shifter, well, a hybrid, to be exact. And, um, he’s older,” I say in a rush.

Mom frowns. “How much older?”

Nana whistles at the same time Mom speaks. “Dear lord, are you talking about that sexy apothecary owner here in town?”

My head snaps toward Nana, and Mom’s mouth drops open.

“Yes, Nana.” I laugh. “He’s so sweet and smart. And he makes me feel happy and alive. We have a lot in common. He loves to read and paint. He has a passion for spellwork and takes a lot of pride in his shop. Not to mention, Maple adores him.”

“Does she?” Nana grins.

“Well,” Mom says slowly, and I brace myself for the worst. “If Maple likes him, that’s a really good sign. Familiars are wired to feel when someone is a threat to their witch.”

Hope swoops in my stomach.

“I actually wanted to ask you if we had anymore invitations to the party. I wanted to invite him. Maybe introduce you both,” I say, hope in my tone.

Mom hesitates. “Are you sure? Your father might need a bit of warming up to the idea. I think he always envisioned you and Blaze with another witch.”

I stiffen, angry she would even bring up Blaze marrying another witch. “Mom—”

“I know, I know. Here, follow me to my office.” She stands. “I have another invite. I’ll talk to your father. If you like this Rook, then I want to meet the man who can make you smile like this.”

Nana picks up her scarf and gives me a wink as we leave the room.

Mom leads the way, her fancy red heels clicking against the tile in the hallway. “You know Nana and I don’t care that he isn’t a witch. Just please tell me he isn’t my age.”

I hesitate.

Mom’s head snaps in my direction. “Oh gods, Autumn, please tell me he isn’t my age.”

“I actually don’t know.” I throw my hands up in the surrender motion and laugh when she narrows her gaze. “In my defense, he looks like he could be in his early- to mid-thirties, but you know shifters, they age differently.”

“True,” she replies as she opens the door to her office. “Just be careful, honey. Shifters have a reputation for not wanting to marry, and when they do, it’s usually with someone in their pack. I can’t even guarantee that a shifter will help us preserve the magic.”

The blood drains from my face. Oh gods. An image of Rook down on one knee pops into my head. Him looking up at me with a sad look, questioning whether I actually want to marry him or if I only want to save our magic.

“Honey?” Mom snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Autumn. What’s going on?”

I shake myself out of a haze. “Mom,” I whisper. “I really like him. But I don’t want him to ask me just because he thinks it will save me and the coven’s magic. I don’t want to use him like that. I never want to trap Rook into anything he doesn’t want. He’s been through too much.”

Mom gives me a soft smile and tugs me into a hug. “Oh, Autumn. I can see your aura right now. You’re falling in love with him.”

Nodding, I swallow hard. “I am.”

“Then invite him to your party. Don’t worry about the magic right now. Just invite him and see how things go. If anything, it’s better to experience love at least once in your life.”

Quietly, I nod again, not surprised when I feel Maple there suddenly, pressing against my leg and giving me her silent support.

By the time I make it to downtown Heart’s Hollow, it’s just after noon. My stomach rumbles with hunger, but I can barely feel it over the swooping nerves in my stomach. Rook might have kissed me in my dreams, and I might be falling for him, but does he feel the same way about me?

I clutch the book bag strap that’s slung over my shoulder. Inside my bag I have the invitation, the Helena Hurt romance Rook gifted to me, and a copy of the ‘Encyclopedia of Otherworldly Creatures.’

I’ve been researching endlessly in my grimoire, trying to find answers for why and how I’m able to walk into Rook’s dreams. At first I thought it might have had to do with my familiar being my guide, but I’m starting to think that isn’t the case. Then, I remembered Rook saying shared dreams were special amongst shifters.

So, I figured I would try looking into shifter lore after I visit with Rook today.

Movement catches my eye, and I see Rook's front door swing open. Laughter fills the air, and I halt in place. I know that laugh. My brother walks out of Rook's Apothecary. He's smiling. Tears brim my eyes. Cass walks out of the shop next. And to my shock, Cass wraps a possessive tail around my brother's muscular torso.

Blaze smiles down at the pretty demon and slides his arm around Cass' shoulders. He kisses the demon's temple before they make their way around the corner and out of sight. Their auras still linger in the air and a wide grin slides onto my face.

My brother is happy and in love. The urge to chase after them is strong, but just knowing that he's in town and in love with someone I know means he won't be going anywhere. I can give him some more time to come to me. If he doesn't reach out soon, I'll ask Cass to arrange a meeting.

Feeling lighter than I have all morning, I practically skip the rest of the way to Rook's door. As soon as I walk inside, I see Lyla.

"Autumn!" Her eyes pop wide and she glances around, looking worried. I'm pretty sure she knows about my brother. Huh. Interesting . That must be why Rook looks pale every time I bring up Blaze. Making a mental note to ask him about it later, I close the distance between Lyla and me.

Lyla swoops me into a big hug. I laugh. "Hey, Lyla. How are you?"

"I'm good."

"Is Rook here?"

She nods, grinning. "He is, but first," she says, leaning closer to me. "I wanted to

thank you. Whatever you're doing, I've never seen my brother this happy before. He looks well-rested. It makes no sense. I have no idea when you two have time to see each other because he's working here and rushing home. Yet he's always telling me something new about you."

I can't fight the big smile on my face even if I tried. "He talks to you about me?"

She barks out a laugh. "Understatement of the year."

"Are you two gossiping over there?" Rook is suddenly by my side. He's also smiling. But unlike anyone else, he has this way that makes my insides heat with pleasure.

Lyla laughs, walking back to the front counter. She waves a hand in the air. "You know me. I'm always gossiping."

"Hi," I say, twisting my hands, suddenly excited yet anxious.

"Hey." He leans forward and presses a kiss to my temple, similar to the way my brother did to Cass.

I beam at Rook, surprised by the public display.

Lyla gasps from the other side of the shop.

He rubs the back of his neck, a blush on his cheeks.

"Any chance you want to get coffee with me?" I bounce on my toes. "I was hoping you were free. We can get something to eat and maybe chat for a bit?"

"I'd love that and I could really go for a break. We had a huge shipment this morning and I'm exhausted from all the unpacking. Let me just put a few things away. Be right

back.”

He jogs to the back room. I have to bite back another smile as I check him out from behind. Gods, I'm always smiling around this big wolf. When he returns, he walks over to his sister first. Her eyes bounce over to me before looking back to Rook with a smirk. She teases him for a bit before he laughs and pulls her into a quick hug.

Damn. There goes my heart again. Maybe I'm always destined to feel like a teenager around him.

After my chat with my mom, getting the invitation for Rook, and then seeing my brother so damn happy, it's hard to keep my feelings at bay. After we walk out of his shop, we slowly meander toward the café.

Shakily, Rook reaches over for my hand, as if unsure of my reaction. My heart fucking soars at the gesture, and I easily lace his fingers with mine. He might be a little shy at first, but it seems like my wolf is willing to take what he wants.

Gods, my wolf.

“Hi, Rook!” Jenny greets us from behind the counter. “Wait, Autumn? Are you two together?”

Rook tenses next to me and starts to pull his hand away, but I don't have any of that. “I'm not sure. It's actually really new.” I lift Rook's clawed hand up to my lips and I kiss his knuckles. “But I sure hope so.”

I giggle when I feel Rook's tail wagging and brushing up against my peacoat.

Jenny squeals. “Oh wow. I can't wait to tell Daniel! Would you two like your usuals to drink?”

“Yes, please.” I glance toward Rook. “Would you want to split a sandwich with me?”

His tail wags again. “That sounds great.”

After we order our large sandwich, we find a private booth in the back.

“You know, now that Jenny saw us together, the whole town will know about it by tomorrow.”

“Gods, I was just thinking the same thing.” He laughs, shaking his head. “What’s your usual?”

“During the fall? A pumpkin spice latte, of course.”

He chuckles. “Of course it is.”

“And you?”

Rook waggles his brows and takes off his coat before sitting across from me. “An iced pumpkin spice latte.”

I gasp. “I’ve always wanted to try it iced, but love my hot ones so much. Can I try a sip of yours too?” Don’t think dirty thoughts. Don’t think dirty thoughts.

“Sure. As long as I can try yours.”

“How’s your day going? You looked a little stressed in the shop earlier.”

“You caught that, huh?” Rook sighs.

Shaking my head, I try to reassure him. “If I hadn’t been spending so much time with

you, I might not have noticed.”

“Hmm.” His smile returns. “I had to file a complaint earlier. Meyer had some teenagers passing out flyers for his shop to all the customers that walked in my door.”

“What? He can’t do that. It totally goes against town policy. He can’t just pass out flyers in front of a competitor’s business. He can only do it in front of his own door or in the town’s square, for fuck’s sake.”

Rook chuckles. “You’re cute when you defend me.”

I blush. “Well, it’s true,” I mumble.

“It is. Hence why I was able to get someone to ask the young girl to leave. When I tried, she just said she didn’t want to get fired.”

I roll my eyes. “Meyer is an asshole. Did you want me to speak to your friend Zero and tell him about the fake love potion he tried selling me?”

Rook nods slowly. “That would actually be helpful. I don’t have much to go on other than he’s trying to poach my customers—”

“And talk shit about your products inside your own store. Heart’s Hollow doesn’t mind healthy competition, but all businesses need to be respectful. Anything less can lead to extra tension, which strains the town’s magical wards.”

Rook eyes me curiously. “It does? That’s fascinating.”

“It’s our coven’s magic that strengthens the wards. It’s why I know random town rules.” Rook loves spellwork of all kinds. I’ve never been in a relationship with someone who shared my interests. My dates were always bored by my specific kind

of magic, but with Rook, he always seems to like the things I enjoy talking about. “Maybe I can take you with me when I strengthen the wards next time.”

His eyes widen with shock. “Are you even allowed to do that?”

I shrug as if it’s not a big deal, but it is. It’s a very big deal. “You’d have to sign some magical NDAs, but we can make it happen. I trust you.”

“Thank you, Autumn.” The look he gives me is downright sinful. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Hey guys,” Jenny says, carrying a tray with our drinks and food on it. “Here you go. Can I get either of you anything else while I’m here?”

“No, thank you,” we both reply at the same time. Jenny grins at us and walks away.

Rook takes a sip of his drink and I take one of mine. We both hum in pleasure before sliding our drinks across the table for the other to try. Once we realize how in sync we are with each other, we both burst into laughter.

After we munch on our food for a moment, I set my book bag on my lap and pull out a slip of paper, sliding it over to Rook.

“What’s this?” He grins. “Oh! Is this your ‘Over-the-Top To-Do List’ from our dream?”

He glances up at me, still smiling. That’s how I know he hasn’t read the whole thing. “Wait. Isn’t this one of the things from your list? Get to know someone over coffee?”

I chuckle and tap the bottom of the list.

His mouth falls open when he reads the last line.

“I figured I could take that off my list since I wanted to ask you out for lunch. I replaced it with something better.”

“Wow. That’s...wow.” His tail wags. He readjusts himself so he’s sitting on the poor thing, then shoves his sandwich into his mouth and chews.

I laugh silently as I finish my food and sip my coffee.

“There’s something else I wanted to give you.” I pull out the pearl cardstock and hand it to him, my heart pounding.

“Oh,” he breathes. Before I can decipher if that’s a good or bad reaction, he abruptly stands up.

“I’ll pay for lunch, but I gotta go back to work.” His eyes bounce behind me. Within seconds he’s at the front handing Jenny some cash and rushing out the door.

I look behind me at the spot that caught Rook’s attention. Standing there is my friend Lucas, red-faced and looking slightly stricken.

What the fuck just happened?

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What the hell was I thinking? I pace back and forth on the forest floor, my paws picking up dirt from padding over the ground so hard. I'm in my wolf form waiting for Autumn to show up. It feels like I've been asleep for hours, and I'm afraid I fucked everything up between us.

I think back over my actions and begin trotting faster through the forest. Why couldn't I have just thanked him for the invitation and went about my day? And how is it possible that I was able to hurt two witches at the same time?

The image of Autumn's face flickers in my mind. Gods, I need to explain.

A breeze hits my face and my wolf senses are on full alert. The tantalizing scent that reminds me of pumpkin pie and all things Autumn causes me to halt in my tracks. It amazes me how I can actually smell things in these shared dreams.

When the breeze settles and I'm finally able to track where Autumn's scent is coming from, I tip my head back and howl my thanks to the moon. I take off in a sprint, following the direction that will lead me to my witch.

With auburn hair falling into his face, he sits on a moss-covered log, his striking cheekbones highlighted by the moonlight.

I step forward, unsure if I'm welcome. Maple is nowhere in sight, and I'm the one who found Autumn this time. It's usually the other way around.

My paw snaps a twig and Autumn's head jerks up. I stand there with pleading eyes, hoping he'll let me explain.

A gorgeous smile breaks across his face and the next thing I know, my wolf is sprinting toward him. His arms wrap around me and his fingers sink into my fur. The feeling is familiar, yet it always seems to take my breath away.

Instead of lingering in my wolf form, I shift and pull Autumn into my arms.

“Rook,” he breathes. “What happened back there?”

I’m surprised his friend didn’t tell him.

“Thank you for the invitation,” I say first, needing him to know how much it meant to get invited. “I’m sorry that I panicked when I saw Lucas and his reaction. Lucas came into my shop earlier this morning wanting a gift for his future betrothed.”

Autumn stiffens against me. I pull away enough to look him in the eyes.

“I helped Lucas pick out a gift. He explained to me that his father was in negotiations with someone in the Sinclair Coven. He’s entering into an arranged marriage. Something about a promise he made to someone in college.”

Judging by the look on Lucas’s face, it must have been Autumn he was talking about.

Autumn gasps. “Oh, gods.” He laces his fingers with mine and leads me to the fall tree. As we sit down together, I brace myself for the worst. This is the part where Autumn will tell me it’s been fun, but I’m not meant for him. A strange pain shoots through my chest at the thought.

Rubbing at the spot on my chest with my free hand, Autumn’s gaze follows the movement.

“Fuck,” Autumn whispers, sounding just as pained. “I can’t take this. I need to be

closer to you.”

His words don’t make any sense. We’re already as close as possible on this log. Autumn stands and I sit back, only to be shocked when he swings a leg over my lap and straddles me. I gasp at the feel of him.

My dick clearly has no concept of heartbreak as it twitches to life under Autumn.

The witch cups my face in his hands and looks deep into my eyes. “I’m not going to marry Lucas. He doesn’t like me like that.”

“But the look on his face. He looked heartbroken or devastated—or both—when he saw you hand me that invitation.”

Autumn shakes his head. “When we were in college, we made a pact to ask our fathers if we could enter into an arranged marriage if we didn’t find someone else. Some covens expect us to get married to strengthen our magic, or, in my case, to inherit the core magic. Lucas’s father is that type of leader. The other day when Lucas saw me and showed me the invitation my mother sent out, he must have assumed I’d be forced to marry, too. Lucas was probably trying to save us both.”

“But the look on his face,” I try again. “He looked hurt and surprised.”

“I’ll talk to him, but I’m pretty sure he just assumed I was single. His father is probably going to force him to marry soon. It was part of our pact. If we were both single, we’d marry each other because we knew that neither of us wanted to trap the other. We knew we could divorce at any time. But since I’m taken, it wipes out our promise to each other.”

Hope swirls in my chest. “Taken?” I ask with a smile.

Autumn laughs and wiggles on my lap, causing me to groan. “I was hoping I’m taken. It’s why I asked my mother for another invitation. I wanted to attend the party with you.”

My mouth falls open. “You told your mother about me?”

“Yes. And my nana.”

“Fuck,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I left like that. Will you let me make it up to you?” An idea forms in my mind and when his face brightens into a huge smile, I know I’m onto something.

“Yes, please. Make it up to me.”

Autumn squeaks playfully when I pat his butt. He climbs off of me and I snap my fingers.

We’re in the meadow from the first night we saw each other in our dreams. In the middle of the clearing, just in front of a large tree, is a blanket spread out with a picnic basket on top of it.

Autumn laughs and twirls around, taking in his surroundings. “I love this place. I wish it was real.” He walks over to the blanket and takes a seat.

I grin. “It is. We might be in a dream, but it’s still Heart’s Hollow.”

“Wait, are we really in Heart’s Hollow? I mean, is this spot really in our town?”

“Yes.” I laugh, joining him on the blanket, and pulling out some snacks to eat.

“Will you show me someday?”

My heart does a swoop, knowing that there will be a next time. “Of course,” I reply. “But for now, how do you feel about checking off one of the items on your list?”

Autumn grins, pulling out a slip of paper from his pocket. “A picnic in a meadow. Check.” He places a check on his piece of paper before re-pocketing it.

An hour later, or at least what feels like an hour later, I pull out one last item out of the picnic basket. “I have one more surprise for you. I tinkered around with this in my shop earlier and think I got the right amount of flavor.”

I place a pink crystal bottle on the ground between us.

Autumn gasps. “Is this what I think it is?”

I nod. “It’s our love potion.”

He smiles as he picks it up, testing the weight and probably feeling that there is no real magic in the bottle, just a tasty elixir made with passion.

“Can we try it?” he asks, bouncing in his spot on the blanket.

I pull out a pale pink stone cup. “A rose quartz cup to drink our love potion with,” I say with a grin.

Autumn’s eyes sparkle. Popping the cap off the bottle, I pour some of our fake love potion.

“Take the first sip,” he says with a giggle.

I bring the cup up to my lips and take a drink. An explosion of delicious flavors hits my tongue. Apple, cinnamon, a touch of vanilla, and ginger for a little kick. He takes

the cup from my outstretched hand and has a sip.

“Oh gods, this is good. It takes like an apple pie cider.”

Autumn reaches over and pushes the picnic basket out of the way. I chuckle, about to tell him he can just snap his fingers since we’re still in a dream, but his words halt me in place.

“Will you lay with me?” He stretches out his lean body on the picnic blanket, and suddenly I’m ready to feast on something else.

I lie next to him, flat on my back, and snap my fingers. He giggles when he realizes we’re now lying on an extremely soft mattress with plush pillows under our heads. “Might as well be comfortable,” I smirk.

Autumn curls up against me, placing his head on my shoulder and a hand on my chest. “Thank you, Rook. For tonight, for the picnic and love potions. Thank you for finding me and explaining.”

I press a kiss to the top of his head, loving the way the moonlight makes his auburn hair shimmer.

“Who knew a picnic at nighttime could be so romantic?” I say. “You keep giving me more reasons to celebrate the moon again.” I press another kiss against his temple this time. “Thank you, little witch.”

“I like it when you call me little witch,” Autumn purrs, wrapping a slim leg around my thigh as he begins rubbing circles on my chest. My heart pounds.

Gods, his touch is light and teasing, but my cock starts reacting to my body getting all this attention.

For a moment, I don't think Autumn realizes his effect on my body, until his hand slides downward with purpose. He wraps his hand around the erection in my pants at the same time he begins to grind against me.

"Oh fuck," I groan. "Autumn, are you sure?" I could fucking kick myself for asking that, but I need to make sure he's okay with this.

In reply, Autumn leans forward and nips my ear. "Rook, I've wanted you ever since we first met. Now," he bites my ear again, still grinding his pretty body all over me. "Are you going to be a good wolf, and let me suck this big cock of yours?"

I moan. "Oh, fuck."

Encouraged, Autumn trails wet kisses down my neck to that spot that drives me absolutely wild with lust. My cock gives a violent jump. Autumn takes full advantage of my squirming and sucks on that spot on my neck.

His fingers are no longer light and teasing. He grasps my cock through my pants and strokes. I pant and writhe under him, and he strokes me faster.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," I repeat, clawing at the blanket under me. It's been years since anyone has touched me, and years since anyone found my most sensitive erogenous zones without guidance.

"Such a good wolf for me." Autumn laps at my neck. His cock is hard against my thigh as he continues sensually grinding against me.

"Autumn," I pant. "Oh gods, you're going to make me come like this."

My hips thrust upward as I begin to fuck up into his hand, chasing my own release.

“That’s it, Rook. Lose control, I like that. You're so fucking hot like this.”

I thrust faster.

“Show me how wild you are. Imagine my lips wrapped around this cock.” His fist grips me firmer, and it takes me right to the edge.

I growl and snarl, mindlessly writhing and thrusting.

“Good, wolf. Look at you so fucking sexy and wild, growling like that. Make yourself come, baby.”

The combination of filthy words and him calling me baby at the end pushes me over the edge.

I come with a snarl, pumping my seed into my pants and feeling my wolf take control.

Unlike some, my first orgasm doesn't make me want to sleep or cuddle or relax. Instead, I push Autumn off of me, until he's the one flat on his back. I yank his shirt open, buttons flying everywhere.

Raking my claws over his pants, I rip them open and watch, ravenous, as his thick cock springs forward and slaps his stomach.

Without waiting a moment longer, I wrap my lips around his cock and swallow him down. Autumn lets out a filthy cry as I take control of his body. I'm determined to make this the best orgasm he has ever experienced.

I suck him down to the base. Then with one clawed hand, I gaze his chest and nipples, tracing a path back and forth between the two hardened peaks.

With my free hand, I massage his balls, so that now he's getting stimulation to both nipples, his throbbing cock, and his balls.

“Oh fuck, Rook. Just like that. Don't stop, baby, don't stop.”

Next thing I know, I'm growling with pleasure, eager to taste more of him on my tongue as Autumn spills into my mouth.

He moans and writhes under me. I swallow him down, savoring his taste.

We lie there for a moment, my head resting on Autumn's thigh, his cock still in my mouth. He runs his delicate fingers through my hair, similar to the way he strokes my fur.

If I was a cat, or hell, even a fox, I'd be purring right now.

Autumn sits up, and I reluctantly pull off of him. With the snap of his fingers, we're all cleaned up, and dressed in fresh clothes.

Despite the clear-looking sky, it starts to sprinkle around us.

Autumn smirks, holding a hand out to me. “How do you feel about marking off another thing from my list?”

It begins to rain in earnest now. But the cool water feels good against my overheated skin. Then I realize Autumn is doing this. A soft melody plays in the distance, the raindrops adding a pleasant pitter-patter to the beat of the music.

“Dancing in the rain,” I murmur.

Autumn grins.

And just like that, we're dancing in the rain under the moonlight with happy little smiles playing on our lips.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:23 am

Chapter eight

Rook

“Hey boss.” Blaze waves as he walks through the front door of the apothecary.

I place a bookmark between the pages of my romance and close the spellbook Autumn gave me. This little spellbook is the coolest little thing I’ve ever seen. I’ll have to have Autumn show me how he used his magic to hide my romance books.

“Hey, Blaze. Do you have a minute to chat?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

Blaze walks over to the front counter and leans his big frame against it. I study the brother of the man I’m falling for. Blaze’s build is similar to mine. Thick and muscular arms, broad shoulders, and a wide chest. If it weren’t for his eyes and similar-colored hair, I’d have no idea he was related to my pretty witch.

“I wanted to chat with you before anyone else got here. First of all, how are you liking it at the shop?”

“Are you kidding?” He grins. “I love it here. I’ve always had a passion for magical plants, so cultivating them, searching for them in the forest, gardening, all of it is like a dream come true.”

“Good. I’m glad. You’ve been a huge asset to the shop, and I love your enthusiasm.”

Blaze smiles at me, almost looking like a little kid. The smile breaks my heart, knowing what Blaze has been through. He doesn't know that I know, thank the gods, but I can't imagine the torture he endured just to be here smiling at me today.

"There's something I have to tell you, and I don't know where to start," I say.

Blaze's smile drops. "Are you letting me go?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. How are things going in your personal life? Have you reached out to anyone you know here in town?"

Blaze bites his lip and looks down. "No, I haven't. I want to, but I'm scared."

"Scared of what? You don't have to answer, but I'm asking for a reason."

He blows out a deep breath. "I'm not the person I used to be. I was...different the last time I saw my family. I was outgoing, charming, and brave. Now, I'm kind of a shell of myself. Broken, if you will."

I lean forward, looking Blaze in the eyes. "I might not know exactly how you feel, but I can understand. Several years ago, I was an important member of my pack. I come from a powerful line of pureblood shifters."

Blaze nods, so I continue.

"I don't know if Lyla told you, but our father wanted to force her to marry the pack leader. Lyla was devastated. She's only attracted to women, and our father didn't care. We went out for a run to help clear her mind. During our run, we were attacked by wild werewolves. I saved her in time, but wasn't able to save myself."

I walk over to the other side of the counter and lean against it so we are now side by

side. My father and Lyla were the only ones who saw my new appearance. I was too ashamed to show myself in front of my pack. As soon as I was healed enough to walk, my father kicked me out of the pack for being a monster. He couldn't afford a human stumbling across my 'grotesque' appearance. His words.

Blaze scowls, shaking his head in disgust. "I'm so sorry, Rook. I had no idea. I thought you were a born shifter hybrid."

I nod. "So did your brother."

Blaze jerks back as if struck. "My brother?"

"Autumn."

His eyes widen as he comprehends what I'm saying. "The auburn-haired witch under the gazebo. The one you've been seeing."

"Did you know Autumn grew the wisteria for you?"

He lets out a shaky breath and glances out the window at the park across the street.

"Every day for a year I've been harbouring a crush on the man who stops by that gazebo to tend to the wisteria. I've wondered why he spent so much time pouring his magic into the beautiful plant. Every day for a year he's been doing it for you."

Tears are streaming down Blaze's cheeks. He swipes at them with a deep sigh.

I grasp Blaze's shoulder. "He loves you, Blaze. And I think Autumn is more understanding than you realize."

Blaze nods. "Thank you, Rook. I needed to hear that. I promise I'll reach out to him

soon.”

“Good.” I nod. “I know I promised you more time, so if you really need it, I plan on keeping my promise. But it puts me in a really hard place.”

Blaze looks at me. “You’re in love with him.”

This time, I let out a shaky breath. “I am.”

“Then why do you sound so sad?”

“Your Nana can’t contain the core magic anymore. He needs to marry in order to inherit the magic. I’m not sure how it works, but I’m guessing he will have to marry another witch.”

“Oh, gods.” Blaze gasps, his hand flying to mouth. “But what about the grimoire? He was meant to guard it. Autumn has a passion for the spells and history inside.”

I pat him on the back, not knowing the answer.

A few hours later, the front door of the shop opens and the bell chimes. Zero strides in with his amethyst wings tucked against his back.

“Hey,” I call out with a smile. “You’re back.”

Zero halts mid-step and narrows his eyes.

I tense. “What’s wrong?”

Zero holds up a hand and grins. “Wait, a damn minute. Is that a smile on your face?”

My cheeks heat, and I go back to stocking the spellbooks in the reading nook area.

“Oh, wow.” He rushes forward and peers at my face. “The damn thing is still there. What the hell has happened since I last saw you? It’s almost as if you—”

I shove a book into its spot on the shelf, purposely dropping my smile, only to have it return a few seconds later.

“You did it, didn’t you?” Zero smirks. “You talked to that witch you’ve been half in love with. Please tell me you’re dating him now.”

My grin grows wider.

“Oh shit. You are!”

“We haven’t put any labels on it or anything.”

“Have you been out on the town with him? Took him to dinner? Wined and dined him at a local restaurant?”

I frown. “Not exactly.”

Zero claps me on the back, causing a few customers to look up. “Well, what the hell are you waiting for?”

The front door swings open again and the bell chimes as two witches walk into the shop.

The tall man, with a name tag that reads ‘Todd,’ walks right up to me. “Are you Rook? The owner of the Rook’s Apothecary?”

“I am.”

“What’s this about?” Zero stands next to me.

“Hello sir, we are with on behalf of the Witch's Board in compliance with Heart’s Hollow's Town rules. We'll be inspecting the cleanliness of the shop as well as the quality of the ingredients.”

The female witch by the name of Willow claps her hands. “Excuse me, we are going to have to ask all customers to leave while we perform our assessment.”

My face flames as my customers leave my shop.

Zero holds out his Elite Guard badge. Both witches widen their eyes when they read his name.

“Sir, it’s an honor,” Todd says.

“Please provide identification and explain the purpose of your investigation at this stand up shop,” Zero demands in a take-no-shit tone.

My chest warms as my best friend takes control. I know Meyer is behind everything. This morning I found his truck with an advertisement for his spellwork parked in front of our shop, blocking the view of our front door. He claimed there wasn’t any parking, and that this was a public street. Last week we had a broken window out back I had to report to the authorities, and my stock of lilacs was missing. I have a feeling that was also Meyer’s doing.

A half an hour later, the witches finish their inspection, and it’s clear it was a waste of time.

“We apologize for the inconvenience. There were several reports stating that your shop was providing subpar supplies and boasting that they were stronger.”

“Nonsense,” I snap. “Meyer, the shop owner down the street has been trying to sabotage my shop since he arrived here in Heart’s Hollow. Purposely price gouging, coming into my store and talking shit about my products. He’s even come in several times trying to poach my customers right in front of me.”

Todd and Willow glance at each other.

“In fact, I’ve asked Zero here to call in a member of the Elite Guard after finding out that Meyer is trying to sell fake potions and making claims on things like love potions.”

“Well now,” Todd says. “This really isn’t a matter for the Elite Guard to waste their time on. It falls under the jurisdiction of the Witch’s Board.”

Willow steps forward. “Do you have any proof about these love potions?”

I nod. “I have a witness. A Sinclair. He was in here shopping when Meyer started a scene. Autumn felt uncomfortable and didn’t want my customers to leave over obvious lies. So he stepped out of the shop and followed Meyer back to his shop. Autumn told me he tested the fake love potion and wanted me to reach out to Zero for a statement.”

“Well, I’m here now,” Zero smirks. “I can easily take his statement now.”

Willow shakes her head. “No, there’s really no need to bother a Sinclair. Why don’t we go over to the shop now and perform a mandatory inspection?”

“Mind if I tag along, then?” Zero offers them his infamously charming smile. He is

clearly not going to take no for an answer.

“It’d be an honor, sir,” Todd replies and Willow nods, looking a little starstruck. As they walk out of the shop, Zero winks at me.

A huge weight lifts off my shoulders. I get the feeling Meyer won’t have a shop here in Heart’s Hollow much longer.

Deciding to keep the shop closed, my thoughts stray back to Zero’s words from earlier. What the hell am I waiting for? I send Lyla, Blaze, and Cass a text. With a new sense of determination, I lock up and make my way down to my favorite boutique. I need an outfit for the Sinclair Garden Party.

Chapter nine

Autumn

When a shifter is bitten by a were, the chances of them turning into a were creature is rare. There have to be several key components: A full moon, multiple bites, scratches deep enough to scar, and most importantly, a dormant gene. Without these things, it's almost impossible.

Once this happens, the body will try to fight off the magic that tries to turn a shifter into a were, usually resulting in a permanent partial shift. This is irreversible.

Note: at this time, there are not enough hybrids to fully test this theory.

-From the Encyclopedia of Otherworldly Creatures

I scan the text multiple times with a sense of defeat. Fuck. I was really damn hopeful that there was something in our personal libraries that could help me figure out Rook's curse. But the more I read up on it, the more I realize that this might not even be a curse at all. It might just be his way of life from now on.

What would he even look like without his wolfy ears and all that sexy fur all over his body? If the curse doesn't actually hurt him, which it seems like it doesn't, then he has nothing to worry about. He's sexy as hell. Although I know what it feels like to be the center of attention when it comes to appearance. People might consider it positive attention, but either way, it's unwanted attention.

But if it's just a matter of confidence, then I'll do everything I can to prove to Rook that he's one of the most attractive people I've ever met, werewolf features and all.

Now, let's just hope he actually shows up to this party.

Chapter ten

Rook

Roses might be the most obvious flower of choice when courting a witch. But tulips, carnations, lilacs, orchids, and lillies all represent love. Look down below for each flower and it's meaning before gifting one to someone you are trying to court.

-Encyclopedia of Magical Flowers

Cool air caresses my face as I weave around the beautiful plants in the garden. Several Sinclair Coven members introduce themselves, thanking me for everything I do with my apothecary. I'm shocked and honored, not realizing that I even had a name within the witch community.

Witchlights and fairylights illuminate the garden giving the whole estate a magical ambiance. Movement catches my eye, and I glance up to see Autumn beaming over at me. He's breathtaking in his form fitting tie and vest.

I glance down at my own tie and chuckle. Somehow we ended up matching, both of us wearing emerald green silk ties. It almost looks like we coordinated it.

Autumn walks up to me. "You made it," he breathes. "I wasn't sure you would come."

"I'm sorry for making you feel that way. It looks like I have a lot of making up to do."

“No, its not that. I knew you’d be here for me. I just wasn’t sure you’d want to be in front of a bunch of strangers. I know that big crowds make you anxious.”

I smile. “I didn’t realize you knew that about me.”

Autumn’s green eyes sparkle in the moonlight. “I want to learn everything there is to learn about you. I’m just glad you’re here and we got to dance in private last night.”

I chuckle. “And here I was ready to ask you to dance right now. Right here. So I can show everyone I intend to court you.”

Autumn’s eyes widen with shock. “Court me?”

“Mmmhmm.” I offer him a smile before snapping my fingers, praying the spell works. A pretty blue orchid appears out of thin air, green wisps from my magic twirl around it. “For you.”

Autumn blinks, happy tears brimming his eyes. “Rook,” he gives me a watery smile. “Do you know what a blue orchid means in the witch community?”

“I do. It stands for strength, rarity, and beauty. It’s a symbol of a love match.”

“Well, now, isn’t that romantic?” An older lady with long gray hair appears by my side. She’s wearing a blue gown that drops to her ankles. She looks more like a goddess of wisdom rather than a mere witch.

“Nana!” Autumn smiles. “This is Rook. The man I was telling you about.”

My insides warm at the knowledge that Autumn has been talking about me.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” I place a kiss on her knuckles.”

She giggles, a sound very similar to Autumn's giggle. "Oh my. Enough of that. We can meet some other time. Autumn go dance."

Autumn shakes his head. "Oh no, Nana. We don't need to dance."

Taking a deep breath, I extend out a clawed hand. "I would love to dance with you, Autumn."

He slides his warm palm into mine, and I lead him to the dance floor. Nerves start to overtake me, but as soon as I face Autumn and look into his eyes, something inside of me settles.

"Just pretend it's only us again," he whispers. "Remember the way we twirled and swayed under the raindrops."

"You're such a romantic," I chuckle.

"Only with you."

We sway to the beautiful melody of the violins. We dance like that for what feels like hours. It's nothing like in the movies where Autumn is forced to change partners. We aren't interrupted and at one point we sit down and rest, too tired to keep dancing.

We chat with his mother and Nana, and I briefly meet Autumn's dad before we wander into the garden grounds, hand in hand.

It hits me suddenly, if I never had the guts to show up here tonight, I never would have experienced the best night of my life.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:23 am

Chapter eleven

Autumn

Dear Autumn,

Wow. I don't even know where to start. So, I guess I should start with the most important thing.

I love you.

And I miss you.

Naturally, Family is the most important thing, especially to someone like me. But something happened to me. Something terrible that took me away from you and our family. In all honesty I'd rather not talk about it, but I feel like I owe you the truth.

I'm back in Heart's Hollow, I've been here now for about two weeks trying to figure out the best way to reach out. In the small amount of time I've been here, something amazing has happened to me. Something else that needs to be talked about it person.

Will you meet me at our favorite gazebo tomorrow at noon?

If you can't make it for any reason reply to this note and leave it at Rook's Apothecary.

Thank you for reading this. I love you and hope to hear from you.

Your brother,

Blaze.

I reread the letter for the fourth time, excitement buzzing through my veins. Blaze reached out to me! Hastily getting dressed, Maple jumps and twirls around my feet, feeding into my hyper energy.

Blaze contacted me.

As soon as I have Maple hooked on her leash, I rush out of the front door and practically sprint toward Rook's Apothecary. I need to tell him the good news. Bursting into the shop I freeze in place when the door bangs against the wall in my excitement.

But what has me freezing in place is the sight of my brother sorting plants behind the counter. Rook is there next to him, mouth dropped open and a guilty look on his face. Silly wolf. He's probably terrified that he kept this from me.

But deep down I think I knew. The way he always reacted when I brought up Blaze's name, the pained or angry looks he'd give when I talked about what I witnessed. There's no way I'm going to blame Rook for any of this, not after everything we've been through over the past several weeks.

My gaze focuses back on my brother. Blaze looks good. He's filled out, no longer looking gaunt from my visions.

Striding forward, I make my way around the counter and throw my arms around my brother.

"You're home."

“I am. Gods, I’ve missed you.”

As I continue to hug Blaze, I glance over at Rook and see all the warmth and love reflecting in his eyes. I give him a smile, and somehow I just know, everything will be okay.