



Red Hood, Bad Wolf (Cursed Kingdoms)

Author: *Jamie K. Schmidt*

Category: Fantasy

Description: A Red Hood protector sworn to eliminate feral werewolves. An Alpha haunted by his past. A killer hiding behind a grandmothers smile.

When missing hikers start turning up dead in werewolf territory, Rowan is sent to investigate. The last thing she needs is to discover the local Alpha is her fated mate—especially since shes sworn never to trust another Alpha after one deceived her to protect a killer in his pack.

Alder has enough problems protecting his pack without a Red Hood witch stirring up trouble. After all, it was the Red Hoods who killed his mother and possibly his father. But when his inner wolf recognizes Rowan as his destined mate, hes forced to question everything he thought he knew about his familys tragic past.

As bodies pile up and evidence points to someone inside the pack, Rowan and Alder must learn to trust each other—and their mate bond—before the killer strikes again. But the greatest threat may not be a rogue wolf at all, but rather a sweet old grandmother with a very big secret and very sharp teeth.

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Moonlight silvered the forest floor as Rowan tracked her prey. Pine needles cushioned her steps. Magic stirred beneath her skin as she followed the trail of destruction—broken branches, scattered leaves, and the acrid scent of madness that all loup garou left in their wake. Her red cloak, the mark of her order, whispered against the undergrowth.

She paused, lifting her hand. A spell sparked between her fingers, crimson threads that illuminated claw marks scored deep in a nearby trunk. Fresh. She was getting close.

A howl shattered the night's silence—pain and rage twisted into something inhuman. Rowan's heart ached. Once, the wolf had been someone's daughter, someone's friend. Now the moon-madness had taken her, stripped away everything but hunger and fury.

Moving faster, Rowan's spelled boots carried her silently through the darkness. The forest opened into a moonlit clearing, and there she found her quarry. The crazed werewolf was massive, easily twice the size of a natural wolf. Its yellow eyes were glazed with feral hunger. Foam dripped from its jaws as it circled the remains of a deer—thankfully just a deer.

"Easy now," Rowan murmured, keeping her voice low and steady. Her fingers traced sigils in the air, weaving a containment spell. "Let's see if there's anything left of you to save."

The werewolf's head snapped up. Those mad eyes fixed on Rowan, and a growl rumbled through the clearing. The sound carried no trace of humanity.

Rowan completed her spell just as the loup garou lunged. Red light flared, forming a shimmering cage around the wolf. It slammed against the magical barrier, snarling and snapping.

"I'm sorry," Rowan whispered. She pulled a silver knife from her belt, its blade etched with runes of mercy. Some Red Hoods went straight for the kill, but Rowan always tried first to reach the person trapped within the beast. She began to chant ancient words of power that could sometimes break the moon-madness.

The wolf threw itself against the barrier again and again. Blood began to mat its fur where it had hurt itself in its frenzy. Rowan pushed more power into her spell, sweat beading on her forehead as she tried to reach whatever humanity remained.

For just a moment, the glazed yellow eyes cleared. A flicker of awareness, of despair—and then it was gone, replaced by mindless rage.

Rowan's heart sank. She'd seen that look before. There was nothing left to save.

The knife flew true, guided by magic and mercy. The loup garou collapsed without a sound. As death took it, the wolf's form shimmered, revealing a young woman with tangled dark hair. Peace smoothed her features, free at last from the sickness.

Rowan knelt beside the body, murmuring the traditional blessing. "Find peace in the dark, sister. May your next life be gentler." She closed the woman's eyes and covered her with a magical shroud while she prepared the ceremonial pyre. No loup garou could be left to rise again.

Dawn was breaking when Rowan's communication crystal chimed. She answered it, recognizing the signature of her order's leadership.

"Report," said a clipped voice.

"Target eliminated. She was too far gone for rehabilitation."

"Understood." A pause. "We have another assignment. Multiple disappearances reported in the Black Pine territory. The local alpha is Alder Blackwood. He doesn't think it's a loup."

Rowan's spine stiffened. "A pack alpha? The last time we trusted an alpha's word—"

"We remember." The voice softened slightly. "These disappearances match loup garou patterns. Investigate. Determine if someone in his pack has turned. And Rowan? Be careful. Blackwood has a history with our order."

The crystal went dark, leaving Rowan alone with her thoughts and the rising sun. Another pack, another alpha. Her hand drifted to the scar on her side, a reminder of what happened when alphas protected their own at any cost.

She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

ALDER FELT THE YOUNG wolf's distress before he heard the howl. Moon-fever, not moon-madness—there was a crucial difference. He sprinted through the trees, his pack bonds guiding him to where sixteen-year-old Danny struggled with his first transformation.

The boy was halfway between forms, fur sprouting in patches, bones cracking as they tried to reshape themselves. Terror rolled off him in waves that any wolf could scent.

"I can't—" Danny gasped, hands curled into claws. "Alpha, it hurts—"

"Breathe." Alder knelt beside him, projecting calm through their pack bond. "The

moon isn't your enemy. She's part of you."

Other pack members melted from the shadows—Danny's parents, his older sister, all watching with worried eyes. Alder waved them back. Too many people would only increase the boy's anxiety.

Danny's body spasmed. "What if I can't control it? What if I hurt someone?"

The words hit too close to home. Alder's mother had asked the same questions, near the end. Before the Red Hoods—

He pushed the memory aside. Danny needed him now.

"You won't." Alder gripped the boy's shoulder, letting his alpha power flow between them. "Feel the pack bonds. We're your anchor. Let the change come naturally."

Danny's breathing steadied. His eyes, now wolf-gold, fixed on Alder's face. Slowly, the transformation smoothed out. Fur spread evenly across his body. Bones shifted with purpose rather than panic.

Where the frightened boy had been, a young werewolf now stood on shaking legs. Alder smiled and shifted his own form, leading his newest pack member on his first run beneath the full moon. The rest of the pack followed, their joyful howls celebrating the successful transformation.

Hours later, as dawn painted the sky, Alder's beta approached him at the pack house. Serenity's expression was grave.

"What is it?" he asked, already tensing.

"Red Hood spotted near our borders. Heading this way."

Ice gathered in Alder's gut. Red Hoods. Were-hunters who'd executed his mother, the order who he suspected had taken his father as well. "How many?"

"Just one. Female. The scouts say she's powerful."

Of course she was. The order never sent their weak ones. "I want to know everything about her."

"I'll get on that."

"And alert the pack. No one approaches her alone." He caught her arm as she turned to go. "If she makes any aggressive moves—"

"We'll protect our own." Serenity's eyes hardened. "We always do."

Alder nodded, but unease prickled along his spine. The timing was too perfect. A Red Hood arriving just when people had started disappearing from his territory. His mother's face flashed through his memory, her eyes clear and sane even as she had been accused of moon-madness.

He wouldn't let the Red Hoods hurt his pack again.

THE PACK'S WARDS WASHED over her as she crossed into Black Pine territory. Old magic, complex and well-maintained. This alpha was serious about protection.

Good. She preferred them competent. It made it easier to tell when they were lying.

The pack house rose before her, a sprawling structure of stone and wood that blended naturally into the forest. Wolves emerged from the trees, flanking her path. Not

attacking, but making their presence known. She kept her pace steady, her hands loose at her sides.

A crowd had gathered in the front yard. Rowan cataloged faces, stances, potential threats. Her attention caught on a tall figure standing apart from the others—broad-shouldered, dark-haired, with sharp green eyes that watched her every move. Power rolled off him in waves.

The alpha. It had to be.

Something strange happened when their eyes met. A jolt, like lightning through her bones. His nostrils flared, and she knew he'd caught her scent just as she caught his—pine and wood smoke and something wild that made her pulse skip and warmth flood through her.

No. She wasn't here for that.

Rowan stopped at a careful distance, close enough to show she wasn't afraid, far enough to react if needed. "Alpha Blackwood. I am Rowan of the Red Hood Order. I believe you know why I'm here."

Those green eyes narrowed. "Enlighten me."

"Seven people have disappeared in your territory over the past three months. The pattern suggests—"

"Suggests what?" He stalked forward, all contained power and barely leashed anger. "That one of my pack has gone feral? That we're harboring a killer?"

Heat rolled off him in waves. This close, his scent was overwhelming, making it hard to think. "Has anyone in your pack shown signs of moon-madness?"

"No." His voice was ice over steel. "And if they did, we would handle it ourselves."

"Like the Southampton alpha handled it?" The words slipped out before she could stop them. "He protected his killer until twelve people were dead."

Alder's power flared, pressing against her shields. Some of his pack growled. "We are not Southampton."

"Prove it." Rowan met his gaze steadily, ignoring the way her body wanted to lean toward him. "Cooperate with my investigation. If no one in your pack is responsible, you have nothing to fear from me."

"Nothing to fear?" He laughed, a harsh sound. "Your kind killed my mother. Claimed she was feral when she wasn't. And my father—" He cut himself off, jaw tight.

Ah. The history her order had mentioned. "I'm sorry about your parents. But right now, people are dying. Will you help me find out why, or will you force me to investigate on my own?"

The air crackled between them, magic and tension and something else, something that made her skin tingle wherever his gaze touched. After a long moment, he growled, "Fine. But you work with me. No wandering my territory alone, no questioning my pack without me present."

"Agreed." The word tasted like surrender, but she knew a victory when she saw one. "When do we start?"

"Now." He gestured to one of his wolves, who brought forward a sealed evidence bag. Inside was a scrap of bloody fabric. "This was found an hour ago, half a mile east. Still fresh."

Rowan's pulse quickened. She reached for the bag, and their fingers brushed. Electric shock raced up her arm. From his sharp intake of breath, he'd felt it too.

Their eyes met again. In that moment, Rowan knew two things with absolute certainty: working with Alder Blackwood would be the most dangerous thing she'd ever done.

And not because he was an irate wolf with an axe to grind.

"Well?" he demanded, breaking the moment. "Can you tell anything from the blood?"

Rowan pulled her focus back to the evidence, to her mission. She had a job to do, and she'd do it—no matter how distracting her reluctant partner might be.

"I need to see the area where this was found," she said, letting magic spark between her fingers. "Lead the way, Alpha Blackwood."

His lips curved in something not quite a smile. "Try to keep up."

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Magic tingled across Rowan's palm as she held the bloody scrap of fabric. Her spell illuminated a faint red trail only she could see, weaving between the ancient pines. Beside her, Alder moved with predatory grace, his nostrils flaring as he caught scents she couldn't detect.

"Blood trail heads east," he said, voice low and rough. "But there's something off about it."

"The magic feels wrong too." Rowan frowned at the crimson trail. "Like it's been deliberately scattered."

"It wasn't us."

That remained to be seen. They moved deeper into the forest, following the twisted trail. Rowan was hyperaware of Alder's presence—the heat radiating from his body, the easy way he navigated the undergrowth. His power called to hers and it was disconcerting.

The trail led them through increasingly dense vegetation. Thorns caught at Rowan's cloak. Without warning, Alder's hand shot out, catching her arm before she stepped into a hidden dip.

"Careful," he murmured. His touch sent electricity racing up her arm.

"Thanks." She didn't pull away immediately. Neither did he.

Finally, Alder cleared his throat and released her. "There's a lot of old trails through

here. Places my grandmother used to gather herbs for the pack."

"Used to?"

"She still does, sometimes. But she's getting older." Something dark flickered across his face. "After my parents... she's all the family I have left."

Rowan's heart squeezed unexpectedly. She knew about being alone.

The trail took a sharp turn, leading them into a small clearing. Alder suddenly went rigid. "Wait."

But Rowan had already seen it—a bloodied sneaker half-hidden under fallen leaves. Her tracking spell flared around it, indicating it was fresh.

Alder approached it carefully, scenting the air. "Same blood as the fabric. Human. Female. Young." His jaw tightened. "There was fear here."

Rowan knelt beside the sneaker, letting her magic probe deeper. "The pattern's strange. Like the blood was..." She hesitated.

"What?"

"Applied after. This wasn't where the injury happened." She met his gaze. "Someone's staging these scenes."

Alder's power flared, making the air heavy. "No one in my pack would—"

"I wasn't accusing." Not yet. Rowan stood, finding herself closer to him than she'd intended. "But someone is playing games. And they know these woods well enough to lay a trail."

He studied her face, surprise flickering in those green eyes. "You really mean that. You're not just looking to blame my pack."

"I go where the evidence leads." She held his gaze. "The last time I trusted an Alpha's word over what I was seeing, people died because I wanted to believe him." The admission cost her, but something in her needed him to understand.

Alder's expression softened fractionally. "Southampton."

"Yes." Rowan's hand drifted to her side, where the scars still ached sometimes. "The Alpha swore his beta wasn't feral. I believed him because I wanted to think the best. Because he seemed so certain." Her bitter laugh held no humor. "Turned out he was certain because he was helping hide the bodies."

She expected Alder to bristle at the comparison. Instead, he surprised her.

"My mother wasn't feral." His voice was rough with old pain. "The Red Hoods who came didn't even test her. Just took the word of—" He cut himself off. "They executed her. No trial, no chance to prove her innocence."

"That's not how we operate now," Rowan said softly. "We always try to save those we can."

"Did you try with the wolf a few days ago?"

She stiffened. "You knew about that?"

"Word travels."

"It's not always hopeless. Sometimes they can be brought back, if caught early enough."

Movement in the trees interrupted them. Serenity, Alder's beta, emerged with two other wolves.

"Alpha." Serenity's gaze flickered between them, noting their proximity. "Sorry to interrupt, but Mae's been trying to reach you. Says it's important."

"Mae?" Rowan asked.

"My grandmother," Alder explained. "She knows these woods better than anyone." He hesitated, then added, "Would you like to speak with her? She might have noticed something useful."

Rowan nodded, ignoring the way her skin still tingled from his proximity. She didn't need this attraction. It was a distraction. They had a killer to catch. Everything else was secondary.

They found Mae Blackwood in her herb garden. She was a small, silver-haired woman with Alder's green eyes. She looked up from her gardening with a warm smile that didn't quite reach those sharp eyes.

"Alder, dear." She rose slowly, brushing dirt from her apron. "And this must be the Red Hood everyone's talking about."

"Grandmother, this is Rowan. She's helping investigate the disappearances."

"Please, call me Mae." The old woman's grip was strong when she clasped Rowan's hand. "Such a pretty thing. Not what I expected from a witch-hunter."

Something in her tone made Rowan's magic stir uneasily, but she couldn't pin down why. Mae seemed perfectly harmless—just a grandmother tending her herbs and worrying about her grandson.

"Mae knows all the old trails," Alder explained. "Places tourists might wander off."

"Oh yes." Mae's smile widened slightly. "These woods can be treacherous for those who don't know them. So easy to get lost or to run into something hungry."

Rowan felt Alder stiffen beside her. "Grandmother."

"Just teasing, dear." Mae patted his arm. "Though you really should mark those trails better. Humans don't know to stay away from wolf territory like they used to." She sighed. "Everything's changing. Not like the old days."

"Have you noticed anything unusual lately?" Rowan asked. "Anyone or anything that seemed out of place?"

"Well..." Mae's brow furrowed. "Now that you mention it, I did see something strange near the old quarry last week. Looked like someone had made camp there, which isn't usually allowed on pack lands." She shook her head. "But when I went back to check, everything was gone. Even the ashes from their fire."

Alder's hand brushed Rowan's arm. "We should check it out."

The touch sent heat spiraling through her. From Mae's knowing look, the older woman hadn't missed their reaction to each other.

"Be careful out there," Mae called as they left. "Woods aren't safe, even for big bad wolves and clever little Red Hoods."

The quarry gave them nothing new. The sheer rock walls dropped away into darkness, decades of mining leaving deep scars in the earth. No sign remained of the camp Mae had mentioned.

"Dead end," Alder growled in frustration. "We're running out of daylight."

Rowan started to respond, but movement caught her eye. "Wait—there."

A flash of red—almost like her cloak—disappeared behind a boulder. They crept forward together, Alder's warmth steady at her back. The space behind the boulder turned into a narrow crevice.

"Tight fit," Rowan muttered.

"Ladies first?" Alder's smile held a hint of fang.

The crevice was barely wide enough for one person. Rowan had to turn sideways to edge through, the rough stone pressing close on either side. She heard Alder following, his breath warm on her neck.

Suddenly, the walls widened into a small cave. Rowan's magic illuminated the space—and her heart stopped.

"Alder."

He was pressed against her back, the narrow entrance forcing them close. "I smell it too."

The cave walls were covered with photographs. Missing persons posters. Newspaper clippings. And in the center, a collection of personal items that could only be trophies—watches, jewelry, keys.

"A werewolf den?" Rowan whispered. There was a sleeping bag and the whole place smelled like wolf. Shifter magic tingled along the walls.

Alder's hands gripped her shoulders, turning her to face him. In the confined space, they were chest to chest, his power wrapping around her like a storm about to break.

"I swear to you," he said roughly, "I had no idea this was here. I don't recognize the scent. It's been altered by magic."

She should doubt him. Should step back, put distance between them. Instead, she found herself swaying closer, drawn by the raw honesty in his voice and something deeper—something that called to her very bones.

His head dipped lower. Her hands fisted in his shirt. For a heartbeat, she thought he might kiss her—

A howl shattered the moment. Close. Too close.

They burst out of the crevice as one, magic and claws at the ready. But the forest was empty. Only the howl's echo remained, and a new scent that made Alder curse.

"What is it?"

"Wolf." His eyes had shifted to gold, power rolling off him in waves. "But wrong. Feral."

Rowan's heart sank. Loup garou.

Their eyes met, shared horror reflected. Someone in his pack had turned after all. Someone was hunting humans for sport, collecting trophies, laying false trails to confuse them.

The trust growing between them cracked like ice in spring.

"Alder—"

"Don't." His voice was hard again, all traces of tenderness gone. "We'll find whoever did this. But not tonight. It's not safe after dark."

He was right, but it felt like surrender. Like failure.

They walked back in silence, the weight of discovery heavy between them. The attraction between them sizzled, demanding they bridge this new distance. But how could they, when one of his pack might be a killer?

At the edge of the pack grounds, Alder finally spoke. "Tomorrow. We'll start questioning the pack."

Rowan nodded, not trusting her voice. She turned to go, but his hand caught her arm.

"Rowan." His eyes held hers, intense and conflicted. "I meant what I said. I didn't know about the cave."

"I believe you." The words surprised them both with their truth.

He released her slowly, fingers trailing down her arm. "Be careful tonight. The killer knows we're hunting them now."

"You too." She managed a slight smile. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to my reluctant partner."

Something darkly possessive flashed in his eyes. "Partner, is it?"

"For now."

She left him there, feeling his gaze follow her into the darkness. Her skin still tingled where he'd touched her. Her magic reached for him like a flower turning toward the sun.

Partner. The word wasn't enough for what was growing between them. But with a killer to catch and both their pasts haunting them, it would have to do.

For now.

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Dawn crept over the pack house as Rowan reviewed her notes, magic crackling at her fingertips as she traced the patterns of disappearances. Her power surged before Alder even reached the study door—the awareness growing stronger with each passing hour, making it impossible to ignore his presence. The woodsmoke-and-pine scent of him filled her senses, and her magic stirred in response, reaching for him even as she tried to maintain professional distance.

This wasn't normal.

This wasn't just a blast of insta-lust.

This could be something serious.

And if she was right and this attraction between them was something more, this was going to get messy.

"Ready?" He looked as exhausted as she felt, dark circles under those green eyes that seemed to see straight through her defenses. His power pressed against her shields, not threatening but aware, like a wolf scent-marking its territory.

"As I'll ever be." She gestured to her organized files, color-coded and annotated with magical markers only she could see. "I've prepared questions for—" She broke off as their fingers brushed reaching for the same paper. Energy crackled between them, and for a moment, she could have sworn she felt his heartbeat syncing with hers.

Their eyes met. She felt his hunger echo through her own body—a deep, primal need to claim and be claimed. Magic hummed, a symphony of fate and instinct demanding

they acknowledge what they were to each other.

“Oh no,” she said.

“What?”

“You know, don’t you?”

Alder cleared his throat, but she felt his reluctance to step back. "We should... the pack's waiting."

"Right. Yes." Rowan straightened her red cloak, the enchanted fabric responding to her touch with a whisper of protective magic. "Professional."

His lips quirked, and through the bond came a flash of what he wanted to do to her professional facade. "Professional."

They interviewed pack members in the formal sitting room, maintaining a careful distance that did nothing to diminish their awareness of each other. Serenity, Alder's beta, went first. The she-wolf's eyes darted between them, nostrils flaring as she caught their mingled scents.

"The cave you found," Serenity said, tension evident in her rigid posture, "it's not marked on any pack maps. We had no idea it existed." Her gaze fixed on Rowan. "But you already think you know who's responsible, don't you? You Red Hoods always do."

"We follow evidence, not assumptions." Rowan kept her voice neutral. "Could someone have been using it without the pack's knowledge?"

"Impossible." Serenity's wolf eyes flashed gold. "We'd smell any intruder. Our

borders are warded, our patrols constant." She leaned forward. "We protect our own."

"Unless," Alder said quietly, his pain lancing through Rowan's chest. She shouldn't be able to feel his emotions like this. "It wasn't an intruder."

The tension crackled. Through their growing connection, Rowan felt the weight of leadership bearing down on him—the possibility that one of his people had betrayed him cut him deeper than any physical wound.

She shouldn't be able to know that either.

They interviewed others throughout the morning: Danny, the young wolf who'd just transformed, still awkward in his new power; Marcus, the pack's elderly historian whose knowledge of territory boundaries went back generations; three rangers who patrolled the borders, their stories overlapping but with subtle inconsistencies that made Rowan's instincts prickle.

Each interview revealed the same tight-knit loyalty, the same resistance to the idea that evil could wear a familiar face. But underneath, Rowan sensed currents of fear. The pack knew something was wrong, even if they couldn't admit it.

Mid-morning, Mae appeared with tea and cookies, her silver hair perfectly arranged, her floral dress deceptively domestic. "You poor dears must be exhausted." She settled into an armchair, everything about her radiating grandmotherly concern. But something in her sharp eyes made Rowan's magic recoil. "Any progress?"

"We're exploring all possibilities," Rowan said carefully, noting how Mae's gaze lingered on her red cloak.

"Mm." Mae stirred her tea with precise movements. "Have you considered it might be related to the territory dispute with the River Valley pack? They've been pushing

boundaries lately." Her smile showed too many teeth. "Of course, I helped deal with the last trespassers they sent. Simple folk, really. Didn't understand the old ways of marking territory."

Alder stiffened. Through the bond, Rowan felt his unease. "Grandmother?"

"Oh, nothing violent, dear. Just made it clear they weren't welcome." She patted his hand, and Rowan felt him suppress a shudder. "I know all the old ways of protecting our land. The ones your mother forgot, near the end."

Rowan's magic prickled in warning. Mae's words were sweet, but something darker lurked beneath them, like poison in honey. "What do you mean?"

"Such a shame, what happened to her. The madness came on so suddenly." Mae's sharp eyes fixed on Rowan with unsettling intensity. "Tell me, dear, how do Red Hoods usually handle feral wolves? Such fascinating magic you must have. I've always wondered about the specifics, whether they suffer much, at the end."

Something in her tone made Rowan's skin crawl

Before she could respond, Alder changed the subject. "Serenity mentioned border patrols found new markers yesterday?"

"Yes, yes." Mae waved dismissively, but her gaze remained fixed on Rowan. "But I'm much more interested in hearing about Rowan's work. It must be so exciting, hunting dangerous creatures. Though I imagine it's risky." She tilted her head. "What happens if a Red Hood's magic fails at a crucial moment? Are you all trained to fight without it?"

"Yes. Now if you'll excuse us, Alder and I have a few things to discuss privately."

“I bet you do.”

After Mae left, they retreated to his office to review notes. The pressure of awareness between them was stronger in the private space. Rowan could feel Alder's thoughts churning, his certainties beginning to crack.

"Your grandmother seems very interested in Red Hood methods," she said carefully.

Alder ran a hand through his hair, his agitation bleeding through their connection. "She's always been interested in power. After what happened with my mother..." He paused. "I never questioned if my mother had been loup before. Never wanted to see..."

"Tell me?" The words were soft, an invitation rather than a demand. She felt her offered support and understanding mirror back at her through their connection.

He was quiet for so long she thought he wouldn't answer. Then: "It wasn't like they said. The official report claimed she showed classic signs of moon-madness, but..." He paced to the window, moonlight silvering his profile. "She was acting strange before that. Confused. Aggressive. Not like herself at all."

Rowan felt his pain echo through her. Without thinking, she touched his arm. Contact sent awareness sparking between them, the bond between them strengthening further. Soon, they wouldn't be able to pretend to ignore what was painfully obvious. "How so?"

"She'd forget things," Alder continued, leaning into Rowan's touch. "Get lost in familiar places. Snap at pack members for no reason. My father thought someone was poisoning her. He was investigating something, but he never told me what. Then he disappeared, and three days later..." His voice roughened. "Three days later, they found those hikers."

"And the Red Hoods came," Rowan finished softly.

"They said she'd killed them. That she was too far gone to save." The bond flooded with old grief. "I was sixteen. Too young to challenge them, too old to forget. Mae helped hold me back when they... when they did it. Said I couldn't save her, that I had to survive to lead the pack."

Rowan's heart ached. Through their connection, she felt the wounds that had never fully healed. "The Red Hoods who came for your mother weren't like me. We're different now."

"No?" His eyes held hers, desperate to believe. "What makes you different?"

She told him then about her training. About the years spent learning both combat and healing magic, about the ancient grimoires passed down through generations of Red Hoods. "We start with basic witchcraft—protection spells, tracking magic, healing. But then we specialize."

"In killing werewolves?" There was no accusation in his voice now, only curiosity.

"In saving them." Rowan let her magic dance between her fingers, crimson threads weaving patterns in the air. "Every Red Hood has their own specialties. Mine is detection and containment. I can sense the difference between regular moon-fever and true moon-madness, can track a loup garou across continents if I have to."

"That's why they sent you here."

"Yes. But not just to hunt." She met his gaze steadily. "We're were-hunters, yes, but we're also healers. Every Red Hood chooses this path knowing we'll face darkness, but our goal is to help. Sometimes that means ending suffering. But we always try to save them first."

"Like you tried with the wolf in the forest." Understanding dawned in his eyes. "You really do care."

"We're not executioners. What happened to your mother, that's not how we operate now. Someone should have tested her, tried to help her." The words cost her, admitting her order's past failures, but she felt his appreciation for her honesty through their bond.

"Tested her how?"

Rowan held up her hands, letting magic shimmer between them. "We can sense the difference between regular moon-fever and true moon-madness. Between natural aggression and loup garou corruption. If she was being poisoned..."

"The tests you do would have shown it." Alder's power flared, making the air heavy. "They didn't even try."

"No. They didn't." She met his gaze steadily. "I'm sorry."

He moved closer, drawn by something neither of them could fight anymore.

"This can't be happening," he said.

"And yet, it is." Her hand trembled.

"You are not who I would have picked."

Hurt sang through the connection between them, sent before she could try to block the emotion. "You're not who I would have picked either."

Jealousy flared. "Is there another?" he demanded.

“No.” She shook her head. “For you?”

“No.”

“We can try and deny the bond,” she said.

“But that would weaken us.”

“At the very least, we’d be distracted and vulnerable.”

“I will not be vulnerable,” he said. “But I will not force you.”

Rowan closed her eyes and let his emotions wash over her. He was a good man. She could tell that because of the way their magic entwined and connected. She could see his soul and it was pure. He could feel her thoughts and he knew while she had her doubts, there was also need and desire there as well.

“I always thought my mate would be a wolf. Or a shifter,” he said.

“I never thought I’d bond with a shifter, and an Alpha at that. Will your pack accept the bond?”

“If I do, they have no choice.”

“You have a choice too,” she said.

“I’m not displeased.”

At this point in their relationship, it was probably the best they could hope for. Affection and maybe love would come later. But right now, it was pure need. Need that would grow to a madness of its own if denied. A mate bond sang between them,

pushing away professional distance, pushing away the weight of their pasts. His hand cupped her cheek, and her magic reached for his automatically.

"Rowan." Her name was a growl of need.

She rose on her toes as he bent down, their lips meeting in a kiss that felt like coming home. Heat exploded through the bond. His power wrapped around her as her magic sank into him, marking, claiming, connecting them on a level that transcended physical touch. She felt his wolf rise to meet her magic, felt the ancient power of the mate bond crystallizing between them.

Alder pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth as she wound her arms around his neck, lost in the sensation of rightness. This was what the bond had been pushing them toward—this recognition of what they could be together. Through their connection, she felt his wonder matching her own. Felt his fierce need to protect, to claim, to make her his.

A sharp knock shattered the moment. They broke apart as Serenity burst in, her face grave. The beta's eyes widened at their obvious dishevelment, but she focused on her alpha.

"We found something. At the old quarry."

Alder's hand stayed on Rowan's waist, his touch grounding them both. "What?"

"Another body." Serenity's eyes darted between them. "And this time, there are claw marks. Deliberate ones. It's definitely a werewolf's kill."

The world seemed to tilt as Rowan felt Alder's horror through their newly acknowledged bond. A part of him hadn't believed that there was truly a loup garou in his territory. That one of his pack might be hiding a terrible secret.

"Show us," he commanded.

They followed Serenity into the growing darkness. The quarry loomed ahead. Its sheer rock walls cast long shadows. Their mate bond was fragile and strung tight with shared tension as they approached the crime scene.

The victim lay crumpled at the base of the cliff. Made to look like an accident, Rowan realized, except for the distinctive claw marks. Her magic detected traces of wolf energy—loup garou, yes. But with a terrible focus. Except loups couldn't focus or reason. That was the whole reason it was called moon madness.

"The ranger who found her said there was something else." Serenity pointed to a nearby boulder. "There."

Carved into the stone were words that made Rowan's blood run cold: LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD, HAVE YOU LOST YOUR WAY?

She felt Alder's fury through their bond. Someone was playing games. But why?

"We need to tell the pack," he said. "Put everyone on alert. We have a serial killer, not a loup."

"Maybe we have both," she said.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:38 am

The pack house great room crackled with tension. Rowan stood slightly apart from the gathering, her magic cataloging everyone's reactions, the stiffening shoulders when she moved, the subtle shifts away, the barely disguised hostility. Most of all, she felt Alder at the head of the room, their mate bond making it impossible to ignore the power and anger rolling off him in waves.

And judging by the wrinkled noses and sideways glances, every wolf in the room could smell that she still carried his scent from their kiss yesterday.

Elder Marcus caught it first, his weathered face darkening as he sniffed the air. His eyes narrowed as he looked between them, lips curling in barely concealed disgust. Around him, the other older wolves shifted restlessly, their disapproval apparent.

Serenity, the beta, kept her face carefully neutral, but her rigid posture and clenched jaw screamed volumes. Only the younger pack members seemed more curious than hostile. Danny, the newly turned wolf, kept shooting her encouraging smiles, while his sister Erin practically vibrated with romantic excitement.

"We have two leads to pursue," Alder announced, his voice steady despite the electricity arcing between them through the bond. Rowan felt his struggle to maintain professional distance, matching her own effort to focus on the investigation rather than the pull between them. "The territorial markings suggesting River Valley pack involvement, and the local evidence including the cave discoveries."

"I wouldn't put it past them to sic the Red Hoods on us," Elder Marcus's words carried clearly, dripping with suspicion. "Convenient timing. Just like when they came for your mother."

The mate bond flooded with Alder's anger and pain. Rowan felt his surge of protectiveness, saw his hands clench at his sides. But before he could respond, Mae spoke up from her corner armchair.

"Now Marcus, dear, let's be reasonable." Her smile was pure grandmotherly concern, but something in her tone made Rowan's magic prickle uneasily. "The poor girl's here to help. Though I do remember when River Valley's alpha mentioned expanding their hunting grounds at the last council..." She let the words trail off suggestively, then added, "They've never forgiven us for that territory dispute twenty years ago. When we had to be firm about our boundaries."

Several older wolves nodded at this, their suspicion redirecting. Rowan noticed how skillfully Mae had shifted the conversation while appearing to help. Even the way she sat, seemingly fragile in her floral dress, made her words seem more harmless than they were.

"Grandmother has a point," Alder said. "I'll investigate the territory dispute personally. Rowan will continue interviewing pack members and examining local evidence."

Serenity's disapproval sharpened. "Alpha, if something happens to the Red Hood, her whole order will come down on us."

"I can handle myself," Rowan said quietly.

"Of course you can, dear." Mae patted her hand, her grip surprisingly strong. "And I'll help however I can. I know all the old stories about pack disputes. Did I mention the time River Valley's previous alpha tried to claim our southern forest? Such a nasty business. He learned why we've held this territory so long." Her sweet smile didn't reach her eyes. "Some lessons have to be... taught firmly."

The meeting broke up into tense clusters. The divide in the pack became physically apparent—younger wolves like Danny and Erica gravitating toward Rowan's side of the room, older ones drawing away. The air filled with heated whispers:

"—mate bond, you can smell it on both of them—"

"—can't trust Red Hoods, they're all killers—"

"—Alpha knows best, and she's different—"

"—not natural, mixing witch and wolf blood—"

"—so romantic though, like the old tales—"

"—remember what they did to his mother—"

Rowan caught Mae watching the growing divide with sharp eyes, though her expression remained benignly concerned. The older woman drifted between groups, dropping careful comments that somehow managed to validate both sides while deepening the rift.

"Change is hard," she told the older wolves sympathetically. "We must protect our traditions." Then to the younger ones: "Young love is so precious. But of course, pack harmony must come first."

Alder's hand brushed Rowan's lower back as he passed, sending heat sparking through her. His power wrapped around her instinctively, like a comforting hug. "My office, ten minutes?" His voice was rough. "To coordinate our investigation."

She nodded, ignoring the disapproving huffs from the elders and the knowing smirks from younger pack members. Professional distance. They could manage that.

The interviews proved even more challenging than the meeting. Pack members filed into the small study one by one, their reactions ranging from open hostility to nervous support. Each conversation felt like navigating a minefield of old prejudices and new possibilities.

"Never seen the Alpha so drawn to someone," Erin admitted during her interview, practically bouncing in her seat. "It's kind of romantic, actually. Like those old tales about fated mates. The way you look at each other..." She sighed dreamily. "And you're not what we expected. You actually try to help wolves, not just kill them."

But the next interview, with James, a middle-aged enforcer, turned arctic the moment he entered. "Red Hoods killed my cousin," he growled, refusing to sit. "Said he was feral. He wasn't. Just like the Alpha's mother wasn't."

"The Order has changed," Rowan began, but he cut her off.

"Pretty words won't change what you are. Or what you'll do to this pack." His eyes flashed wolf-gold. "You'll destroy us from within, witch. And some of us won't stand for it."

The threat hung in the air between them until Serenity intervened, calling James away for patrol duty. But the beta's sympathetic look was for him, not Rowan.

The morning wore on. Each interview revealed the growing schism in the pack, even as they provided pieces of evidence that seemed to support the territory dispute theory. Almost too many pieces, Rowan realized. Strange scraps of fabric with River Valley pack colors. Reports of unauthorized scent markers. Distant howls that might be warnings or might be threats.

It was all circumstantial, yet it built a compelling picture.

"Find anything interesting, dear?" Mae appeared with a tray of coffee and honey cookies. "Alder just found out that it seems the River Valley's been moving some old boundary markers. Such a shame, really. In the old days, packs knew to respect territories." She sighed, settling into a chair with a wince. "Now they think they can just take what they want. The young ones forget the old ways of dealing with trespassers."

"Have there been many trespassers lately?" Something about Mae's tone made Rowan's magic stir uneasily.

"Oh yes. Especially near the deep forest." Mae's eyes glittered with an emotion Rowan couldn't quite name. "I still walk there sometimes, gathering herbs. You see all sorts of interesting things. Just yesterday I found these caught in some brambles." She produced some scraps of fabric. "Look like they're from River Valley, don't they? Their pack colors."

The evidence seemed almost too perfect. But Mae was just trying to help, wasn't she? And the territory dispute theory did fit some of the facts, especially if the River Valley was trying to weaken the pack. But getting the Red Hoods involved seemed over the top, even for territory hungry wolves.

A LDER WAS PISSED. THIS was looking more and more like a set up. The River Valley was killing humans and planting evidence to bring the Red Hoods down on them. And for what? Inches of forest land?

If the Red Hoods had sent anyone else but Rowan, all of this could have been deadly.

"The River Valley's been here," Serenity confirmed, nose wrinkling. "Recently. And look—" She indicated scratches that had deliberately obscured the original boundary

runes. "They're trying to move the line."

It fit the theory perfectly. Almost too perfectly, a voice that sounded like Rowan whispered in his mind. Through their strengthening bond, he sensed her working her own investigation back at the pack house. Her frustration. Her determination. Her longing that echoed his own.

Focus. He was Alpha first. This mate bond was a distraction that needed to be settled soon. But these murders needed his full attention right now. No matter how much his wolf howled at the separation, he couldn't afford to let his guard down.

"Signal's weak out here," Serenity noted, checking her phone. "If River Valley's watching, we'd never know until—"

A howl split the air. Not pack, not friendly. Serenity shifted instantly, fur rippling over skin as she charged toward the sound. Alder followed, power surging as he took wolf form.

They found two younger enforcers cornered by three River Valley wolves. The fight was brief but vicious. When it ended, the rival wolves fled, leaving behind torn scraps of clothing whose colors and fabric did match the fragments found near the cave.

"They're getting bolder," Serenity growled, shifting back. "First the markers, now this. The murders must be—"

"Maybe." But the scent was different. These scraps smelled like foreign wolves. The scraps they found just smelled...evil.

His phone chimed, but there wasn't a message. Damned signal.

Then something pinged inside him.

Rowan?

Problem at pack house. Come quickly.

Urgency flooded through him.

He shifted back into his wolf form and ran back to his pack house.

He heard the argument before he reached the great room. James's voice rang out, accusatory: "—consorting with our natural enemies. The Red Hoods exist to kill us."

"Rowan's different. She's his mate," Erica said.

"She's a were-hunter and isn't fit to be the Alpha's mate."

Alder burst in to find the pack divided literally and figuratively—James and the traditionalists on one side, the younger wolves on the other. Rowan stood in the middle, power crackling around her as she maintained a barrier between the factions.

Her magic sang to his wolf even as his heart swelled with pride. She wasn't fighting. She was protecting both sides from doing something they'd regret.

Shifting back into human form, he ordered, "Enough!" His Alpha power rolled through the room. The wolves subsided, though tension still crackled.

"Perhaps everyone needs tea," Mae suggested from her chair, appearing concerned. "Such hot heads, just like that business with River Valley twenty years ago. Remember how that ended, James?"

James paled slightly. "That was different, Mae. You know it was."

"Was it?" She smiled benignly. "The young forget so much. But some of us remember the old ways. When pack was everything."

Something in her tone made the hair on Alder's neck rise, but before he could examine why, Rowan swayed slightly. The barrier spell dropped as exhaustion caught up with her.

He caught her elbow, uncaring of their audience. The mate bond flared between them, and suddenly he couldn't remember why they were fighting this connection.

"My office," he growled. "Now."

The door had barely closed behind them when he pulled her close, burying his face in her hair. Her magic reached for him as his power wrapped around her, the bond singing with completion.

"This is insane," she murmured against his chest. "We barely know each other."

"My wolf knows you." He drew back enough to meet her eyes. "My power knows you. And I'm tired of fighting it."

"The pack—"

"Will adjust." His hands framed her face. "I choose you, Rowan. Whatever comes next, I choose you."

This kiss was different from their other—deeper, more certain. No holding back, no professional distance. Just recognition of what they were becoming together. Her magic twined with his power until he couldn't tell where he ended and she began.

"Is this really happening?" she whispered, her breath hot against his skin.

"Can't you feel it?" Alder replied, his voice rough with need. Their mutual desire crackled between them, a tangible force that demanded surrender.

"Of course I do," she admitted, her fingers gripping his shirt tightly.

He felt her shudder beneath his touch, her body agreeing even as she struggled to find words. They both knew the truth: they were meant for each other, bound by forces beyond their control. There was no turning back now.

Alder felt the heat of Rowan's body pressed against him, their breaths mingling as they sought each other. He found her lips with his own, tasting the hunger that mirrored his as he deepened the kiss. He explored every inch of her body with his hands, savoring the taste of her skin as he kissed her neck, her shoulders, her breasts.

"Touch me," Rowan begged, arching her back as Alder caressed her nipples. She reached for the waistband of his jeans, her fingers deftly undoing the button and zipper. Her hand wrapped around his cock with an urgency that left him breathless. As she stroked him, he surrendered to the pleasure, his senses overwhelmed by the intensity of their connection.

"Does that feel good?" she asked, her voice sultry and breathless.

"More than you know," Alder replied, his words muffled against her breast. The sensation of her hand pumping him was sheer bliss, but he needed more. He wanted to possess her completely, to feel her body shudder as she came undone around him.

Alder's world narrowed to the sensation of Rowan's soft lips meeting his, their breaths mingling as her tongue traced a path along his. This kiss was different from their others—deeper, more certain.

He growled softly as he peeled off her last piece of clothing, revealing her naked

form, flushed and beautiful.

"Look at you," he breathed, appreciating the sight before him. "So perfect."

He ran his hands across her body, reveling in the way she shivered beneath his touch. His fingers traced patterns on her skin, memorizing every curve and contour as her own hands mirrored his actions.

Alder's senses were overwhelmed by the intoxicating scent of Rowan's arousal filling the room. The sound of her ragged breaths and the heat from her flushed skin consumed him. He trailed his lips down her neck, feeling her pulse throb beneath his touch, before moving to her breasts.

He sucked on one nipple, teasing and tugging it gently with his teeth, while he played with the other between his fingers. The soft whimpers escaping Rowan's lips fueled his own desire even more. His hand slid between her thighs, finding her slick, wet pussy waiting for him. He caressed and teased her clit, feeling Rowan squirm against his touch. "You're so wet for me," he growled into her ear, needing her to understand just how much her pleasure excited him.

"Only for you," she moaned, her grip on his cock tightening as she continued to stroke him with increasing urgency.

Alder backed her up against the wall, urging her legs wide apart. Her back pressed against the cool surface as he never stopped playing with her clit. Rowan pumped his cock furiously, driving him to the edge until he finally spilled over, coming across her stomach in hot, intense pulses.

"Rowan," he murmured, nibbling at her neck, tasting the saltiness of her sweat. Her body tensed, her breath hitching as she neared her own climax.

"Please," she gasped, the plea barely audible as it passed her lips. "Alder, I'm so close."

"Come for me, Rowan," he whispered against her skin, the words like a spell that broke through her last remaining barriers. Her body convulsed beneath his touch, her moans filling the air as her pussy throbbed with the force of her release.

The afterglow of their previous orgasms still radiated between them, both panting and slick with sweat. Alder pulled away from Rowan's neck, his eyes darkened with desire as he took in the sight of her flushed face and trembling limbs.

"Rowan, you have no idea how much you please me," he growled, his voice thick with need. He dropped to his knees before her, pushing her legs apart to reveal the glistening wetness that awaited him.

The scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, driving him wild. He buried his face between her thighs, his tongue eagerly parting her lips and delving deep into her core. The taste of her was intoxicating, a mixture of sweet and salty that made his inner wolf howl with delight.

Her thighs began to shake, pressing against his cheeks as he continued to lavish attention on her pussy. With each flick of his tongue, Rowan whimpered and trembled, her body reacting to his every touch. The room seemed to spin around them as their connection intensified.

"Don't stop," she moaned, her fingers tangling in his hair as she struggled to maintain her balance.

He responded with a growl, the vibrations sending shivers up her spine. The sensation pushed her over the edge, and she came, drenching his face in her release. He lapped at her hungrily, savoring every drop until she was left a quivering mess.

With a roar of primal satisfaction, Alder rose to his feet and swept everything off his desk with a single swipe of his arm. Papers and office supplies clattered to the floor as he bent Rowan over the now-empty surface, her ass exposed and inviting.

"Mine," he snarled, gripping her hips and thrusting into her without warning. The force of his entry made her gasp.

"Yes," she panted, meeting his thrusts with abandon.

He fucked her hard and fast, growling and snarling as the bond between them hummed with power. There was no holding back now, no pretense of control. They were completely lost to each other, their bodies melding together in a frenzy of passion.

The slap of their flesh echoed through the office, the sound raw and erotic. With each thrust, Alder pumped into her, his cock driving deeper as he sought to claim her fully. She was his mate, and he would make sure she knew it.

Alder felt the tightness of Rowan's body clenching around his cock, her pleasure evident as she cried out his name. The intensity of their connection was overwhelming, a primal force that threatened to consume them both. He could feel her orgasm building again, coaxing him to follow.

"Rowan," he groaned, voice strained from their passionate union. "I can't take it much longer."

"Me neither," she gasped, digging her nails into the edge of the desk. "I need you to come with me."

As if on command, her body convulsed around him, milking him for every ounce of pleasure. Unable to resist, Alder filled her with his essence and sealing their bond

even further.

Yet, even after they reached their climax, something inside him couldn't let go. Their bodies were still connected, and Alder found himself continuing to rock slowly within her, their shared aftershocks causing reality to blur and warp around them.

He pressed warm kisses along her spine, tasting the saltiness of her sweat mixed with the sweetness of her skin. His lips traveled lower, nipping gently at her ass before he knelt behind her once more.

Alder buried his face between her legs again, savoring the taste of their mingled juices. He licked and suckled her pussy, driven by the desire to bring her to another peak. Rowan's moans filled the room, her fingers gripping the desk for support as her body trembled in ecstasy. He continued to lavish attention on her, relishing in the feel of her thighs pressing against his cheeks. When she finally came again, it was with a shuddering gasp that seemed to vibrate through her entire body.

"Enough," Rowan murmured weakly, her hands reaching back to stroke his hair. "I can't take any more."

Alder reluctantly pulled away, his chest heaving from exertion and desire. He helped Rowan stand upright, the two of them leaning against each other for support as they tried to catch their breath.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern lacing his words as he searched her face for any sign of distress.

"More than okay," she assured him, a soft smile curving her lips. "Just... overwhelmed."

"Me too," he admitted, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "But I wouldn't trade

this for anything."

"Neither would I," she agreed, their eyes locking in a moment of shared understanding.

After as they held each other, reality began to creep back in. Rowan traced patterns on his chest, her touch both soothing and igniting. "The pack's divided."

"They'll come around." He caught her hand, kissed her palm. "You protected them today, even the ones who hate you."

"And River Valley?"

"We found more evidence in the deep forest." He told her about the fight, the matching fabric. "It seems clear that there isn't a loup and you've been sent here under false pretenses."

She absently played with his chest hair. "I sensed a loup. I know there's one out there. I think we could be looking at two different situations."

"I don't mind you staying longer, just to make sure." He wondered how they would handle being separated now that they were truly mates. Would she stay with his pack? Or would he always feel a part of her when she was off doing Red Hood business. Would they be casual lovers or would this grow into something more serious? The timing just sucked for this, but he couldn't complain. Not when his wolf was sated, and he felt whole for the first time since his parents left him.

A howl of alarm cut off his thoughts. They dressed hastily and ran outside to find Danny supporting a badly wounded wolf—one of River Valley's enforcers.

"Found him by the edge of our territory, sneaking in," Danny gasped. "He says

they're not responsible for the killings. Someone's been leaving false evidence, trying to start a war between the packs."

The enforcer's eyes rolled with pain and fear as Rowan knelt beside him. "I saw someone planting marks. They were wearing a red cloak"

Alder felt Rowan's shock through their bond. A red cloak like hers? But before they could question him further, the enforcer passed out.

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Dawn had barely touched the horizon when Rowan felt Alder's alarm spike through their strengthened mate bond. The connection yanked her from sleep, his urgency becoming her own. She was dressed and running before his howl even sounded, their shared emotions amplifying her own sense of dread.

The River Valley wolf lay dead in the pack house infirmary, skin already cooling beneath her probing fingers. No obvious cause of death—no wounds beyond his original injuries, no sign of struggle. Just the lingering traces of... something. Something that made her magic recoil even as it tried to identify the signature.

"His ring's missing," she said, examining the corpse. "He was wearing an alpha-mate's ring when we brought him in." The silver band had been ornate, marked with River Valley's pack symbols—marking him as someone important in his pack's hierarchy. Her magic detected residual energy where it had been forcibly removed.

"Could he have lost it during the attack?" Alder's power pressed close to hers, their newly consummated bond making it impossible not to share his mix of anger and concern. His emotions colored her own investigation, making it harder to maintain professional detachment.

"No." Rowan's magic probed deeper, finding traces of... she couldn't quite grasp it. Like trying to hold smoke or capture the memory of a scent. "This feels wrong. The magical signature is—" She broke off, frustrated. "It's familiar somehow, but distorted."

"Convenient, isn't it?" James stood in the doorway, other pack members crowding behind him. Their scents carried fear and suspicion. "He indicated a Red Hood and

now he's dead."

"Watch yourself," Alder growled, but Rowan felt his own flicker of doubt through their bond. The timing was suspicious, even to him.

Serenity pushed through the gathering crowd, her beta authority creating a small bubble of space. "We need to contact River Valley. Tell them what happened before they discover it themselves."

"And start a war?" Danny's sister Erica challenged from where she stood with the younger wolves. "They'll blame us. They already think we're killing their people."

The argument escalated, pack members taking sides. Accusations flew—about the death, about Rowan's presence, about Alder's judgment in taking a Red Hood mate. Through their bond, Rowan felt Alder's struggle to maintain order warring with his instinct to defend her. His anger and frustration beat against her shields like storm waves.

She touched his arm, grounding them both. Their essences intertwined automatically, strength flowing between them. "I'll examine the body properly," she said. "My magic might find something we're missing."

"Of course you'll examine it." James's words dripped venom. "Just like Red Hoods examined the Alpha's mother? We all know how that ended."

Alder's fury crashed through their bond like lightning. Before he could respond, Rowan stepped forward. "Yes. I'll examine him. Because unlike the Red Hoods who killed Alder's mother, I actually care about finding the truth. And right now, that truth is that someone wanted this wolf silenced before he could tell us what he saw."

Her magic flared, illuminating the corpse with sparkling lights. "Someone with access

to the infirmary. Someone who knew enough about Red Hoods to frame us. Someone who took a trophy, just like the killer's been doing all along."

The pack's reaction rippled through the room—surprise, reluctant respect, lingering suspicion. But it was Alder's pride and love flooding their bond that made her magic sing.

Later, in the privacy of Alder's quarters, that pride took physical form. His kiss claimed her mouth as his power wrapped around her, the mate bond humming between them like a plucked string. Every touch resonated through their connection, amplifying sensation until she couldn't tell where her pleasure ended and his began.

"Felt you," he murmured against her neck, teeth grazing the spot where he'd marked her as his mate. "All morning. Your determination. Your strength. The way you faced them down."

"The bond's stronger." She gasped as his mouth found sensitive flesh. "After last night... after completing the mating..."

"After claiming you properly." His wolf rose close to the surface, possessive and proud. Through their bond she felt his primal satisfaction, his need to mark and protect and possess. "My mate. My witch."

Their magic tangled as clothes disappeared, power crackling between them like lightning. She felt his pleasure as if it were her own, knew he experienced her passion just as intensely. His emotions crashed through her as her magic sparked through him. When he finally slid inside her, their powers merged completely—wolf and witch, alpha and hunter, two halves of a whole.

Each thrust sent echoes of sensation bouncing between them through the bond. His pleasure fed hers fed his in an endless loop until they shattered together, magic and

power exploding outward in a wave that rattled the windows.

Afterward, lying tangled in sheets that smelled of both of them, Rowan traced the mate mark on his shoulder. The connection between them pulsed, carrying contentment and lingering desire. She could feel his wolf still prowling close to the surface, satisfied but watchful.

"I need to contact my Order," she said reluctantly. "About the missing cloaks. We need to know if this is connected to the killings."

His arm tightened around her, and through their bond came his resignation warring with his desire to keep her close. "What do you need?"

The communication spell required precise setup. Rowan drew the runic circle in salt while Alder gathered the other components—blessed water, sage, witch-fire crystals. The mate bond buzzed as she worked, his power supporting her magic, making the spell stronger than she could have managed alone.

Magic flared as she completed the final sigil. In the crystal's depths, a face appeared—Elspbeth, one of the Order's senior members. Her eyes widened slightly at seeing Alder standing protectively behind Rowan.

"So the rumors are true," Elspbeth said. "You've taken a wolf mate."

"That's not why I'm calling." Through their bond, Rowan felt Alder's tension at Elspbeth's tone. "I need information about missing cloaks. Someone here is using one to frame the Order for murders."

"Ah." Elspbeth consulted something off to the side of the vision. "We've had three cloaks stolen in the past year. Two from retired members, one from unfortunate circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

"The owner was killed. By a loup garou, we thought, but..." Elspbeth hesitated. "The evidence never quite added up. No signs of moon-madness on the body, but clear wolf marks. Almost like..."

"Like someone was trying to frame a werewolf," Rowan finished. Hope flared. "Can you send me the details? Locations, dates, anything unusual about the thefts?"

"Of course. But be careful. Something about this feels wrong. The timing of the thefts, the way the cloaks were taken—it suggests inside knowledge of our ways."

The crystal darkened as the spell disconnected. Rowan sat back, processing. Three missing cloaks. Three opportunities for someone to impersonate a Red Hood. But why? And what was the connection to Alder's pack?

Her magic stirred uneasily, trying to tell her something just beyond her grasp. Like a scent that triggered memory but vanished before you could place it.

Alder pulled her close, their bond carrying his concern. "What are you thinking?"

"That we're missing something obvious." She turned into his embrace, drawing strength from their connection. "Three cloaks, multiple murders, the River Valley wolf's death. It's all connected, but I can't see how."

"You'll figure it out." He kissed her temple, his certainty flowing through their bond.

But as his power wrapped around her protectively, Rowan couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time. Something was coming. Something that smelled of old magic and older grudges.

And somewhere in the pack house, a trophy ring glinted in secret hands.

THE PACK MEETING THAT evening crackled with tension. Rowan watched from her place beside Alder as Serenity delivered the news about River Valley's response to their wolf's death.

"They're demanding answers," the beta reported. "And compensation. They say we either hand over the killer, or they'll take territory as payment."

"We don't even know who killed him," Danny protested.

"Don't we?" James's gaze fixed on Rowan. "A Red Hood arrives, and suddenly wolves start dying. Just like before."

Through their bond, Rowan felt Alder's control snap. He surged to his feet, power rolling through the room. "Enough! My mate is not—"

"Your mate?" Marcus stood, others rising with him. "That's the problem, isn't it? You've let your urges cloud your judgment. First you let her investigate us, now you've actually mated her—"

"She's a were-hunter," someone shouted from the back. "She'll destroy us all."

"No, she's trying to help." Erica jumped up, other young wolves following. "You're all too blinded by the past to see—"

"The past?" James snarled. "You mean like when they murdered our Alpha's mother? Or my cousin? Or—"

"I'm leaving." The words cut through the chaos. All eyes turned to Thomas, one of the pack's oldest members. "I won't stay and watch another Red Hood destroy my family. Anyone who remembers the old ways, who wants to preserve what we are can come with me. I'll be gone by morning."

Others stood with him—nearly a third of the pack. Rowan felt each departure like a physical blow through her bond with Alder. His pain crashed through their connection, nearly bringing her to her knees.

"Think about what you're doing," Serenity pleaded. "We're stronger together—"

"We were stronger before her." Thomas's words carried the weight of years. "Choose, Alpha. Your mate or your pack."

The room erupted. Through their bond, Rowan felt Alder's agony as he tried to maintain order. His wolf howled at the threat to both mate and pack. The conflict tore at him, bleeding through their connection until she could hardly breathe through the shared pain.

She slipped out while the arguing continued. Her feet carried her to the garden where she'd first met Mae, where everything had seemed simpler. The mate bond throbbed with Alder's distress, and beneath it, her own growing certainty.

She had to leave.

The thought hurt like silver in her veins, but she couldn't destroy his pack. Couldn't be the reason his family fractured. She could request another Red Hood to investigate, someone without her complicated history with wolves—

"Don't you dare."

She turned to find Alder in the doorway, his eyes wolf-gold with emotion. Through their bond came his fury, his fear, and beneath it all, his absolute certainty.

"I feel what you're thinking," he growled, stalking closer. "Feel you pulling away. Don't."

"Your pack—"

"Needs time." His hands framed her face, grip gentle despite his intensity. "They're scared. Hurt. But you're my mate. My true mate. I feel it in my bones, in my power. Do you really think I could let you go?"

Her magic reached for him instinctively. "I won't be the reason your pack falls apart."

"Then help me hold it together." Through their bond came his love, his trust, his absolute faith in her. "Stay. Fight. Prove them wrong."

She felt the moment her resolve cracked. Her magic surged into him as his power wrapped around her, the mate bond singing with rightness. When he kissed her, she tasted his relief.

"I'll stay," she whispered against his lips. "Until we solve this. But after we solve these murders, if the pack can't accept me..."

"They will." His certainty flooded their bond. "We'll make them see the truth."

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Rowan's boots crunched on the gravel path leading to Mae's cottage, each step echoing the unease churning in her stomach. The mate bond zinged beneath her skin, a warm comfort, but her magic bristled like a cat sensing a storm.

The cottage itself looked perfectly ordinary—weathered stone walls draped with climbing roses, smoke curling from the chimney, herbs drying in the windows. But something felt off, like a painting hung slightly askew. Her Red Hood training screamed at her to notice, to catalog, to hunt out the wrongness. The mate bond purred, telling her to relax.

She forced herself to breathe, to center. Focus, Rowan. This was Alder's grandmother, for goddess's sake. The pack's respected elder. The local healer who'd kept them safe for decades.

Mae opened the door before Rowan could knock, her movements quick and precise for someone who claimed joint pain kept her close to home. "I thought I caught your scent," she said, smiling. "Come in, dear. I've just put the kettle on."

The kitchen was a homey space filled with copper pots and bundles of drying herbs, but Rowan's magical senses tingled as she cataloged their varieties. Wolfsbane hung alongside cooking herbs, its poisonous stems nearly hidden among the rosemary and thyme. A Red Hood would notice—would question why a werewolf kept such a deadly plant. But the mate bond whispered trust, safety, pack, and Rowan found herself doubting her own instincts.

"Sit, sit," Mae urged, gesturing to a chair while positioning herself between Rowan and the door. The movement seemed innocent enough—a grandmother eager to serve

tea—but it triggered something in Rowan's hindbrain. Predator blocking prey's escape . She shoved the thought aside, unsettled by her own suspicion.

"I hoped you might help me understand more about the local territory," Rowan said, forcing her voice to remain steady. "The missing hikers—"

"Such terrible business." Mae clicked her tongue, reaching for the kettle. Her movements were fluid, economical. No wasted motion, no elderly tremor. "But then, humans have always brought trouble when they stray where they don't belong."

A chill skittered down Rowan's spine. Before she could examine why, Mae was pressing a steaming mug into her hands. The tea's sweet scent couldn't quite mask an underlying bitterness that Rowan's enhanced senses detected.

"Sugar?" Mae offered, already reaching for the bowl.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the sugar. She took a hesitant sip, then added another spoonful.

"Is it too bitter?"

"It's different."

"An old family recipe. Drink. You'll get used to it."

Rowan blinked and took a longer sip.

Mae settled into the chair opposite, her own movements suggesting nothing but comfort and ease. But her eyes—sharp, alert—never left Rowan's face. "Now then," she said, "what would you like to know about my territory?"

The possessive pronoun hung in the air between them. My territory. Not the pack's. Not Alder's.

She was being paranoid, surely. Seeing threats where none existed. This was Alder's grandmother, not some loup garou, Rowan drank more tea, mind clouded with conflicting signals.

Mae's smile widened, showing too many teeth.

"Such interesting work you Red Hoods do," Mae said, her eyes never leaving Rowan's face. "Protecting us all from those who've lost their way." She took a deliberate sip of tea. "I've always wondered—how do you determine when someone's truly gone feral?"

The question seemed innocent enough, but something in Mae's tone set Rowan's teeth on edge. She shifted in her chair, acutely aware of how Mae had angled her own seat to keep both Rowan and the door in her line of sight.

"There are signs," Rowan said carefully. The mate bond encouraged her to share, to trust. The tea filled her with a comforting warmth. She relaxed against her better judgement. "Behavioral changes first. Increased aggression, territorial marking, loss of human speech patterns."

Mae nodded, looking thoughtful. "And the physical changes? I heard that silver can force a shift, make the madness show itself." Her fingers traced the rim of her teacup. "But that seems so crude."

Rowan's magic flared dimly in warning. That was classified information—the kind of detail that shouldn't be common knowledge outside the Order. But before she could examine that thought too closely, she took another sip of tea, and everything was all right.

"You seem to know quite a bit about Red Hood methods," Rowan managed.

Mae's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Oh, I've picked up bits and pieces over the years. Did you know, in the early days of the territory, we had our own ways of dealing with problems." She reached for a leather-bound book on a nearby shelf. "I've kept records of the old ways. The pack's history. Would you like to see?"

The book she opened was filled with neat, precise handwriting. Too precise, Rowan noticed, for hands that supposedly shook with age. Mae's fingers moved across the pages with predatory grace as she pointed out various entries.

"Here's an interesting tale," Mae said. "Fifty years ago, when humans first started encroaching on pack lands. Building their hiking trails, their camping grounds." Her voice took on a strange edge. "The pack had to protect itself, of course. Had to maintain order."

"What happened?" Rowan asked, even as her instincts screamed at her to leave.

"Oh, the problem solved itself." Mae's smile showed teeth again. "People learned to be more careful about where they wandered. Much like they're learning now, wouldn't you say?"

The mate bond couldn't quite mask Rowan's shiver at those words. Mae noticed—of course she noticed—and her expression softened into something that might have looked grandmotherly if not for the calculating gleam in her eyes.

"But those are just old stories," Mae said, closing the book with a decisive snap. "Tell me more about your work, dear. How do you track those who've gone feral? What signs do you look for? What weaknesses do you exploit?"

Each question was a little too specific, a little too probing. Mae leaned forward

slightly with each answer, her posture reminding Rowan of a wolf stalking prey. But every time Rowan's suspicion sparked, feelings would surge, smothering her concerns under a blanket of peace.

"Your order has changed since the old days," Mae mused. "When they took my daughter-in-law, they were much less discriminating." She sighed. "Poor Alder, losing his mother that way. And then his father, so soon after..."

Rowan's heart clenched at the mention of Alder's parents. "The records show his mother went feral," she said softly. "The Red Hoods had no choice."

"No choice," Mae echoed, something dark flashing behind her eyes. "Tell me, what exactly are the signs of moon madness? The early symptoms?" She reached for the teapot. "More tea?"

Rowan nodded, even though she really didn't like tea.

The questions were coming faster now, each one deeper into Red Hood territory. Rowan found herself answering despite her growing unease. She never was this open about Red Hood business.

"Fascinating," Mae murmured. "And silver affects them even before they turn completely? Makes them aggressive, paranoid?" She hummed thoughtfully. "Almost like they've gone feral, one might say."

The implications in those words tried to penetrate the haze of her thoughts, but Rowan felt sluggish, heavy. She glanced down at her half-empty teacup, a new suspicion forming.

Mae followed her gaze and smiled. "Just calming herbs, dear. Family recipes passed down. I do so love preserving the old ways." She rose smoothly, moving to the herbs

drying in the window. "Would you like to see my collection? I'm quite proud of it."

Rowan stood as well, fighting against the strange heaviness in her limbs. The mate bond purred safety, trust, pack. She needed to leave, needed to think clearly, needed to understand why every instinct she possessed was telling her to run.

"Sure," she said instead. Rowan's head cleared slightly as she followed Mae deeper into the cottage, though the tea still dulled her usual sharp awareness. They passed through a narrow hallway lined with old photographs—pack gatherings, family moments, all seemingly innocent except for the way Mae's image lurked at the edges of each one, watching.

"The pack has such a rich history," Mae said, running her fingers along the wall as they walked. The gesture might have seemed nostalgic if not for the way her nails dragged against the wood, leaving faint marks. "So many traditions to preserve."

The living room beyond was a study in careful presentation. Everything arranged just so, each item placed for maximum visibility. Rowan's gaze caught on a collection of hunting knives mounted on one wall, their edges gleaming with recent care.

"Family heirlooms," Mae explained, noting Rowan's interest. "From before we had to be so... civilized about territory disputes." She moved closer to the display, her body language shifting subtly. Gone was the grandmother's stoop—her stance now was pure predator, though she caught herself quickly and curved her spine back into its elderly arch.

Rowan pretended not to notice, but her magical senses were screaming louder now, picking up traces of something dark and hungry beneath the room's cozy veneer. Old magic lingered here, bitter and sharp like tarnished silver. The knife block on the counter held blades too sharp, too well-maintained for simple cooking. Their handles were worn smooth with use, positioned for quick drawing rather than food

preparation.

"You've lived here a long time," Rowan said carefully, trying to focus through the mate bond's interference. "You must know these forests better than anyone."

"Oh yes." Mae's smile showed too many teeth again. "Every trail, every cave, every place where humans like to wander." She moved to a large map mounted on the far wall. "I gather herbs, you see. All over our territory." Her finger traced a path along the paper. "It's remarkable how few humans understand which plants can heal—and which can harm."

Something about the way she caressed the map made Rowan's skin crawl. Her eyes followed Mae's finger, noting how it lingered over the areas where hikers had gone missing. The mate bond tried to soothe her rising alarm, but her magic was stronger now, fighting through the artificial calm.

"The forest can be dangerous for those who don't know it," Mae continued, her voice taking on an almost dreamy quality. "So many ways to get lost. To stumble into trouble." Her hand dropped from the map. "That's why we need strong protectors, isn't it? To keep the territory safe?"

The word 'safe' carried a weight that made Rowan's throat tight. She watched as Mae circled the room.

"You know," Mae said, pausing by a shelf of old books, "I've always admired the Red Hoods' dedication to their cause. So thorough in their pursuit of threats." Her fingers drummed against a leather-bound spine. "Sometimes I wonder if they ever doubt their judgments. If they ever question whether the monsters they hunt are truly what they seem."

The words hung in the air like smoke, heavy with implication. Rowan forced herself

to meet Mae's gaze and found something ancient and calculating looking back at her through those seemingly benign eyes.

"We're very careful about our investigations," Rowan said. "We have to be certain before we act."

"Of course you are, dear." Mae's smile didn't waver. "Just as you were with Alder's mother, I'm sure." She turned away, but not before Rowan caught a flash of something savage cross her features. "Such a tragedy, that. Strange how the madness came on so suddenly, don't you think? Almost as if something triggered it."

Rowan's magic surged against the mate bond's restrictions, trying to warn her of something just beyond her grasp. But before she could focus on it, Mae was moving again, herding her subtly toward the door with that same predatory grace.

"You'll come visit again, won't you?" Mae's voice had returned to its grandmotherly lilt, though her eyes remained sharp as knives. "I so enjoy our talks. And I have so many more stories to share about the old ways."

The invitation carried an edge that even the mate bond couldn't completely dull. Rowan managed a nod, fighting the urge to bare her throat in submission to the dominant wolf energy suddenly flooding the room.

Mae's answering smile was all teeth.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the path as Rowan left Mae's cottage, each step feeling like she was wading through deep water. The mate bond still burbled contentedly, but her magic was in chaos, sending conflicting signals that made her head spin.

She paused at the garden gate, trying to organize her thoughts. The interview had

been productive, hadn't it? Mae had been helpful, sharing stories about the territory, offering insights into pack history. So why did her instincts scream that she'd just walked away from something infinitely dangerous?

A sudden movement caught her eye. Mae stood at the window, her silhouette sharp against the golden light. Gone was any trace of the kindly grandmother—her posture was straight, powerful, watchful. For a heartbeat, she looked more wolf than human, her eyes reflecting the dying sunlight like a predator's.

Then she lifted one hand in a wave, and the illusion shattered. Just a sweet old woman watching her grandson's mate leave. Nothing more. But in the dying light, her shadow seemed to stretch across the garden like reaching claws, as if the very land itself was marked as her territory.

In the deepening dusk, a wolf's howl echoed through the trees. It might have been a greeting.

It might have been a warning.

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"Her questions weren't right. She knew too much about Red Hood procedures—about silver testing, about how we identify feral transitions. Things that aren't common knowledge."

Alder looked up from behind his desk, his green eyes sharp with concern. The mate bond carried his worry to her, tangled with threads of defensive protectiveness. "Mae's lived alongside Red Hoods for decades."

"She asked about silver testing." The words burst out in a rush. "About how we determine early signs of moon madness. Specific details about how silver affects wolves before they turn feral." Rowan's voice cracked. "That's classified information. Even most Red Hoods don't know the exact procedures unless they're field certified."

The mate bond rippled with Alder's unease. He stood, moving around the desk toward her. "What exactly did she say?"

"She mentioned how silver can force a shift, make the madness show itself." Rowan's training finally broke through the bond's haze. "Those were her exact words. Then she asked about early symptoms, about how we track ferals, about our weaknesses—" She cut herself off, remembering more. "And her herb collection. Wolfsbane mixed with cooking herbs. Who does that? And the tea. I'm still shaking off the sluggishness."

His jaw tightened. "Her tea is probably too potent for a human."

"Maybe." Rowan resumed pacing, her boots silent on the hardwood floor. "And her movements, Alder. The way she blocked exits, monitored sight lines. Those aren't

grandmother behaviors. They're predator behaviors." She stopped, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "I know how this sounds. I know the mate bond is screaming at me that I'm wrong, that I'm betraying pack trust. But my training—" Her voice broke. "My training says something's very wrong."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with implication. Outside, a crow called a warning to its mate.

"There's more," Rowan said softly. "When she talked about your mother..." She hesitated as pain flashed across Alder's face. "She said something about how the Red Hoods were 'less discriminating' back then. Asked very specific questions about how we determine if someone's truly gone feral. And the way she talked about the territory, about humans encroaching—" She shivered despite the morning warmth. "It wasn't just protective. It was hungry."

Alder's hands clenched. The mate bond carried his turmoil to her—doubt warring with denial, trust battling against instinct. "You're sure about this?"

"No," Rowan admitted. "That's what terrifies me. The mate bond keeps trying to make me doubt everything I noticed. But..." She crossed to him, laying her hand over his. "Alder, you know how extensive Red Hood training is. How many signs of predatory behavior we're taught to recognize. Everything in me is saying something's wrong, even with the bond trying to convince me otherwise."

His fingers interlaced with hers, drawing strength from the contact. "What do you want to do?"

"I need to talk to her again." Rowan squeezed his hand. "This time without letting the mate bond or tea cloud my judgment. I need to know if I'm seeing threats where none exist, or if—" She couldn't finish the thought.

Fury rolled through the mate bond like thunder. Alder's hands clenched on the edge of his desk, knuckles white. "You're accusing my grandmother of what, exactly? Being a secret murderer? Taking trophies from victims?"

The rage in his voice made Rowan step back, her wolf instincts responding to an Alpha's anger even as her human side tried to stand firm. "I'm saying something isn't right. These aren't normal questions, normal behaviors—"

"Normal?" He barked out a harsh laugh. "You've known her for what, a few days? And suddenly you're an expert on what's normal for her?" The desk creaked under his grip. "She raised me after your kind murdered my mother."

The accusation hit like a physical blow. Rowan's chest tightened, memories of her own family's death tangling with the present pain. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it?" Alder straightened, power rolling off him in waves that made her inner wolf want to bare its throat. "You come here, make me think we have something real, and then start throwing accusations at my family?"

"I'm trying to protect you." The words burst out before she could stop them. "Do you think I want this to be true? Do you think the mate bond isn't screaming at me to shut up, to look the other way?" Her voice cracked. "But I can't. Not when my instincts are telling me people might be in danger."

"Your instincts." His lip curled. "The same Red Hood instincts that said my mother had to die?"

The mate bond between them twisted, sharp with shared pain and betrayal. Rowan wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold in the hurt. "Maybe..." She swallowed hard. "Maybe this was a mistake. The mate bond. Us." Each word felt like glass in her throat. "Maybe I should just finish the investigation and go."

Silence fell, heavy and cold. Through the bond, she felt his pain match her own, felt him wrestling with pride and anger and fear.

"Maybe you should." His voice was quiet now, controlled, but the bond carried the agony those words caused them both.

Rowan nodded, unable to speak past the knot in her throat. She turned toward the door, then stopped. "I still need to talk to her again. To be sure, one way or the other."

"Fine." Alder's voice was still tight. "I'll check the cabin while she's gathering herbs. You..." He looked away. "You do what you need to do."

Neither of them said what they were both thinking—that this might be the end of something that had barely begun. The mate bond keened between them, mourning what they might be losing.

"I'll go find her in the woods," Rowan said softly. "Better to talk away from the cabin."

Alder gave a sharp nod, still not looking at her. "She gathers herbs every morning on the east trail. She should be there now."

The formal tone hurt worse than his anger had. Rowan hesitated at the door, wanting to say something—anything—to bridge the gulf suddenly yawning between them. But there were no words that could make this better. Not until she knew the truth, one way or the other.

She left without looking back, the mate bond aching like an open wound with every step she took away from him.

THE CABIN DOOR CREAKED under Alder's touch, the sound unnaturally loud in the late morning quiet. His grandmother's scent lingered—herbs and earth and something else he'd never quite been able to identify. Something that had always made his wolf uneasy, though he'd spent years ignoring that instinct.

Just like he'd ignored so many things.

The mate bond throbbed like a fresh bruise as he moved through the familiar rooms. Every surface held memories: Mae baking him cookies, tending his scrapes, telling him stories of the old ways. Had there always been that edge to her tales about humans encroaching on pack lands? That gleam in her eye when she spoke of protecting territory?

Focus . He had to be thorough, had to prove Rowan wrong. Or...

His jaw clenched. Or prove her right.

The kitchen first. Nothing unusual in the herb bundles except... he paused, nose twitching. Wolfsbane. Not just a trace, but woven through multiple bundles. Why would a wolf keep so much of something toxic to their kind?

The living room next. Maps on the walls, marked with Mae's precise handwriting. He'd never noticed how the annotations clustered around areas where hikers had gone missing. Gathering grounds , she'd called them. His stomach turned.

In her bedroom, the scent of death hit him—faint, old, but unmistakable. How had he never noticed? The mate bond's anguish tangled with his rising horror as he searched methodically, fighting memories of childhood comfort against growing suspicion.

The jewelry box on her dresser had belonged to his mother. Mae had claimed she'd found it in the woods after... after. His hands shook as he opened it.

Silver glinted against dark velvet. A delicate chain with a distinctive pendant—a small crystal wrapped in twisted wire. His breath caught. He'd seen this necklace before, just last week in the missing persons report. Balinda Dross, age twenty-four, last seen hiking the east trail. In her photo, the crystal had caught the light exactly as it did now.

The truth slammed into him like a physical blow. Memory after memory realigned: Mae's odd comments about territory, her convenient absences when bodies were found, the way she'd always known exactly where to gather the richest herbs.

A floorboard creaked outside.

Alder froze, ears straining. Familiar footsteps approached—Rowan. She must have given up searching the gathering grounds. But under her scent...

He reached the window in two strides. Rowan stood at the edge of the clearing, unaware. And emerging from the trees behind her, moving with silent purpose was Mae.

All this time. All these years. His grandmother—the woman who'd raised him, who'd comforted him after his mother's death—was a murderer. Had probably killed his mother. And now she was stalking toward his mate with death in her eyes.

The mate bond screamed warning, but Rowan was too focused on the cabin to notice what approached from behind. Mae's lips curved in a hunter's smile as she closed the distance, her movements too deadly for the frail woman she pretended to be.

Alder's muscles tensed to spring, to shout warning, to do something—but he knew with sick certainty that any sudden move would only make Mae strike faster. She was too close to Rowan already, and she'd had decades to perfect her hunt.

His mate. His grandmother. And no time to prevent what was about to happen.

Through the window glass, Mae's shadow stretched across the grass like reaching claws.

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After an hour of searching the gathering grounds with no sign of Mae, Rowan had given up and headed for the cabin. Maybe she'd find some evidence there, something to either confirm her suspicions or put them to rest. Anything to stop this ache of doubt and loss that came with every pulse of the mate bond.

She'd checked all of Mae's usual herb-gathering spots along the east trail, finding only freshly disturbed earth and lingering traces of an unfamiliar scent that made her magic bristle. Now, reaching for the cabin door, she forced herself to focus on the task at hand, not on the memory of Alder's anger, of his words that cut deeper than any blade: Maybe you should leave.

"My, what sharp senses you have, little Red Hood." Mae's voice came from behind her, silky with menace. "Though perhaps not sharp enough."

Rowan spun, her heart slamming against her ribs. Mae stood less than three feet away, all pretense of the kindly grandmother stripped away. Her stance was pure predator, her smile showing too many teeth.

"What big eyes you have, grandmother," Rowan said, her own voice steady despite her racing pulse. Her hand inched toward her belt, toward her silver blade.

Mae's laugh was dark honey over broken glass. "The better to watch my prey, my dear." She moved with fluid grace, circling to cut off Rowan's escape route. "And what a lovely prey you are. So confident in your training, your power." Her lips curved in a hunter's smile. "So blind to the real predator in your midst."

The mate bond flared with warning, but Rowan shoved it down, refusing to be

distracted by emotions when her life hung by a thread. Mae continued her predatory circle, each step precise and measured, nothing elderly or frail in her movements now.

"What big teeth you have," Rowan said, matching Mae's circling pace, keeping her distance. Her fingers closed around the silver blade's hilt.

"The better to rip out your throat, my dear." Mae's smile widened, showing fangs too sharp for a normal wolf. "Just like I did to those hikers who dared trespass on my territory. Who thought they could walk my paths without consequences."

A chill ran down Rowan's spine as pieces clicked into place. "The missing persons. All of them?"

"Humans." Mae spat the word like poison. "Weak. Helpless. Prey." Her eyes gleamed with predatory satisfaction. "They used to know their place. Used to fear the dark woods and what lurked within. But now?" She gestured sharply. "Now they march through our territory with their maps and their phones, thinking they're safe. Thinking they're above nature's laws."

Rowan's training kicked in, cataloging details even as she maintained the deadly dance. Mae's movements were those of an apex predator—efficient, practiced, patient. This wasn't madness. This was calculated hunting. She wasn't loup garou, but she was crazy nonetheless.

"What sharp claws you have," Rowan said, watching Mae's hands flex.

"The better to mark my territory, little Red." Mae's voice dropped lower, rougher. "Like I marked my traitor son who thought he could challenge my control of this pack. Poor Richard, so concerned about his mate's strange behavior." Her laugh held no trace of humanity. "He should have paid more attention to what I was feeding

her."

The implications hit Rowan like a physical blow. "Alder's mother..."

"Wolfsbane and silver, carefully measured. Just enough to make her seem feral." Mae's eyes glittered with dark pride. "The Red Hoods did exactly what I knew they would. So efficient, so quick to eliminate a threat. And Richard?" Her smile turned cruel. "He figured it out too late. Became another trophy for my collection."

"You killed your own son." Rowan's voice shook with horror and rage.

"I protected my territory." Mae's facade cracked, showing the monster beneath. "He would have exposed me, would have destroyed everything I've built. This is my land, my hunting ground." She bared her fangs fully now. "And you, little Red Hood, have wandered right into my trap."

"What a big mistake you've made." Rowan drew her blade in one smooth motion, silver gleaming in the late morning light.

Mae's laugh turned to a growl. "Have I? Poor Alder, losing another loved one to the Red Hoods. He'll never trust your kind again after I'm done with you." She flexed her fingers, claws extending. "What big eyes you have, little Red. The better to see your death coming."

Mae struck with supernatural speed, but Rowan's magic flared, throwing up a shield of crimson energy. The protective barrier sizzled where Mae's claws raked across it, leaving smoking gouges deeper than they should have been.

"Did you really think you were the first to suspect?" Mae circled, her movements fluid and precise. "Others came before you. Red Hood witches who noticed too much, who thought their magic would save them." Her smile was all fang now. "They

all died screaming."

Rowan gathered her power and sent a blast of binding magic toward Mae. The spell that should have locked a werewolf in place barely slowed her. She's wrong, Rowan's training screamed. The binding should have held.

"Surprised?" Mae's laugh echoed with dark triumph. "Decades of exposure build resistance, little Red. Did you think I gathered wolfsbane just for my daughter-in-law?" She shrugged off another spell like it was mist. "I've spent years studying Red Hood magic. Every spell. Every ward. Every weakness."

The next attack shattered Rowan's shield, sending her stumbling back. She pulled power from the earth, weaving it into a counter-strike, but Mae was toying with her now, each move showing centuries of accumulated knowledge about fighting witch-kind.

"I watched you all." Mae's voice was conversational, as if they were still sharing tea. "The witches, the rangers, my own son. Learned their patterns. Their defenses." She batted aside a fire spell like swatting a fly. "Just like I learned yours. So confident in your magic, your training. Never thinking the grandmother might be the monster until it was too late."

Rowan's strongest binding spell dissipated against Mae's skin like water on hot steel. "You won't get away with this."

"I already have. For decades." Mae's next strike broke through Rowan's magical defenses, her claws raking flesh. It burned like fire. "And when they find your body, torn apart despite your magic, who will they blame? The sweet old grandmother?" Her laugh was razor-edged. "Or the dangerous pack that already lost one member to moon madness?"

Rowan tried to gather more power, but Mae's hand closed around her throat, disrupting her concentration. "Poor Alder, losing another love to 'feral' wolves. At least this time he'll have his pack rally behind him. Good riddance to a bad witch."

Through the pain, through the mate bond's desperate keening, Rowan suddenly understood. "You've been controlling him since he was a child. Killing anyone who might take him away from you."

"He's mine." The words erupted in a growl. "My territory, my pack, my grandson." Mae's claws dug deeper, and Rowan felt her magic flickering, weakening. "I won't let some Red Hood witch steal what's mine."

Rowan struggled, but Mae's power was overwhelming, centuries of accumulated resistance making her nearly immune to magical attacks. Black spots danced at the edges of her vision as her claws raked across the forearm she managed to get up to save her throat. The mate bond howled in her mind, but it was too late. Too late to warn Alder, too late to save herself, too late—

Glass shattered above them in an explosive cascade.

Alder crashed through the window in a spray of glass, his wolf form massive and dark with fury. He slammed into Mae, ripping her away from Rowan with a force that sent them both rolling across the ground.

Rowan gasped for air, magic surging back as her concentration returned. The mate bond exploded into full awareness, carrying Alder's rage and horror and love—so much love—it nearly brought her to her knees.

Mae recovered impossibly fast, facing her grandson with teeth bared. "You don't understand," she said, her voice still carrying that deceptive honey tone. "The territory has to be protected. Humans encroaching, Red Hoods interfering—I did

what was necessary."

"You killed my mother." Alder's words came out in a growl as he shifted back to human form, his eyes blazing alpha red. "My father. You've been killing innocent people for years."

"Innocent?" Mae's laugh held an edge of madness now. "They were trespassers. Threats. Your mother would have exposed us to the humans. Your father would have destroyed everything I built." Her claws flexed. "Every death made our territory safer."

Raw power exploded from Alder, his Alpha authority filling the clearing. But Mae didn't submit, didn't even flinch.

"You think being Alpha protects you?" Her smile showed too many teeth. "I've spent decades preparing for this. Who do you think they'll blame when they find another Red Hood dead on our territory?"

She lunged for Rowan again, but this time Rowan was ready. Her magic burst forth in crimson ribbons, wrapping around Mae's legs. Alder struck from the other side, his claws raking across his grandmother's back. Mae howled—not in pain, but in fury.

But she'd forgotten something crucial. Something even decades of studying Red Hood magic couldn't prepare her for.

The mate bond.

Power surged between Rowan and Alder, their magics linking, amplifying. Red Hood witch and Alpha werewolf, their strengths combining into something Mae had never encountered in all her years of hunting.

Mae's eyes widened as crimson energy wrapped around her, enhanced by Alder's Alpha power. For the first time, fear flickered across her face.

"What big mistakes you've made, grandmother," Alder snarled.

Together, they struck. Magic and claw, power and fury, love and justice all merging into a single devastating attack. Mae tried to resist, tried to call on her decades of built-up immunity, but this was something new. Something she couldn't fight.

Her final scream echoed through the clearing as the combined power tore through her defenses, ending decades of secret murders in a flash of crimson light.

Silence fell.

Alder stared at what remained of his grandmother, his body trembling. The mate bond carried his anguish, his horror, his relief—too many emotions to process. Rowan moved to him, ignoring her own injuries, and wrapped her arms around him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

He turned into her embrace, burying his face in her hair. Through the mate bond, she felt the moment his walls crumbled, felt decades of manipulation and hidden trauma break free. She held him tighter, her magic wrapping around them both in a comforting cocoon.

They stood like that for a long moment, healing beginning in the ashes of devastation. The mate bond was stronger now, tempered by shared pain and shared triumph.

"Don't leave," Alder whispered against her hair. "Stay. Please. I love you."

Rowan's heart clenched at the memory of their argument, now seeming so distant.

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised. "I love you too."

Above them, the sun broke through the clouds, casting light on a territory finally free of its hidden monster.

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Rowan's magic flickered like a candle flame as she cleaned the last of Mae's claw marks on Alder's shoulder. Her own wounds had been easier to heal—physical injuries always were. But the raw anguish pouring through their mate bond made her hands tremble.

"I should have known," Alder whispered. He sat on the edge of his bed, shoulders bowed under the weight of truth. "All these years, she was right there. Killing. Lying. Using me—" His voice broke.

"She fooled everyone." Rowan knelt before him, letting her magic wrap around them both in a soothing cocoon. "Even trained Red Hoods never suspected."

"My mother." His hands clenched into fists. "My father. She—" He couldn't finish.

Rowan felt his pain crash through the mate bond like a tidal wave. Without thinking, she pulled him into her arms. He came willingly, burying his face in her neck as decades of carefully constructed walls crumbled.

"She took everything," he managed between ragged breaths. "And made me believe it was the Red Hoods' fault. Made me hate your kind for years."

"Shh." Rowan stroked his hair, her own eyes burning with tears she wouldn't let fall. He needed her strength right now, not her grief. "You survived her. You protected your pack despite everything she did. You became a good Alpha, a good man, in spite of her manipulation."

The mate bond carried comfort and understanding between them, deeper than words

could reach. Rowan felt Alder's barriers dissolving, felt him finally letting himself grieve for the parents he'd lost, for the childhood that had been built on lies.

Minutes passed, or maybe hours. Time seemed meaningless as they held each other, the mate bond weaving their pain and healing together until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Finally, Alder lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed but clearer. "I need to go back to the cabin," he said quietly. "There's something I have to find."

Rowan understood. Some truths needed physical proof to be fully accepted. She pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead. "Do you want me to come with you?"

He shook his head. "I need to do this part alone." His hand cupped her cheek. "But don't go far?"

"Never again," she promised.

The cabin's interior seemed smaller now, stripped of Mae's carefully constructed illusion of harmless domesticity. Alder moved through the rooms like a ghost, past the herbs that had poisoned his mother, past the knives that had killed his father, toward his grandmother's bedroom.

The jewelry box still sat on her dresser where he'd found it earlier. His hands shook as he opened it again, pushing aside the necklace from her latest victim. There, at the bottom, gleaming dully in the afternoon light, lay his father's Alpha ring.

He lifted it carefully. The heavy silver band was inscribed with the pack's symbol—a wolf beneath a crescent moon. How many times had he watched this ring flash on his father's hand during pack meetings?

Alder slid the ring onto his finger. It fit perfectly, as if it had been waiting all these years for this moment. The silver was warm against his skin—spelled, he realized, to protect the Alpha who wore it. His father must have been taken completely by surprise for Mae to overcome that protection.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he whispered to the empty room. "I should have known. Should have seen—" But he'd been just a boy, carefully blinded by Mae's manipulations.

The mate bond pulsed gently, carrying Rowan's wordless support. She was keeping her promise, staying close enough to comfort but far enough to give him privacy. The bond felt different now—stronger, clearer, as if Mae's death had removed some invisible barrier between them.

He looked around the room one last time. Here was the truth he'd searched for all these years. Not Red Hood persecution, not pack politics, but his grandmother's ruthless grip on power. The ring on his finger was proof enough for any wolf who might doubt.

Moving with sudden purpose, Alder gathered the evidence they'd need—the journal documenting her kills, the trophies from her victims, the herbs she'd used to poison his mother. The pack would need to see it all, would need to understand how thoroughly they'd been deceived.

But first...

First, he had a mate waiting for him. A future to build. A chance to heal not just himself, but the rift between Red Hoods and werewolves that Mae had worked so hard to maintain.

The ring caught the light as he closed the cabin door. On his finger, it felt like both an ending and a beginning.

When Alder called the emergency pack meeting that evening, his father's ring drew every eye. Elder Thomas was the first to recognize it, his sharp intake of breath cutting through the murmured conversations. The aged wolf's face went pale, then dark with denial.

Rowan stood at Alder's side, feeling the weight of decades of prejudice and suspicion pressing against them. Through their bond, she sensed his grim determination. There would be no gentle way to unravel Mae's web of lies. The truth would hurt, but the pack needed to understand exactly what had happened.

"She was protecting us from humans encroaching on our territory," Elder Thomas growled, his weathered face fierce in the pack house's lamplight. "You can't expect us to believe—"

"Like she protected my father?" Alder's voice cut through the pack meeting. He held up his hand, his father's Alpha ring gleaming. "This was in her trophy collection, along with items from every missing hiker. Along with the wolfsbane she used to poison my mother."

Thomas flinched as if struck. He'd been one of Mae's strongest supporters, had even opposed Rowan's presence in pack territory. Now he stared at the ring, color draining from his face. "Richard's ring. But she said the Red Hoods..."

"She lied." Alder's words carried the weight of Alpha authority. "About everything."

Through the mate bond, Rowan felt his pain as he laid out the evidence—Mae's detailed journals, the hidden cache of victims' belongings, the carefully preserved herbs that had driven his mother to apparent madness. With each revelation, she felt the pack's resistance crumbling.

"I served her tea," Serenity whispered. The pack's youngest elder pressed trembling

hands to her mouth. "All those times she asked me to serve special tea to Alder's mother, I never questioned it."

"She fooled us all," Rowan said gently. She felt Alder's gratitude through their bond as she stepped forward. "That's what predators do. They hide in plain sight."

"A Red Hood witch." Thomas spat the words, but his voice shook. "How do we know you're not lying to turn us against our own?"

"Because I checked everything myself." Monica, the pack's healer, stepped forward. Her hands shook as she held up a small glass vial. "This was in Mae's herb collection. It's wolfsbane processed to be undetectable in food. I found traces of it in the old tea sets she kept as 'memories' of Alder's mother."

The evidence mounted through the night. Pack members came forward with their own stories—odd comments Mae had made, strange behaviors they'd dismissed, moments of cruelty disguised as protection. By midnight, even Thomas's shoulders had slumped in defeat.

"I was wrong about you," he told Rowan three days later, catching her alone in the pack house kitchen. His voice was gruff but sincere. "Both of you." He nodded to Alder as he entered. "The pack needs this alliance with the Red Hoods. Needs you both."

Through their bond, Rowan felt Alder's surprise and relief. Thomas had been the hardest to convince, his distrust of Red Hoods bone-deep after decades of Mae's influence.

"The pack's healing," Alder said quietly, echoing their private conversation from days before. But this time it wasn't just words—they could see it in Thomas's acceptance, in Serenity's determination to learn proper herb lore from the Red Hoods, in Monica's

dedication to building new bridges between their communities.

His father's ring caught the morning light as he pulled Rowan close, its spelled silver warm against her skin. Through their bond flowed shared hope, shared purpose, shared certainty that together they could build something new from the ashes of Mae's destruction.

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Two weeks after Mae's death, with the pack healing and bridges forming between communities, Alder found Rowan in his study reviewing alliance documents between the Red Hoods and werewolves.

"Enough paperwork," he said, pulling her to her feet. The mate bond between them tickled with anticipation—he'd been planning something, she realized. Something that made their bond spark with nervous joy.

"It's the full moon," he said softly. "The pack is already gathering. And your Red Hood sisters arrived an hour ago."

Rowan's breath caught. They'd discussed a formal bonding ceremony but hadn't set a date. Through their bond, she felt his certainty that tonight was right. Even with his wolf rising, fighting to emerge under the moon's pull, he wanted this.

"Now?" Her heart raced. "But I'm not prepared—"

He smiled, that special smile that was only for her. "Serenity arranged everything before she shifted. Including your dress."

The traditional Red Hood ceremonial dress hung in their bedroom—crimson silk that shimmered like liquid fire. Monica had worked with Rowan's Order to combine Red Hood and werewolf bonding traditions, creating something unique for this first-ever union between their kinds.

An hour later, moonlight silvered the ceremonial clearing, turning everything to pearl and shadow. Red Hood witches in their ceremonial cloaks formed an inner circle,

their magic creating soft lights that danced in the air. The pack gathered in their wolf forms, forming a larger circle—a ring of silver-touched fur and gleaming eyes. Their energy soared with acceptance and hope, their occasional soft howls harmonizing with the witch-lights above.

Only Alder remained in human form, fighting his wolf's urgent need to shift. He would speak their vows as a man, though the moon pulled at his blood. His father's ring gleamed on his finger, blessed silver keeping his change at bay for these crucial moments.

High Priestess Elena stepped forward, her crimson cloak flowing like blood in the moonlight. She alone would speak the ceremonial words, while the pack's voices would rise in wolfsong at key moments. The combination had never been attempted before—witch words and wolf song joining in blessing.

"Under the full moon," Elena intoned, "we gather to witness the binding of two souls, two traditions, two peoples long separated by fear and misunderstanding."

The wolves howled in harmony, their voices rising to the moon. Red Hood magic spiraled upward to meet their song, crimson light twining with silver moonbeams.

Alder took Rowan's hands in his, his skin fever-hot with the effort of holding his wolf back. The mate bond between them sang with all the love and certainty that came with finding your true match. Before all their witnesses, they spoke the words that would bind them forever.

"From the moment I first caught your scent," Alder said, his voice rough with emotion and the wolf's rising power, "my wolf knew. Even when I was fighting it, fighting you, something in my soul recognized its other half. You came to my territory hunting a monster, but you found your mate instead." His hands trembled in hers. "You showed me truth when I was blinded by lies. You fought for justice even when it hurt. You are everything my wolf could want, everything my heart needs."

The pack's howls rose in affirmation, their wolf-voices carrying his words to the moon. Through their bond, Rowan felt everything he wasn't saying—how completely she'd changed his world, how deeply their souls had twined together, how the fates themselves must have guided her to his territory.

"I tried so hard not to feel it," she whispered, her voice carrying to all gathered. "Tried to be just the Red Hood witch, to focus on the mission. But you..." She touched his cheek, feeling him lean into her hand, feeling his wolf press close to the surface. "You broke through every wall I'd built. My magic knew you, called to you. My perfect match. When everyone doubted me, you listened. When I was lost in duty, you showed me love was possible."

The mate bond pulsed between them, stronger than ever. Around them, Red Hood magic swirled with wolf energy, creating a spiral of power that rose toward the moon. The wolves' eyes gleamed brighter, reflecting the magical lights above.

"I swear by the moon and my father's ring," Alder said, lifting her hand to his lips, his words becoming rougher as his wolf pushed closer to the surface, "to love you, protect you, stand beside you for all my days. To build a future where Red Hoods and werewolves work together, where no one has to choose between duty and love."

"I swear by my magic and my heart," Rowan returned, her free hand calling crimson energy that wrapped around their joined fingers, "to love you, guard you, fight beside you until my last breath. To help heal the wounds between our peoples, to show that love is stronger than old prejudices."

Elena stepped forward, binding their hands with a cord woven of wolf hair and witch-blessed silk. As she spoke the final blessings, the cord began to glow—wolf magic and witch power combining in a way never seen before.

Their bond flared brilliant and beautiful as Alder pulled her into a kiss that tasted of moonlight and promise. The cord binding their hands dissolved into pure light that

sank into their skin, marking them as true mates in both their traditions.

The moment the blessing was complete, Alder's control finally broke. His shift rippled through him, wolf form emerging in a surge of power. Where a man had stood, a massive black wolf now pressed against Rowan's side, his eyes glowing with love and moonlight.

The pack's howls reached a crescendo, joined by Red Hood magic that painted the sky in streams of crimson light. Elena's witches added their own blessings, their magic harmonizing with wolf song in a symphony of unity.

Rowan buried her hands in her mate's fur, feeling their bond pulse with joy and completion. Around them, wolves began to run, creating circles of movement and magic that wound through the witch-lights like a dance.

Together, witch and wolf, they ran with their combined peoples under the full moon. Their love had exposed decades of darkness to the light, had begun bridging ancient divides. And in this moment, racing through moonlit forests with their packs, they knew that together they could face anything.

Their mate bond was pure and perfect and eternal. Just as it was meant to be.

Just as they were meant to be.