



# Cub My Way (Celestial Pines #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Delilah Moonstone never planned to come back to Celestial Pines — not with a suitcase full of secrets and a heart still bruised by the boy who ghosted her under a full moon.

But when her grandmother's magic shop starts losing its spark (and her talking cat starts offering unsolicited dating advice), Delilah finds herself face to face with Rollo Steele—her growly, flannel-wrapped ex, who now runs a magical animal sanctuary and looks like he could chop wood with his emotions.

Their reunion? Less sweet and more sassy. But the forest is acting strange, Wren is fading fast, and the towns enchanted muffins have stopped glowing.

Delilah came home for duty. She didn't expect fate to throw in a grumpy bear shifter, a magical mystery, and a second chance at the one man she swore she'd hex if she ever saw again.

Now all she has to do is save the shop, survive the spark between them, and maybe—just maybe—fall in love without setting anything (or anyone) on fire.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

## DELILAH

Delilah Moonstone gripped the leather handle of her suitcase until her fingers cramped, the metal clasp biting into her palm like it had something personal against her.

Two bags. One soul-heavy heart. And a town she'd sworn never to set foot in again—except fate had a way of dragging you home with its claws sunk deep.

The sign at the edge of the road hadn't changed. Welcome to Celestial Pines—Where Magic Meets the Mountains . Some joker had added a sticker beneath it: Population: Unruly .

She snorted. "Still cute."

The Appalachian air was crisp with spring's first bite, scented with pine, damp soil, and just a tinge of moon magic that settled behind her ribs like a half-forgotten song. The veil always felt thicker here, like reality thinned just enough for something else to breathe through.

Delilah took one slow step toward the cobblestone path that led into town, her boots clicking against stone and memory. A fox darted past her cart, paused, then vanished into the woods. She whispered a quiet greeting to the spirits.

The Spellbound Sip stood like a time capsule wrapped in ivy, nestled between a crystal shop and Juniper's Paper Emporium. Its windows glowed amber, fogged slightly from the inside, and the brass bell above the door jingled as she pushed it

open.

It smelled like cinnamon, orange zest, and the kind of comfort she didn't trust anymore.

Nerissa Tidewell stood behind the counter, her waterfall of seafoam-blue hair coiled in a braid that reached the backs of her knees. The siren's gaze flicked up, calm as still water—then widened.

“Well slap me with seaweed and call me startled,” Nerissa breathed. “Delilah Moonstone, back from the dead.”

Delilah managed a half-smile. “Just Salem, not the underworld.”

Nerissa abandoned her post and swept Delilah into a tight hug. She smelled like peppermint and sea salt and something faintly ancient.

“Your aura's bruised,” Nerissa murmured against her hair. “Looks like you've been carrying grief in your back pocket and resentment in your shoes.”

Delilah huffed. “I didn't come here for a reading, Ness.”

“No readings. Just tea. Sit, sugar.”

She sat at a corner table worn from generations of elbows and whispered secrets, and watched Nerissa move like silk behind the counter. The siren didn't ask her what she wanted—she never did. The mugs chose for you.

Her cup arrived steaming with a golden swirl inside. One sniff told her everything.

Pumpkin clove. Nostalgia.

Delilah cursed under her breath. “Seriously?”

Nerissa raised an eyebrow. “I don’t make the tea. The tea makes itself. Take it up with your subconscious.”

Delilah lifted the cup, cradled it between both hands. It was warm—too warm. Like a memory slipping beneath her skin.

She was halfway through her first sip when the bell over the door jingled again.

She didn’t look up until her skin prickled.

The back of her neck tightened like it had been kissed by a shadow. She looked up—and everything inside her went still.

Rollo Steele.

Broad-shouldered. Towering. Wearing a plaid flannel rolled up at the sleeves, boots scuffed from honest work. His dark hair thick with waves, his beard just this side of unruly. And those forest-green eyes? They still held a storm.

Her breath caught in her throat, sharp and hot, despite her best efforts.

He hadn’t changed.

Well, maybe broader in the chest, and a bit more... weathered. Like the mountain had carved itself into his bones.

But the ache he’d left in her? That hadn’t aged a day.

Rollo froze mid-step. Their eyes locked.

The silence between them wasn't silence—it was a whole damn monologue. Her pulse pounded. She felt the old heat creep up her throat, and hated herself for the part of her that still noticed the way his shirt clung to his biceps.

“Delilah,” he said, voice low, rough like gravel soaked in honey.

She didn't answer.

Didn't blink.

Didn't breathe.

He stepped closer.

That was his mistake.

“Don't,” she said sharply, standing up so fast her chair scraped the floor.

Nerissa winced.

“Not even gonna say hi?” Rollo's voice was quieter now. Tentative. Too tender.

Delilah tilted her head. “You didn't bother with goodbye, so why break tradition?”

The room went thick. Even the enchanted muffins on the shelf seemed to stop glowing.

“Can we talk?” he asked, one step closer again.

“No.” She shoved her chair back under the table, hard enough to make a nearby spoon rattle. “I didn't come back for you.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

She grabbed her cup, marched to the counter, and slammed the mug down with a little more drama than necessary. Nerissa raised an eyebrow.

“Refill?” she asked delicately.

Delilah gave a tight nod.

Rollo hadn’t moved.

Delilah turned just enough to look over her shoulder. “You still lurking?”

He exhaled. “Still living here. So... yeah.”

“You could’ve warned me.”

“I didn’t know you were coming back.”

“Well, surprise.”

His lips parted like he might say something else, but he hesitated—then turned and walked out.

The bell jingled.

Her knees almost buckled.

Nerissa slid the fresh cup toward her, this one dark and bitter. She didn’t need to

sniff.

Mocha. Anger.

“How’s Wren?” Nerissa asked softly.

“Deteriorating. Magical exhaustion. The earth isn’t speaking to her.”

“She’s part of the land. If she’s sick, the forest’s grieving.”

Delilah nodded slowly. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

She carried her drink back to the corner and collapsed into the chair again.

Outside, the mist hung low, cloaking the streets in secrets. The whispering woods loomed beyond the rooftops—alive, watching. Delilah’s fingers curled around the mug again, and her thoughts turned back to Rollo.

The first boy she kissed. The only man she ever loved. The one who disappeared without a damn word.

“Why’d it have to be him?” she muttered.

“Because fate,” Nerissa sang from the counter, not even looking up.

Delilah groaned. “I don’t believe in fate.”

“You will.”

Her phone buzzed. A text from the healer’s ward at the apothecary.

Wren asking for you. Bad night. Spirits whispering again.

She shoved the phone back in her coat.

Duty first. Heartbreak second. The forest needed her.

And Celestial Pines? It needed a reckoning.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

ROLLO

Rollo Steele had smelled her before he saw her.

He'd barely stepped foot off the dirt trail when the wind shifted—carrying a current of rosemary, damp moss, and something heartbreakingly familiar. His whole body stilled.

Delilah.

The scent hit like a memory swung from a pine branch and smacked him clean in the gut. He stood in the middle of Main Street, boots rooted to the cobblestones, a burlap sack of feed slung over one shoulder and three raccoon kits squalling from the sanctuary cart behind him.

"Easy now," he muttered to the kits, but it wasn't them making his pulse hitch.

She was here.

After eight years. And she had made it clear she didn't want anything to do with him. Still, he found himself waiting outside hoping without an audience, she'd hear him out.

The bell above The Spellbound Sip jangled, soft and mocking, as the café door swung open—and there she was. Steam curling behind her like ghostlight, a mug clutched tight in her hands, and her dark chestnut curls pulled back with a ribbon that looked frayed from travel.

Time didn't dare touch her.

She looked like every spring morning he'd ever missed.

Rollo froze, heart thudding a rhythm his bear growled against. She hadn't seen him yet, thank the stars. He took a breath, then another, willing himself to keep walking.

But fate was never the polite kind.

She turned.

Hazel eyes locked with his. Hers narrowed. His widened.

Then the whole world narrowed down to the look she gave him—the one that said you left me, without speaking a single word.

“Delilah,” he said. Her name cracked in his throat like dry bark.

And she... didn't respond. Not really. Not unless you counted that deadly tilt of her chin.

It stung.

“Can we talk?” he asked, voice lower now, softer. The kits chirped behind him like backup singers to his failure.

“No,” she snapped, all velvet fury and elegance, and then she was gone—walking fast enough to almost call it a jog across the street and to the apothecary.

And Rollo just stood there.

He let out a long breath and rubbed a hand across his jaw. His beard was too long—Delilah always said it made him look like a mountain hermit, which, to be fair, wasn't wrong.

“Welcome back,” he muttered to himself.

A pedestrian vampire chuckled as he passed.

Back at Wolfe & Whiskers Sanctuary , the air was quieter, but not by much. The moment Rollo opened the gate, a chorus of magical chirps and howls rose from the pens. The phoenix pup— charred feathers still molting—let out a disgruntled squeak and flapped pitifully toward him.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm late.”

He dropped the feed sack and crouched beside the enclosure, his big hands gentle as he cleaned out the water bowl and replaced it with fresh springwater. The pup nuzzled his wrist, sparks flickering across its beak.

“Don't give me those eyes,” Rollo murmured. “I just ran into a ghost wearing my mate's skin.”

He didn't like the word mate. Not anymore.

The bond had snapped into place years ago like a trap sprung too soon. He hadn't been ready. Not for the responsibility. Not for the heat of it. And sure as sin not for Delilah's heart in his hands.

So he'd run, tried to push down what he felt he wasn't ready for.

And she'd left.

And nothing had felt right since.

Inside the sanctuary cabin, the scent of cedar and tea tree clung to the wooden walls. Rollo set a kettle on the woodstove, then moved to the window overlooking the woods. The trees whispered with the wind, voices low and restless.

“She's back,” he said aloud.

No one responded, but the spirits in the woods shifted, branches creaking like joints waking from slumber.

Hazel Fairweather's words came back to him like they often did when the forest grew too quiet.

"The bond isn't a curse, Rollo. It's a seed. It grows if you let it. And if you don't... it'll rot you from the inside out."

Well, he was already halfway rotten.

The kettle whistled.

He poured himself a cup of pine nettle tea—earthy and bitter, just how he liked it. Sat in his old rocking chair. Let the mug warm his palms.

But Delilah's face was still burned behind his eyes. The way her jaw clenched. The way she wouldn't even say his name again.

He deserved that.

Hell, he deserved worse.

Later that evening, he busied himself stacking firewood and checking on the rest of the sanctuary's rescues: a wounded water sprite curled into a mossy basin, a mischievous bunyip pup chewing on enchanted rope, and three orphaned owlets that blinked in unison from their perch.

His hands knew the work.

His mind kept drifting.

He didn't expect her to forgive him. He'd ghosted her. Walked out when she needed him. Because he hadn't trusted himself—hadn't trusted the bear inside him not to hurt her when the bond flared too bright.

But now?

He knew himself better.

And seeing her again didn't spark panic. It sparked something warmer. Something like... hope. The kind that bloomed slow.

He finished his rounds, the stars bleeding into the sky above like silver brushstrokes. The town was quieter now, the Spellbound Sip likely closed, and the streets bathed in that familiar lavender twilight that only Celestial Pines could pull off.

He stepped onto the porch and leaned against the railing, cup in hand.

Out beyond the sanctuary, the Whispering Woods pulsed like a sleeping thing. Restless.

Wrong.

The trees weren't just whispering—they were whining , keening low and long like something was festering inside them.

A cold wind cut through his shirt, and his bear stirred.

Trouble.

Rollo took a long sip of his tea and stared out at the line of trees.

Delilah's magic could help. She was an Earth element after all, just like her grandmother.

But would she? And more importantly... would she ever let him get close enough to ask?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

DELILAH

Delilah had only been back in Celestial Pines for a day and a half, and already her heart ached like she'd walked barefoot through broken memories.

The town looked the same on the outside—cobblestone paths lined with ivy-wrapped lanterns, shop signs hand-painted with whimsical flair, and that ever-present mist curling through the air like the breath of some ancient sleeping creature.

But magic didn't shimmer here like it used to.

It wobbled. Fizzled. Like someone had put a wet blanket over a hearthfire.

And Wren? Her grandmother looked more like a fading portrait than the force of nature she once was.

By the time she had gotten there the day before, her grandmother had fallen asleep, so Delilah had left her there to rest while she settled in.

Now, they needed to talk about what was happening.

To her, the Whispering Woods, everything.

Delilah pushed open the warped wooden door of Moonshadow Apothecary, the brass bell above the entrance letting out a warble rather than a chime. She frowned. The enchantment was off.

Inside, the scent hit her first: lavender, sage, and something sharper beneath—rot. A note of decay hidden under the usual bouquet of drying herbs.

“Wren?” Delilah called, stepping across the crooked floorboards. They creaked like they recognized her and weren’t quite sure if they forgave her yet.

“I’m in the back, sugar plum,” came the answer, thin and papery.

Delilah’s throat tightened.

Wren Moonstone wasn’t supposed to sound like that.

She found her grandmother seated in her favorite rocking chair near the back hearth, a fox curled asleep in her lap. Thistle’s flame-colored ears flicked at Delilah’s approach but didn’t stir.

“Sweet roots, you came,” Wren said, smiling up at her.

Delilah tried to smile back but couldn’t stop the sting in her eyes. “I told you if you summoned me with a binding charm again, I’d put nettles in your bathwater.”

Wren chuckled, but the sound turned into a cough that rattled in her chest.

Delilah dropped to her knees beside her and took one of the older woman’s hands in hers. The skin was cool and dry—too dry—and the pulse beneath her fingers thready.

“You look like hell,” she whispered.

“And you’ve still got the bedside manner of a snapping turtle.” Wren gave her hand a weak squeeze. “Welcome home, baby girl.”



Delilah bit her lip and leaned forward, wrapping her arms around her grandmother's frail frame. Wren's bones felt like bundled twigs wrapped in a floral shawl.

"I missed you," Delilah said, softer now.

Wren patted her back. "You came back. That's what matters."

The hearth popped behind them, sending a puff of smoke into the air. Thistle lifted his head, eyes glowing faintly as he stared at something invisible to Delilah.

"You've been slipping," Delilah said, pulling back. "Tell me everything."

Wren sighed. "It started subtle. My herbs stopped listening first—couldn't grow them past a crescent moon. Then the tinctures began turning cloudy even before I sealed them. My connection to the earth... it's like a door's been shut, and I'm knockin', but no one's home."

Delilah's brow furrowed. "The Whispering Woods?"

"Mm-hmm," Wren murmured. "Something foul is soaking into the roots. And the spirits? Restless. They murmur all night. You felt it, didn't you?"

Delilah nodded slowly. "In the café... and walking through town. The air's wrong."

Wren gestured weakly toward the workbench. "Take a look at the moonvine batch. It bloomed during the wrong phase last week. That ain't never happened."

Delilah stood and crossed the room, her shoes echoing in the quiet. The jars on the shelves shimmered faintly—some more than others. A few were completely dim.

She paused at the moonvine jar. The petals inside were soft gray, not the deep silver

they should've been under this moon.

She touched the glass. Cold. Too cold.

“Holy roots...” she muttered.

“Now you see it,” Wren called. “Magic’s limping, not dancing.”

Delilah spun slowly, taking it all in—the drying racks that sagged, the chalk runes on the floor that had blurred, the candle beside the altar that sputtered even without wind. Something was draining the shop... and Wren.

“We need to get you re-rooted. Something’s corrupted your tether to the land.”

“I’ve tried,” Wren said gently. “But my magic’s tangled in this. It ain’t personal—it’s systemic. You can feel it outside too, can’t you? The trees... they grieve.”

Delilah swallowed hard. “This isn’t just sickness. It’s spiritual. Elemental.”

Wren nodded once. “I need your help, sugar. You’ve got a stronger pull now than I do. You’re fresh. Unbroken.”

Delilah wanted to protest—wanted to scream that she was broken—but the words caught in her throat.

“I’m here,” she said instead.

Wren smiled like that was enough.

Later that afternoon, Delilah cleaned the apothecary’s front counter while Wren rested. The shop responded to her touch like it remembered her—the candles

flickered brighter, the shelves straightened a little on their own, and even the floorboards creaked less spitefully.

She reached for a stack of cinnamon bark when the door creaked open.

“Closed for?—”

But her voice faltered when she saw who stood in the doorway.

Rollo.

Again.

This time, he looked hesitant, one hand braced against the frame like he expected to be hexed.

“I came to see Wren,” he said.

“She’s resting,” Delilah answered curtly. “And this place isn’t a petting zoo for old regrets.”

Rollo winced. “That’s fair.”

Delilah exhaled slowly. “Why are you really here?”

He stepped inside, careful not to cross the salt line at the threshold. “Something’s off with the woods. The sanctuary animals are restless. They won’t sleep. The phoenix pup’s already started molting again—it shouldn’t be.”

Delilah’s posture softened just a fraction. “You think it’s tied to the forest?”

“I think it’s tied to everything ,” he said. “Wren, the woods, the tea going bitter at The Sip... it’s all bleeding together.”

She stared at him. “You been paying attention, huh?”

His voice dropped. “Only to what matters.”

Delilah looked away, biting the inside of her cheek. “I’ll talk to my grandmother,” she said instead. “But she’s barely strong enough to string a charm, let alone fix the whole forest.”

Rollo hesitated, his expression unreadable. “If there’s anything I can do?—”

“There isn’t,” she cut in, voice clipped. “You’ve got your sanctuary, I’ve got this shop. Let’s not confuse history with obligation.”

A beat passed. Then he nodded once, quiet. “Take care of her.”

He didn’t push. Didn’t argue. Just turned and left, the bell over the door giving a soft, almost apologetic chime as it swung shut behind him.

Delilah exhaled, long and low.

She leaned against the counter, arms crossed tight over her chest.

Eight years.

And he just walks in, all broad shoulders and mountain silence, like nothing had changed. Except... maybe something had. An animal sanctuary? Since when? She never pictured him with baby creatures and bandages—she’d only known him with walls and warning signs.

Maybe he did change.

She shook her head hard.

“Nope,” she told herself. “Not going there.”

But still, her fingers wouldn’t stop tracing the edge of the counter where he’d stood—like the wood still held his warmth.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

### ROLLO

The phoenix pup wouldn't eat.

Rollo crouched beside the stone basin in the sunroom, holding out a bowl of crushed char-root and ground firepetals—normally irresistible. But the creature just blinked at him, its half-molted feathers ruffled and dulled to a soot-gray sheen.

“Come on, ember tail,” he coaxed softly, his deep voice low and warm like river rocks under sunlight. “Just one bite. For me?”

The pup squeaked, then turned its head and tucked it beneath a trembling wing.

Rollo sat back on his heels, exhaling. The fire hadn't gone out of the little bird completely, but it was flickering. He could feel it in his bones, the way his bear paced restlessly beneath his skin, agitated by the wrongness in the air.

Something's poisoning the magic here.

He'd known it for weeks—first in the uneasy silences of the forest, then in the way the sanctuary's wards hummed low like they were preparing for a storm. It had only gotten worse since spring touched the air.

And now Delilah was back.

Just when everything else was going sideways.

He rubbed a hand over his jaw, the stubble rasping against his callused palm. Part of him still reeled from seeing her yesterday. From the way she'd looked at him—like she wasn't sure whether to slap him or summon a weather spell.

Not that he didn't deserve it.

Rollo stood and adjusted the heating stones around the phoenix pup's nest, letting the warmth rise before stepping toward the front of the sanctuary.

The morning mist was still clinging to the trees like a shawl, but the sun was breaking through in strips—thin gold brushing over the forest canopy. He opened the door and there she was standing right there on his porch.

Delilah.

Dark curls tied up in a green scarf, cheeks pink from the crisp mountain air. Her hands were shoved deep in her coat pockets, and her expression wasn't quite apologetic—but it wasn't biting either.

“Well,” he said, his voice raspier than he meant. “Wasn't expecting company.”

She gave a half-shrug. “I figured since I stormed out the day before with all the grace of a hexed badger and yesterday snapped at you for simply checking on my grandmother, I should... at least show up before the gossip starts.”

Rollo leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “Appreciate the warning. I was bracing for magical scones with my face on 'em.”

That made her lips twitch. Just barely.

“I brought an apology,” she said, lifting a small cloth-wrapped bundle from her bag.

“Dried orange slices. For the animals. Not you.”

He took it with a nod, fingers brushing hers as he did.

Static.

Or maybe not static. Maybe something else.

The contact was brief, but enough to rattle the calm he'd been piecing together. Her magic still shimmered under her skin, barely contained. And it recognized him.

He cleared his throat. “They’ll love ‘em.”

She stepped past him without asking for permission. “This where you keep the babies?” she asked, peering toward the sunroom.

“Phoenix pup’s sick. Won’t eat. That’s where I’ve been all morning.”

She paused. “The same one that molted early?”

Rollo nodded.

She bit her lip for a moment and he had to force himself to not remember what those lips tasted like.

“I thought it might help to lend a hand.”

He tilted his head. “Thought I wasn’t worth your energy?”

She sighed, not facing him. “Wren’s weak. Sicker than she’s letting on. It’s been... a lot. And then seeing you , running a sanctuary like some big-hearted mountain



man..." Her voice softened. "It threw me."

Rollo didn't move. Didn't speak for a moment.

"Not just big-hearted," he said finally, stepping past her toward the enclosure. "Also stubborn. And usually sleep-deprived."

She followed him into the warm room, kneeling down beside the pup without hesitation. Her fingers hovered over the tiny body, not touching, just sensing.

"He's cold. Even with the stones."

Rollo watched her, the way her eyes narrowed, her brow furrowed. She was still sharp. Still tuned to the threads most others missed.

"I run this place solo," he said. "Started it a year after you left. Took over after the old caretaker passed. Seemed right."

Delilah glanced up, surprised. "You do it alone?"

"Yup. Millie Grace helps sometimes, but it's mostly just me and the critters."

Her mouth pressed into a thoughtful line.

"You could've written," she said after a moment.

Rollo's heart thudded, slow and heavy. "Would it have mattered?"

"Maybe."

They fell into silence, only the low chirp of the bunyip pups from the next room

breaking it. Delilah reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny woven pouch, untied it, and sprinkled something fine and golden over the phoenix pup.

“Crushed sun-blossom,” she explained. “For hope.”

Rollo watched her hands, graceful and sure. Watched the way her hair glinted in the slant of light. He’d thought he’d forgotten what she looked like when she was focused. He hadn’t.

“You never stopped,” he said quietly.

She looked up. “Stopped what?”

“Being... this. Magic. Gentle. You.”

For a moment, something shifted between them—an ache too familiar, a longing they’d both buried deep.

Their fingers brushed again as they both reached to adjust the pup’s blanket.

Rollo inhaled sharply.

The bond snapped against him like a rubber band pulled too tight. It pulsed. Real. Alive.

Still hers.

His bear clawed beneath his skin, not wild, but desperate. Certain.

She was still his mate.

Delilah pulled back, too quick. Her hands trembled, just slightly.

“I should go,” she said, standing fast. “Wren’s probably wondering where I am.”

“Of course,” he said softly.

She lingered in the doorway, one hand on the frame.

“I’ll stop by tomorrow,” she said, not quite meeting his eyes. “See how the pup’s doing.”

Rollo nodded, unable to speak past the thick weight in his chest.

The door clicked behind her.

The phoenix pup stirred. And for the first time in days, it chirped.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

DELILAH

The next morning, Celestial Pines woke wrapped in silver fog and the scent of damp pine. Delilah wrapped a scarf twice around her neck and stared at her reflection in the mirror above Wren's tea cabinet. Her hazel eyes looked more rested than they had in days.

She hated that she knew why.

Rollo, with his quiet voice and rough hands and the sanctuary that didn't look like it should suit him—but did.

Delilah shook her head and slipped on her shoes.

She wasn't here for him. She was here for Wren. For the town. For the woods that whispered in her dreams like they missed her.

Still, she tucked an extra sprig of elderflower in her pocket for the phoenix pup, and another for her nerves.

The sanctuary sat nestled against the forest edge like it had grown there, all mossy shingles and leaning fences and early crocuses blooming despite the chill. Delilah stepped through the main gate, the old iron creaking under her hand.

"Back again?" Rollo's voice called out before she saw him.

He was kneeling in the herb patch just past the side porch, sleeves rolled to his

elbows, dirt smudging his forearms like old ink. His hair was tied back today, and the sight of him like that—domestic, rooted—sent something warm and unwanted through her chest.

“Told you I would,” she said, careful to keep her tone even.

He stood, wiping his hands on a cloth. “I didn’t think you were the type to bluff.”

“I’m not. I’m also not the type to be ignored. So... I’m here. To help. When I’m not tending to Wren.”

His eyes softened. “She doing any better?”

Delilah shook her head. “Still weak. The house feels hollow without her magic pulsing through it.”

“I’m sorry,” he said simply, and the way he said it—not out of obligation, but like he meant it deep in his bones—made her throat tighten.

She cleared it fast. “So? What do you want me to do?”

“Come on,” he said, motioning toward the stables. “I’ll show you where the real chaos lives.”

The stables weren’t glamorous. Not by any stretch.

They were warm and full of straw and smelled like damp fur, wet hay, and magic. Tiny jars of glowing salves lined one wall. A trio of owlets blinked at her from the rafters.

“What’s that smell?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Bunyip pup got into the fermented moonfruit again. Threw up all night.”

Delilah laughed before she could stop herself.

Rollo grinned. “Glad to know I can still make you laugh.”

She arched a brow. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You smell like compost and regret.”

He clutched his chest dramatically. “Ouch.”

She rolled up her sleeves. “Show me what needs doing.”

They worked side by side for the better part of the morning.

Delilah helped clean the phoenix pup’s nest, using a light warming charm on the water while Rollo replaced the stones.

They fed the owlets together—him slicing tiny bits of enchanted meat, her casting a calming charm that made the fluffballs sigh contentedly.

Their hands bumped. More than once.

The air between them sparked—warm, buzzing. Like it used to.

Delilah tried not to notice. Failed spectacularly.

At one point, Rollo knelt beside a wounded thistle hare, gently brushing its thorny fur with a salve that glowed blue. Delilah watched the way his brow furrowed in concentration, how he whispered to the creature like it was sacred.

He hadn't just changed. He'd grown.

"Didn't know you were such a softie," she said, tossing him a fresh bandage.

Rollo caught it easily. "Guess you never stuck around long enough to find out."

Delilah's stomach flipped. She snapped back, "Not like you gave me much of a choice."

Low blow. But not unfair.

Rollo stiffened, but said nothing as they continued on.

She busied herself tying a fresh ribbon around a bundle of herbs, fingers tight.

"This place is good," she murmured after a while. "Better than I expected."

He looked up, one brow raised. "That supposed to be a compliment?"

"Take it before I change my mind."

He chuckled. "You're a menace."

"I get it from Wren."

That drew a real smile from him—slow, genuine. It made her chest ache with memories. What was wrong with her?

He set down the salve. "I know you've got your hands full. But if you ever want to stay on here, more permanent-like..."

Delilah paused.

“As of now, I’m here for Wren as long as she needs me,” she said. “But I’m just going to take it day by day.”

“That’s fair.”

They worked in silence for a bit longer. A comfortable quiet. The kind that used to stretch long into evenings before everything went sideways between them.

Delilah brushed dirt from her palms and stood. “I should head back. Wren’s due for another tonic and her spirit candle’s acting up again.”

Rollo nodded, standing too. “Thanks for the help.”

She gave a half-smile. “Thanks for not being a total ass.”

His grin widened. “High praise.”

She turned to leave, but paused at the door unable to help herself.

“Hey, Rollo?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t trust you.”

He blinked. “Okay...”

“But I want to.”



That shut him up.

Delilah walked out with the last word and the breeze behind her, the scent of pine and old feelings clinging to her coat.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

ROLLO

R ollo spent the afternoon pretending everything was fine.

He repaired a broken section of the chicken coop fencing.

Hauled in a fresh load of enchanted straw for the thistle hares.

Sprinkled anti-rot charm dust along the garden beds that had started to show signs of creeping blight.

All while doing his best not to replay every second Delilah had spent at the sanctuary that morning.

It didn't work.

Her laugh still echoed off the rafters, soft and surprised like it had snuck out before she could stop it. The way her fingers had brushed his, and how she hadn't yanked them away like touching him would burn her.

He'd been ready to lock that part of himself up and throw away the key. But now? Now she was here, with her wild hair and sharp tongue and bruised kind of softness—and the bear inside him had started pacing.

Restless. Alert.

Hopeful.

Which was dangerous.

Because hope was the first thing to rot when things went wrong.

By late afternoon, the sun dipped low, casting the trees in warm gold. He rubbed a hand across chin and muttered to no one, “Need a damn reset.”

And there was only one place in town he could think clearly.

Hazel Fairweather’s garden didn’t grow—it listened .

Which was saying something, considering it was the only place in Celestial Pines where the plants literally moved when you talked to them.

He walked the familiar path past the edge of the sanctuary and into the curve of the southern woods.

Hazel’s home looked like a fairy tale, forgetting it was supposed to end happily—moss covering the roof, flowers blooming directly from the walls, and an ever-present hum in the air like lullabies carried on the wind.

He knocked gently, twice.

No one answered, but the door creaked open anyway.

“Hazel?” he called, stepping into the twilight-laced sitting room that always smelled like sugarplums and mint.

“In the grove,” came the singsong reply from somewhere behind the house.

He followed the voice out through a crooked back door and into the garden that never

stayed the same shape twice.

Hazel Fairweather stood at the center of it all, barefoot and serene, tendrils of blooming lavender twisting through her silver-streaked curls. She turned slowly, her pale bark-brown skin glowing faintly in the shade of the oaks.

“Well, well. The bear comes out of his cave,” she said, eyes twinkling.

Rollo gave a sheepish shrug. “Didn’t know where else to go.”

“That’s usually when folks find their way here.”

Hazel walked to a moss-covered bench shaped like a crescent moon and patted the space beside her. “Come. Tell me what’s gnawing at your gut.”

He sat heavily, resting his elbows on his knees, watching the way the vines curled protectively around the base of Hazel’s skirts.

“It’s Delilah,” he said after a moment.

Hazel’s lips twitched. “Of course it is.”

“She’s back... working part-time at the sanctuary when she isn’t taking care of Wren. Said she doesn’t trust me but wants to.”

“Mmm.” Hazel plucked a violet from behind her ear and twirled it. “And how does that make your bear feel?”

“Unhinged,” Rollo admitted. “He’s pacing. Restless. Every time she walks by, it’s like I’m breathing again.”

Hazel's expression softened. "You never stopped loving her."

"I did everything to forget her," he muttered. "Thought I had. But one look and it was like... no time passed at all. Like my body never got the memo that she left."

Hazel laid a hand on his shoulder. It felt like being steadied by roots.

"And now you're scared," she said, not unkindly.

He nodded, jaw clenched.

She tilted her head, flowers blooming between the strands of her silver-touched curls. "Because loving her means letting her in again. And letting her in means risking the pain."

"And losing her again would wreck me."

Hazel nodded slowly, then looked at him like she saw not just the man but the boy he used to be—the one who had loved Delilah with everything he had, and still bolted when it got too big.

"But you didn't lose her, Rollo," she said gently. "You pushed her."

He flinched, just a little. But didn't deny it.

"She was yours," Hazel continued, voice steady. "Fated. Chosen by something older than blood and wiser than soul. But you ran from it. Didn't trust it. Didn't trust yourself."

"I wasn't ready," he muttered, shame threading through the words. "I thought if I claimed her, I'd lose myself—or worse, I'd lose her."

“So you broke her first,” Hazel said softly, not accusing—just truthful . “Hurt her before she could hurt you.”

He exhaled, rough and sharp. “I thought I had time. To figure it out. To grow into what she needed.”

“She didn’t ask you to be perfect, Rollo,” Hazel said. “She just wanted you to stay.”

“I didn’t know how,” he whispered.

Hazel gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Well, now you do.”

“I ruined it.”

“You delayed it,” Hazel corrected. “Not destroyed. Time ain’t always the enemy.”

The garden rustled softly around them. A few sunflowers turned toward Rollo like they were listening, leaning closer in the hush.

Hazel leaned closer herself, her voice dropping to a murmur. “But that’s not the only reason you’re here, is it?”

He hesitated, then said, “The forest’s off.”

Her face grew serious. “You feel it too?”

“It started small—animals restless, wards glitching. But the last few days... it’s worse. And the phoenix pup? He wouldn’t eat until Delilah came near.”

Hazel nodded once, slow and solemn. “The forest is stirring, Rollo. Old things waking up. Magic shifting. And your past...” she paused, fingers brushing petals that

hadn't bloomed a second ago, "Your past will test your future."

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

She didn't answer directly. "You ever seen trees cry?"

Rollo shook his head.

"You will. If you're not careful."

Silence fell again. He looked at the garden, the way it pulsed like a living heart. Even it was anxious. Even it knew something was unraveling beneath the surface.

"What should I do?" he asked, voice low.

Hazel's gaze was steady, unwavering. "Be brave enough to love her. And strong enough to protect more than just your heart this time."

He nodded slowly, rising from the bench.

Hazel smiled and tucked the violet into his shirt pocket. "For clarity," she said. "You're going to need it."

"Thanks," he said, voice rough.

As he turned to go, Hazel called softly after him, "And Rollo?"

He looked back, the weight of the past hanging between them like storm clouds.

"Delilah's not the only thing coming home," Hazel said, her eyes shadowed now. "Watch the shadows."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

### DELILAH

The pink moon rose like a silent warning over Celestial Pines.

Thick clouds rolled off the ridgeline in bruised streaks of violet and rust, parting just enough to reveal that heavy red disk hanging low over the woods like an eye half-lidded in judgment.

The Whispering Woods rustled with more than just wind—tonight, they murmured .

Not the usual sleepy kind of whisper either. This one sounded... awake. Watching.

Delilah stood at the edge of the clearing, breath misting in the cold air, hands clenched around her moonstone pendant as if it could ground her. Her bare feet sunk slightly into the mossy ground, and her chest ached with anticipation.

“You sure about this?” Wren asked, voice rough from too many coughing fits, but still steady. She leaned on her ashwood walking stick, her fox familiar curled around her neck like a scarf.

Delilah nodded. “If there’s something wrong with the woods, I need to feel it.”

Wren tilted her head, studying her with wise, tired eyes. “Feeling ain’t always safe, child. Especially under this moon with the way things have been happening. This moon feels all too close to a blood moon instead.”

“I can handle it,” Delilah said, more sure than she felt.



The clearing had been used for generations by witches of their bloodline.

It sat between three standing stones and a weeping alder with bark like scarred silver.

Tonight, she'd drawn her ritual circle in crushed rose salt and set a ring of candles, each one flickering with blue-white flame.

In the center lay her offering: lavender, juniper, and a piece of her own hair braided into a charm.

Delilah stepped into the circle and exhaled.

“Watch over me?” she asked, glancing at Wren.

Wren gave a faint smile. “Always.”

The moment Delilah dropped to her knees and pressed her palms into the dirt, the air shifted.

Cool and damp then hot.

She closed her eyes and whispered the invocation, ancient syllables her grandmother had taught her before she could spell her own name. Her magic pulsed through the words, golden and wild.

Earth beneath me, breath within me. Show me what's buried. Show me what breaks.

At first, the connection felt like it always had. Familiar. Deep. The woods opening up like an old friend willing to talk.

But then... something bucked.

Delilah gasped, her back arching as energy surged up her arms. The ground hummed . Not just with power—but protest.

“No, no,” she muttered. “Easy now...”

The roots beneath her fingers jerked, twisting. The dirt cracked open in spidering lines across the ritual circle. Wind screamed through the trees—not over them, through them.

“Delilah!” Wren shouted, already stepping forward.

But Delilah couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe.

The spirits were screaming.

She didn’t hear words—just anguish. Like the forest had been torn in places too deep to reach. Her vision blurred with crimson streaks, and her magic surged, then sputtered.

Vines shot up from the earth—long and thorned, snapping across the circle. One grazed her cheek, drawing a hot line of blood.

Delilah’s hands trembled. She tried to withdraw, pull back into herself—but it was like the woods had latched onto her.

Something cold slithered through her mind.

A presence.

Not forest. Not spirit. Not of Celestial Pines.

It watched her through the roots. Fed on her attempt to connect.

Delilah gasped, voice shaking. “There’s something else here... not rot. Not natural. It’s like—it’s like invasion .”

Wren’s cane clattered as she stepped closer, her voice taut with fear. “Delilah, come back. Cut the connection.”

But Delilah couldn’t stop. Her lips moved on their own. “It’s fighting me. Like it wants to stay hidden. Like it knows us , knows how to use our magic against us.”

The candles around her blew out all at once.

Darkness rushed in like a tide.

“If it spreads...” she rasped, “the town’s wards—Celestial Pines—it won’t be hidden. It won’t be safe.”

Her fingers reached for her pendant, breath shallow. “Wren... the forest isn’t just in pain... it’s under siege.”

Then the ground buckled beneath her knees.

And she collapsed.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

ROLLO

R ollo had always respected the silence of the woods. Respected its rhythm, its breath, its balance.

But that night—under the full Pink Moon—the stillness went sharp.

He was waist-deep in the underbrush beyond the sanctuary's boundary, foraging for wildheart root by lanternlight, when the pain hit him. Sudden. Deep. Right behind the ribs.

He staggered.

His hand clutched his chest like something had reached through his sternum and yanked.

Not pain exactly. Not physical. But tethered.

Delilah.

Her name echoed in his bones before he could stop it.

Then everything else—reason, caution, even the ache in his shoulder from hauling crates earlier—just fell away .

He dropped the basket of herbs. Let the lantern crash against a mossy stump. And ran.

The bear came fast—claws beneath skin, senses sharper than thought.

It took over like it always did when instinct called louder than logic. He didn't shift fully, not this time. Just let the strength bleed through, his limbs looser, faster, his breath stronger.

The Whispering Woods parted like they recognized him. Or maybe they didn't recognize who he was anymore.

But they led him. Straight to the clearing. And that's where he found her.

Wren knelt in the dirt, her shawl smeared with ash, face drawn and furious. Thistle paced in a tight circle around a body.

Delilah's body.

He hit his knees before his thoughts even caught up.

"What happened?" His voice cracked, raw and jagged.

"She went too deep," Wren said, voice shaking but steady. "Tried to read the forest under the full moon. Spirits screamed at her. Something in there fought back."

He looked at Delilah.

Still. Pale. A red welt along her jaw. And her lips—gods, they were too still.

"She spoke before she collapsed," Wren continued. "Said the forest is under siege. Not natural. Not rot. Something's moving in it like a sickness."

Rollo brushed the back of his hand against Delilah's cheek. "She's cold."

“Pulse is steady,” Wren said. “But she’s not waking.”

That did it. That cracked something.

Without another word, he slid his arms beneath her.

She was light and limp.

“Where are you taking her?” Wren asked, though she already knew.

“Home,” he said.

His.

The walk back to the sanctuary felt longer than it should’ve. Each step came with a whispered memory—Delilah humming under her breath, laughing at his clumsy attempts to bottle honey, scowling when he forgot to label the salves properly.

She didn’t belong limp like this. Not her.

“I got you,” he murmured, over and over. “You’re okay. You hear me? You’re okay.”

He hadn’t felt helpless in years. Not since the day he let her walk away.

And now, with her in his arms, the helplessness came back like a ghost with claws.

At the cabin, he shouldered the door open, nudging it shut with his foot. Laid her gently on the couch near the fire. Threw on every blanket he had. Lit candles without thinking.

She still didn’t stir.

“C’mon, Dee,” he whispered, kneeling beside her. “Don’t do this. Don’t make me wonder again what life’s like without you.”

The fire snapped. Her fingers twitched. And then, slowly— mercifully —her eyes fluttered open.

At first, just slivers of hazel. Then wider. Confused. Fuzzy.

“R-Rollo?” she croaked.

His breath left him all at once. “Hey there. Welcome back.”

She tried to sit up, wincing. “What?—?”

“Don’t move.” He eased her back gently. “You passed out. In the woods. Wren said the forest pushed back.”

Delilah closed her eyes. “It did. I— I felt something. Not a spirit. Not wild magic. It knew me.”

Rollo reached for a damp cloth and dabbed the scratch along her jaw.

“You scared the hell outta me,” he said quietly. “And Wren,” he quickly added.

“I scared myself,” she whispered. Then, softer, “But I had to try. Wren’s too weak. Someone has to figure out what’s poisoning the land.”

“You don’t have to do it alone.”

Their eyes locked.

The firelight made her skin glow like warm honey. Her hair, still messy from the wind, spilled across the couch like ivy. And her fingers curled into the blanket like she didn't know how to let herself be cared for.

Rollo reached out. Just brushed a piece of hair behind her ear. His hand lingered a second too long.

“You were always too stubborn for your own good,” he murmured.

She didn't pull away. But Rollo forced himself to.

He cleared his throat. “You can take my room tonight. Get some rest. I have some tea that will help you sleep and settle the nerves. I have some things that will help, you know where they are if you find yourself feeling any... pull again.”

Delilah stared at him a moment and nodded once with a small smile before getting up. “Thanks.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

DELILAH

The town hadn't changed.

Not really.

Flower boxes brimmed with wild pansies, and store signs swung with a rhythm only Celestial Pines seemed to understand.

But walking through it again, Delilah felt like a shadow version of herself—one stitched together from old heartache, half-healed grief, and a thin thread of growing hope she didn't quite trust.

It'd been two days since she'd collapsed in the woods.

Two days since she woke in Rollo's arms, safe but shaken.

She could still remember the way his fingers brushed the hair from her cheek, his voice low and raw like he'd clawed through his own ribs to speak to her. That kind of tenderness was dangerous.

So today, she needed normal. Or at least Celestial Pines' version of it.

And that meant coffee.

The Spellbound Sip stood like a warm beacon, the brass teapot windchime over the door dancing in the breeze. Delilah pushed open the door, and the familiar scent of

cinnamon and cloves wrapped around her like an old shawl.

“Back from the brink and already craving gossip?” Nico Voss called from behind the counter, grinning over the rim of a floral teacup. His midnight-blue lipstick matched the sparkle in his eyes. “Our girl’s got spunk.”

Delilah rolled her eyes. “Our girl needs caffeine and a day without unsolicited opinions.”

Junie Bell, clumsy as a colt and still trying to master enchanted espresso wands, spun toward her with wide eyes. “You didn’t die, right? ‘Cause Rollo looked like a whole bear stormed the woods after you fainted.”

Delilah blinked. “...Hi, Junie.”

“Hi! I made your mood tea already. It’s Lemon Mist. You’re radiating flirtation or panic—it’s hard to tell.”

Nico leaned in. “Personally, I think it’s both. But mostly panic. That’s a girl who’s been near Rollo Steele and lived to tell the tale.”

Delilah took the cup without comment, settling into the window seat with a view of the fog-draped pines. She sipped. The tea fizzed gently on her tongue—bright and citrusy with an edge.

She hated that it was accurate.

“Y’know,” Nico said, gliding over and plopping into the opposite chair, “he never stopped checking in on the apothecary. Always stopped by for herbs. Real quiet-like. Didn’t ask for you, but his eyes did.”

Delilah stared into her tea.

Junie, carrying a tray of enchanted almond croissants, added, “And Wren always pretended not to notice, but she left his order notes right where he could see your old handwriting.”

Delilah’s throat tightened. “Why are y’all telling me this?”

Nico tilted his head, tone softening. “Because you left like you’d been burned clean through. And if you’re back, really back, we figure you deserve the full weather report.”

“I’m not here for Rollo.”

“No, but you’re here. And he’s part of this town, same as you.”

Delilah didn’t answer.

The truth was, she’d left because of him. Rollo had broken her heart with quiet .

She’d been all in—young and wide-eyed and certain that the stars had stitched their souls together. She gave him everything. Her loyalty. Her laugh. Her secrets.

And he?

He pushed her away like he was scared of catching fire.

Said he wasn’t ready. Said fated mates were myths shifters clung to when they didn’t know how to build real relationships. Said love should come after logic.

She’d stood in the garden behind the apothecary and begged him to look her in the

eye and say it didn't mean anything. And he couldn't.

But he still left.

And she couldn't stay in a town where every corner smelled like memory.

So she packed her bags, left Wren a note, and boarded the midnight carriage to Salem.

"Some things," Nico said gently, "are worth forgiving."

Delilah shook her head. "And some things are worth remembering."

The bell over the door jingled again, and Delilah glanced up instinctively.

Not Rollo.

Just Cassian Drake, the vampire tavern keeper, humming a low tune and carrying a box of donated blood muffins.

"G'morning, darlings," he crooned, nodding to them.

Delilah watched the town move around her—people waving from across the street, enchanted bicycles floating past, a broomstick delivery witch zipping overhead.

Life kept turning in Celestial Pines, even when hearts stopped.

"I should go," she said, standing.

"Back to Wren's?" Nico asked.

Delilah nodded. “And the sanctuary.”

He raised a perfectly shaped brow. “You sure it’s not the bear and not the bunnies pulling you back?”

Delilah said nothing.

She stepped into the misty morning, the lemon mist still clinging to her lips like a dare.

Her heart softened—for a second. Then she remembered the garden. Remembered him pulling away from her touch like it burned. And the softness turned to stone again.

Rollo might’ve changed.

But she wasn’t ready to find out what that meant.

### ROLLO

The woods didn't whisper this morning. They hissed.

Rollo felt it the moment he crossed the outer border of the sanctuary—a tremor in the rootbed, a hum in the trees that sounded less like song and more like warning. The forest was unsettled. He'd hoped it was residual—leftover echo from Delilah's ritual—but this was fresh.

He moved quietly, boots soft on moss and frost-laced leaves, his senses tuned sharp.

Something was off. And he had a gut feeling he knew exactly what.

He followed the unnatural pull, weaving deeper into the Whispering Woods, past the old split-rock altar and into the stretch of hollowed yews where the light didn't touch. The further in he went, the more the air turned metallic—like blood and wet iron.

Then he saw him.

Garrick.

Leaning against a tree like he owned the land, half-shadowed by the twisted limbs above. Taller than Rollo remembered, leaner too—but with the same jagged grin that had once meant trouble and loyalty in equal measure.

Only now, it just meant trouble.

“Still got that bear gait,” Garrick said lazily, kicking off the trunk. “Heavy-footed. Predictable.”

Rollo’s fists curled at his sides. “Didn’t expect to see you slinking around Pines again.”

“You say that like I ever really left.”

“You were exiled.”

Garrick shrugged, his coat hanging off him like molted skin. It was dark, stained in places Rollo didn’t want to look at too long.

“I was abandoned ,” Garrick said. “Left to rot while you and the others kept playing family without me.”

“You attacked a Council Elder during a transformation cycle, Garrick,” Rollo snapped. “You lost control. Someone almost died.”

“She provoked me. You know how thin the edge gets in moon season.”

Rollo stared at him, jaw tight. “That was three years ago. You didn’t just lose your temper. You fed on corrupted magic. You let it in.”

Garrick’s eyes glinted—too bright, too wild. “Corruption’s just another flavor of truth, brother.”

Rollo bristled at the word.

They’d once been a clan. Practically raised shoulder to shoulder under the same mountain clan, swearing blood-oaths before they even knew what they meant.

Garrick had always walked closer to the line than most—but Rollo had never believed he'd cross it.

Until he did. Until he fed off it.

“Why are you here?” Rollo asked, voice low.

“Just checking on the old stomping grounds.” Garrick's grin turned sharp. “Heard your little witch-mate took a tumble in the woods.”

Rollo's body went rigid. “Leave Delilah out of this.”

Garrick chuckled. “Oh, she's very much in it, friend. The forest woke up the moment she came home. You feel it too, don't you? The pull?”

“She's none of your concern.”

“On the contrary.” Garrick stepped closer, his boots cracking dead leaves like bones. “She's the key to the roots. You think the Pact will protect her? It won't. That girl's too close to the pulse, and when it snaps?—”

Rollo lunged.

Grabbed the front of Garrick's coat and slammed him into the tree hard enough to make bark crack.

“I swear to every star in the Pact,” he growled, “if you come near her again?—”

“Or what?” Garrick hissed. “You'll finish what you didn't back then? You didn't stop me before. You couldn't.”



Their breaths tangled like frost in the cold air.

Then Garrick smiled—slow, deliberate.

“You can’t protect what’s already broken, Rollo.”

Rollo let go, shoving him back.

“I’m not who I was,” Rollo said, breath thick with restraint.

“No,” Garrick said, voice low and uncoiling like a serpent. “But maybe you should be.”

Rollo blinked, the words hitting harder than they should have.

Garrick leaned in, the gleam in his eyes like moonlight on a blade. “Back then, before all this peace-talk and sanctuary fluff—you knew how to fight. How to lead. You didn’t second-guess your instincts, and you didn’t tuck your claws in for people who didn’t understand what we are.”

“I grew up,” Rollo snapped.

“You got soft,” Garrick countered, voice sharp as bark peeling from rot. “You traded your spine for safety and called it growth. Look around, Rollo. That sanctuary? That witch? They’ve made you forget what it means to survive when the woods turn against us.”

Rollo clenched his jaw, fists trembling at his sides.

“I’m protecting what matters.”

“Then you better hope you still remember how to be the man who could.” Garrick gave a final crooked smile. “Because the forest doesn’t care about peace pacts or second chances. And when it calls for blood, soft won’t cut it.”

He turned and disappeared into the shadows, melting into the trees like he was part of them.

Rollo stood rooted to the spot, anger pounding within him.

Maybe you should be.

The words echoed long after the wind swallowed them.

He’d clawed his way out of that version of himself—the hot-tempered, iron-fisted boy who thought strength was loud and love was weakness. That Rollo had let Delilah slip through his fingers because he couldn’t bear the idea of being vulnerable.

And now? Garrick wanted to drag that version back into the light.

He had to tell someone. Hazel, maybe. Or the Council.

But not Delilah.

Not yet.

It wasn’t her concern anyway.

...Was it?

He shoved the thought down.

Turned back toward the sanctuary, boots heavier now, like the forest was clinging to him, trying to keep him in its dark.

When he got there, the scent of rosemary and morning bread greeted him. The cabin's hearth was lit, casting golden light against the fog still curling outside.

Delilah was already there.

She knelt beside the phoenix pup's enclosure, murmuring softly as she rearranged the warmed stones. Her hair was loose today, curling down her back, and she wore one of Wren's old aprons, pockets stuffed with herbs and gloves.

She looked like she belonged.

Like she'd never left.

Rollo stood in the doorway for a moment longer than he meant to.

Delilah glanced up. "Hey."

"Hey," he said, masking the catch in his voice.

"You're late."

"Got caught up gathering."

"Everything okay?"

He smiled. Forced it to his lips. "Yeah. Just the woods being moody again."

She watched him a beat longer, as if trying to read past the mask.

Then nodded.

“Breakfast is on the stove,” she said, standing. “And the pup ate twice. Probably thinks you’re slacking.”

He chuckled, stepping inside. “Good thing I’ve got backup now.”

Their eyes met again.

And for a second, everything else—Garrick, the woods, the warnings—faded into the soft thrum of something warmer.

But Rollo said nothing.

Not about the encounter. Not about the danger. Because for now, he just wanted one morning where the world didn’t crack beneath his feet.

DELILAH

The apothecary smelled different today.

Less like sage and lavender, and more like unease.

Delilah stood at the front counter, hands wrist-deep in a bowl of feverfew and powdered agate, stirring clockwise like Wren had taught her. The potion didn't respond like it usually did. Instead of glowing softly, it flickered—erratic and stubborn.

“Figures,” Delilah muttered, wiping her fingers on a cloth. “The magic’s got attitude now too.”

Behind her, Wren chuckled from her rocker near the hearth. She was wrapped in her thickest wool shawl, one hand curled around a mug of bone broth tea, the other lazily stroking Thistle’s ears. The fox’s eyes were slits of sleepy contentment.

“You’re stirring like you’re mad at the herbs,” Wren said, voice scratchy but amused.

“I am mad at them.”

Wren tilted her head. “Is it really the herbs you’re mad at, or is it Rollo again?”

Delilah stilled.

“I didn’t say it was Rollo.”

“You didn’t have to,” Wren replied, sipping her tea. “You’ve had that stormcloud between your brows since he carried you got back this morning.”

Delilah turned around, leaning back against the counter. No I haven’t.”

“Yes it is. Ever since he took care of you after you exhausted yourself, you’ve been hot and cold. You looked like death, and he looked like he’d wrestled a mountain bear to get you out of the woods and he did just that.”

She sighed. “That’s the problem.”

“What? That he cares?”

“That he still can .” Delilah pressed her hands against the cool wood counter. “I’m not sure I know how to let him. Not again.”

Wren gave her a long, quiet look, the kind that only someone who’s seen too much and still chooses kindness can give.

“You want to sit?”

Delilah hesitated, then crossed the room and dropped onto the cushioned bench beside her grandmother’s rocker. The fire crackled between them, casting flickering shadows across the shelves.

“It’s not just him,” she said, voice low. “It’s being back. It’s this place. The forest. The people looking at me like I’m some kind of prophecy wrapped in disappointment. And yeah—Rollo, too. All of it.”

Wren didn’t speak, just sipped her tea.

Delilah kept going.

“When I left, I thought I was doing the right thing. That if I stayed, I’d lose myself in this town, in what everyone expected of me. Especially with him. He looked at me like I was everything—and then like I was too much.”

“He was scared.”

“I know,” Delilah whispered. “And I was ready . I wanted everything. The magic, the mate bond, the future. And he shut down. Said fate was a cage, said love wasn’t something to be decided by the moon.”

“And now?” Wren asked.

Delilah stared into the flames. “Now I don’t know if I trust it. Any of it. I don’t want to be someone’s second choice because fate tied a knot they couldn’t wiggle out of.”

Wren reached out and took her hand, warm and soft and steady.

“Delilah Moonstone,” she said, “you are nobody’s second anything.”

Delilah’s eyes burned, but she blinked it back.

“Fated doesn’t mean forced,” Wren added. “It means found . Found in the mess. Found in the middle of a thousand other choices. Fate’s just a road sign, baby—it don’t drive the cart.”

Delilah managed a watery laugh. “That’s... surprisingly wise for someone who once enchanted my shampoo to smell like garlic after I borrowed your boots.”

“You never just borrowed my boots. You wore ‘em to a mud ritual.”

“They needed grounding!”

“You needed boundaries.”

They both laughed, and the tension cracked just enough to let warmth in.

Delilah leaned her head against Wren’s shoulder.

“I’m scared,” she said quietly. “Scared of opening that door again. Of getting wrapped up in him and forgetting how to be me.”

“That ain’t love’s fault, sugar. That’s what happens when you give yourself away instead of bringing yourself along.”

Delilah closed her eyes.

“I think I still love him,” she whispered.

Wren nodded slowly. “I think you never stopped. But love only works when both folks show up.”

Delilah nodded, her cheek pressing against the wool of Wren’s shawl.

A long silence passed. The fire popped, and the potion on the counter finally began to glow steady and true.

“You gonna tell him?” Wren asked.

“Not yet.”

“Good. Make him earn it.”



Delilah smiled.

That, she could do.

### ROLLO

The bell above Millie Grace's shop door gave its usual squeaky chirp as Rollo stepped inside, boots trailing the scent of pine and damp earth.

The shelves of Moonlit Mercantile were lined with all the things a person might need to keep a magical household running—charms to keep sour milk sweet, enchanted broom oil, and of course, a whole aisle of salves and warded bandages.

“Back again, Bear Boy?” Millie called from behind the counter, her silver hair pulled into a bun that looked more spell than style. She wore an apron embroidered with stitched crescent moons and the tiniest reading glasses perched on her nose.

“Need to restock,” Rollo said, lifting a hand in greeting. “The bunyip pup chewed through a bandage again. Thinks the gauze is a chew toy.”

Millie snorted. “Maybe it's cursed. That pup has more teeth than sense.”

Rollo moved through the aisles, grabbing what he needed: burn balm, healing poultices, gauze infused with calming runes. His shoulders ached from the weight of the week. From Garrick. From Delilah.

Especially Delilah.

Every time he saw her lately, something inside him cracked a little more open—like a shell that had never healed right. She was sunlight and salt, firm hands and flinty eyes, and being near her made the world feel a little less sharp.

He paid, tucked the supplies into his satchel, and stepped back outside into the cool morning air.

That's when he heard it.

A sound that didn't belong.

Not quite a growl, not quite wind—but alive . Heavy. Wet with power.

Rollo turned toward the park near the edge of the town square where Miss Pepper's class of eight-year-olds were gathered with clipboards and pocket wands, all lined up to sketch the saplings along the perimeter.

A few fae-born kids were chasing butterflies that shimmered blue, their laughter soft and high-pitched under the hush of the morning.

Then the wind snapped.

Not a breeze. A crack—like fabric tearing in the sky.

The trees groaned deep, like something inside them had twisted wrong. And the air—normally cool and pine-sweet near the woods—turned sour, like spoiled cider left too long in a copper pot.

Then came the shift.

That thick, humming pulse of wrongness that hit Rollo straight in the gut like a warning bell. Magic—yes—but not natural. Not of the woods. Twisted. Fed-on. Angry.

He dropped his satchel without a second thought.

“Shelter,” he muttered under his breath. Then louder—roaring like thunder across the green—“Back! Everyone get back!”

Miss Pepper turned mid-lecture, startled, her glasses slipping down her nose. She didn’t even get a full word out before the first root exploded from the earth.

Thick and gnarled like a centipede made of bark, it curled out of the dirt and snapped, flinging soil into the air. More followed. A whole knot of them erupted from beneath the saplings the children had been sketching, tearing through the garden like angry veins.

A shimmer—dark as oil and flickering violet—rippled beneath the grass, cutting straight toward the children.

One little girl tripped, her wand clattering from her hand as she fell.

Another screamed when a root cracked the pavement just feet from her boots.

Rollo didn’t think.

He ran.

Fast. Hard. Everything inside him going hot, his bear roaring awake like it had waited for this.

He reached them in seconds, skidding into a full stop in front of the children, spreading his arms wide like a wall of flesh and bone and fury.

The roots came fast.

He threw up his hands and growled—not a human sound, but something older,

something guttural and full of alpha heat. His palms sparked, and the protective glyphs tattooed on his forearms glowed gold. A shield shimmered to life just in time to deflect the first root.

It slammed into the barrier and recoiled with a shriek like splitting wood.

Miss Pepper was already grabbing children by the collar, shouting, “Inside! Go, go, go!”

The shimmer in the ground followed her words, surging again—slithering toward another child who’d frozen in panic.

Rollo scooped him up with one arm. “Hold on, kiddo.”

The boy clutched his shirt with tiny fingers, shaking.

Behind them, the woods wailed again, a chorus of snapping bark and moaning wind.

It wasn’t just a surge.

It was a message.

Rollo’s jaw clenched.

This wasn’t wild magic acting up.

This was Garrick.

He could feel it now. The thread of corrupted magic that ran under the earth like a rootworm. Slick. Slippery. It pulsed like something feeding.

That wasn't just wild energy back there.

That was guided .

Rollo stood slowly, breathing heavy.

Garrick's magic had sunk into the sacred earth. Into the pulse of the woods. And it was spreading.

He turned and headed toward the apothecary, urgency in his every step.

When he pushed open the door, the soft scent of lemon balm and rosemary greeted him. Wren was in her rocker, drowsing. Thistle opened one eye, yawned, and went back to sleep.

Delilah stood behind the counter, organizing bottles with quiet focus. She looked up, and her smile faltered the moment she saw his face.

"What happened?"

"There was a surge. Forest pushed toward the school field." His voice was low, steady, but his hands trembled slightly. "Kids are fine. Got them inside. But... it's getting worse."

Delilah rounded the counter, reaching for him without hesitation. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I think so. But the energy—it felt targeted. Not like the normal woodland shift."

She studied him. "What do you think caused it?"

Rollo hesitated. Just for a heartbeat.

Then he said, “I don’t know yet. But it wasn’t random. The surge had direction. It was like something reached through the earth and twisted it on purpose.”

Delilah stepped back just enough to give him space but didn’t pull away. “You felt it that strongly?”

He nodded, voice quieter now. “The roots weren’t just reacting. They were responding . And the energy... it was cold. Sharp. Like it didn’t belong to the woods at all.”

Her brow furrowed. “Do you think it’s some kind of magical sickness?”

“Maybe,” he lied. “But until we know more, I want to fortify the area. Ward it. At least protect the school line.”

Delilah didn’t hesitate. “What do you need from me?”

He looked at her, the firelight catching in her hazel eyes.

“I need your magic,” he said softly. “I need you . Your connection to the land—your pulse. You’re tuned to this place in a way I never was.”

She blinked, lips parting slightly at the honesty in his voice.

Then she nodded. “Alright.”

No resistance. No hesitation.

She turned and pulled her travel kit from the back shelf, her movements confident

and precise.

“I’ll prep the grounding spells,” she said. “You’ll handle the perimeter wards?”

“Yeah.”

They worked side-by-side for the next hour, candles flickering around them, the windows catching the amber edge of late afternoon light.

The world outside was spinning faster, darker. The woods were turning in on themselves. Whatever was coming—it was coming soon. But in that golden hour inside the apothecary, with herbs spread across the table and their magic weaving quiet threads through the air, Rollo allowed himself a breath.

One breath of peace.

He stole a glance at her—how the furrow in her brow smoothed when she focused, how her lips curled slightly when the incantation clicked just right.

He swallowed hard.

You can’t protect what’s already broken, Garrick had said.

Rollo’s jaw tensed.

No.

He’d find out what Garrick was doing—what he wanted—before it touched Delilah.

She didn’t need to carry that weight.



Not yet.

He'd protect her this time. Even if it meant keeping some things hidden.

### DELILAH

The smell of butter and garlic clung to Delilah's sleeves as she organized the shelf of glass vials, each one labeled in Wren's shaky but elegant script. The apothecary was quieter than usual—no potions bubbling, no spirit candles whispering from the corner altar.

Which made her suspicious.

Too quiet in Celestial Pines always meant someone was plotting something charming and ridiculous.

Her suspicion turned to certainty the moment the door jingled open and Rollo walked in.

He ducked slightly out of habit—he always did, even though the doorframe was wide enough—and carried with him that ever-present mix of pine bark and cinnamon. His flannel sleeves were rolled up, revealing the faint glimmer of the protective glyphs on his forearms.

“Morning,” he rumbled, warm and casual.

Wren, seated by the fire with her tea, barely looked up from her crochet. “You headed to the market?”

“Figured I'd stop by,” Rollo said. “Thought you might need something. I can pick it up while I'm out.”

Wren grinned and sipped her tea like she'd been waiting all morning for this.

“Oh, there's sure to be something , but my list's in Delilah's head,” she said sweetly. “You'll take her with you, won't you?”

Delilah turned slowly. “Excuse me?”

“You're already halfway dressed for town,” Wren said, not blinking. “Besides, I don't trust you to remember the difference between star thistle and crow root when they're bundled together.”

Rollo looked toward Delilah, lips tugging with amusement. “I can carry the baskets.”

She crossed her arms. “I am perfectly capable of shopping on my own, you know.”

“Then you'll have no trouble showing me how it's done,” he said, his eyes glinting.

Wren coughed—suspiciously close to a laugh.

Delilah narrowed her gaze as she walked over to her grandmother to grab her basket. “You planned this.”

Wren sipped her tea. “I'm old and wise and very tired. Humor me.”

The Everglen Market spilled across the clearing like a bouquet of chaos—woven tents, floating herb stands, charm weavers hawking their wares, and kids darting between aisles with paper cones of candied violets.

The sun was high and honey-warm, and the scent of woodsmoke mingled with fresh bread and sweetroot cider.

Delilah tried not to notice how naturally she and Rollo fell into rhythm—how their pace matched, how his fingers brushed hers when he steadied the basket without asking.

They moved through the crowd, checking stalls for ginger root, dried moonflower petals, and a specific violet-dusted candle Wren swore improved dream clarity.

She was just starting to relax when they turned a corner and walked straight into chaos.

A small booth run by the Nettle twins—a pair of mischievous witch siblings barely out of apprenticeship—had a crooked chalkboard sign that read:

“Try Our Lovers’ Knot Enchantment! Guaranteed to Strengthen Any Bond!”

Delilah froze mid-step. “Oh no,” she said under her breath. “Absolutely not.”

But Rollo had already turned toward the commotion, eyes catching on a pair of teens shuffling past, hands stuck palm-to-palm by a glowing gold thread and laughing awkwardly.

“Let me guess,” he said. “Charm gone rogue?”

Delilah narrowed her eyes at the nearest twin—likely Fenny, who had a history of charming frogs into people’s teapots.

“Don’t touch anything,” she hissed.

Rollo lifted his hands in surrender—but stepped too close to the edge of the tent.

That was all it took.

A leftover thread from one of the display charms uncoiled from the top of the booth and snapped to life, zooming through the air like it recognized them.

Delilah felt it before she saw it.

The pulse of magic hit her palm with a sudden heat , and a second later, a loop of gold light wrapped around her wrist—and Rollo's.

“Rollo!”

He looked down in time to see the enchanted thread tighten between them.

Their hands were yanked together, palms pressing, fingers curling instinctively to catch the connection.

Delilah yelped. “Are you serious?!”

Rollo, eyes wide, gave a tug.

So did she.

The golden knot pulsed—then shimmered brighter and tightened .

They both froze.

“Oh,” said one of the twins, blinking. “Oops.”

“ Oops? ” Delilah snapped.

“It's only temporary,” the other offered. “Just until dusk. Promise. It's a harmony loop! It only binds people who?—”

“Finish that sentence,” Delilah growled, “and I will hex your eyebrows off.”

Fenny winced. “We really should’ve warded the display better...”

“Unbelievable,” she muttered.

Rollo looked at their joined hands and had the audacity to grin. “Well. Could be worse.”

She glared at him. “How?”

“We could be stuck at the outhouse.”

She elbowed him, and he laughed—but made no move to free his hand.

“Guess we’re bonded,” he said far too happily.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

She exhaled, slow. Tried to pull away again. Failed

They spent the rest of the day doing what they'd planned to do—just significantly closer than expected.

At the bakery stand, Delilah tried to hand over coins while Rollo awkwardly balanced the basket in their joined hands.

At the candle booth, she insisted on testing each scent, and Rollo had to sniff with her wrist pressed against his.

At one point, a crow from the wax paper stall squawked at them from a perch and said, “Awfully cozy,” in a raspy voice that made Delilah’s face go pink.

“You like this,” she accused as they shared a plate of seedcake near the musician’s circle.

“I’m not complaining,” Rollo admitted, tearing the cake in half and handing her the bigger piece. “I mean... you haven’t yelled at me once in three hours. That’s a record.”

“Because I can’t storm off. Not the same.”

He leaned a little closer. “So what you’re saying is, we should’ve been magically tied together from the beginning.”

She stared at him, lips twitching.

“You’re lucky your bear’s cute.”

They both laughed.

And for a heartbeat—longer than it should’ve been—it felt like nothing had changed. Like they were just two people who never got hurt, never said the wrong things, never left.

The golden cord between them pulsed, warm.

And Delilah realized with a rush of panic how easy it was to slip back in.

ROLLO

They left the Everglen Market just as the sky began to stain with lavender and gold, the light slanting low between the trees like it was trying to hold onto the day.

Rollo didn't rush.

He didn't want to.

Delilah walked beside him, her hand still tangled in his. The golden loop of the Lovers' Knot had gone dim, the shimmer faded to a faint warmth that pulsed beneath their palms. But neither of them spoke about it. Neither had tugged free. Maybe neither wanted to.

Their basket, now full with dream candles, dried violet bundles, and three types of tea Wren hadn't asked for but needed, swung gently from Rollo's free hand.

"You got quiet," Delilah said, breaking the silence.

"I'm always quiet."

"You're usually quiet. This is... suspiciously introspective."

He shot her a side-glance. "Maybe I'm just enjoying the moment."

She arched a brow. "You? Enjoying being roped into a full-day magical hand-holding adventure with your ex?"



“Ex?” he echoed, pretending to wince. “Cold.”

“You dumped me, Steele.”

“I panicked.”

“You ran. ”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck with the hand not bound to hers. “Yeah. I did. Doesn’t mean I liked it. OR that I was right to do it.”

She looked at him then—really looked—and something flickered in her eyes. Not quite forgiveness. But the soft glint of understanding. Maybe even curiosity.

“You’re different now,” she murmured.

He shrugged. “So are you.”

They turned onto the wooded path that curved toward her side of town, the ground scattered with late spring petals and the whisper of wind brushing through the canopy overhead. It was quiet here. Sacred.

She didn’t pull her hand away.

Neither did he.

“Remember the first time we walked this way?” she asked, voice low.

“How could I forget?” he smiled. “You tripped over your own skirt trying to impress me.”

“I was trying to impress Hazel . When the council elder is watching”

“You fell flat on your?—”

“Finish that sentence and I swear I will charm a vine to trip you. ”

He laughed, and she did too. Really laughed. The sound curled through the trees like music. And for a moment, it felt like the past hadn’t fractured them at all. Like it had always been leading back to this.

They reached the old footbridge near her apothecary, where the moss grew thick between the planks. Rollo paused there, soaking in the soft glow of evening as it slid down her cheekbones, as her curls caught the light like ivy brushed with copper.

The basket shifted suddenly—one of the glass jars inside wobbling.

Instinctively, they both reached to steady it.

And in that moment, the tether broke .

It didn’t snap. It melted , like sugar dissolving into tea, a faint shimmer that faded so gently they didn’t notice at first.

Delilah blinked, realizing it.

So did Rollo.

“I guess... that’s over,” she said softly, not moving her hand any further.

“Is it?”

She glanced up at him.

And then Rollo leaned in. Slowly. Deliberately.

The space between them shrank, air thick with unspoken things and sweet, lazy twilight. His breath brushed her lips, and she didn't pull back. Her eyes fluttered, but didn't close. She didn't move.

And he took that as permission.

He closed the gap. His lips met hers, tentative at first. Then deeper, more sure.

He went to pull back, afraid of getting slapped, but then he felt Delilah lean in as well, parting her lips. Almost welcoming him.

And just as the kiss settled into something real, he felt Delilah's hand hard on his chest.

DELILAH

Delilah's breath hitched.

For a moment, just a moment, everything inside her said yes—to the warmth of Rollo's mouth, to the hand cradling her waist, to the quiet surrender she felt blooming in her chest like a long-buried seed finally touching light.

Then she remembered everything.

How it had felt to watch him walk away eight years ago, her palms still tingling with the magic that never had a chance to settle. The way the silence between them had grown teeth. How she'd been left loving someone who didn't know how to stay.

She pressed her hand flat to his chest, hard.

Rollo pulled back instantly, his eyes almost glowing.

“Delilah—”

But she was already stepping back.

She didn't say anything. Couldn't.

Her lips still burned, but her voice had turned to dust.

With shaking fingers, she turned, grabbed the now-wobbly basket, and walked away.

Fast.

By the time she reached the apothecary, the sun had dipped below the hills, and the air was damp with the scent of moss and nightfall.

Inside, everything was still. Wren had left a light spell glowing in the front window, its soft amber hue flickering like fireflies. Thistle blinked at her from his perch atop the hearth, but didn't move.

She nudged the door shut with her hip and dropped the basket on the counter with a loud thud of irritation.

“Stupid,” she muttered to herself. “Stupid.”

She didn't bother lighting more lamps. Darkness felt easier right now. Like she could hide in it, if just for a while.

Wren was asleep in her rocker, breathing deep and steady beneath the quilt Delilah had woven her last Solstice. Thank the moon for that. She didn't think she could stomach a knowing look or gentle, smug “I told you so.”

The silence was a mercy.

She began unpacking the basket, setting aside jars of moonflower resin, little bags of wild ginger, the enchanted dream candles Wren had specifically not asked for. Her hands moved on autopilot, her heart still thudding like a second heartbeat just behind her ribs.

What was she doing?

One kiss and her knees had gone soft. One moment and she'd let her guard drop like

a loose thread unraveling all her carefully patched-up resolve.

“He still makes you feel like you’re twenty again,” she whispered to herself bitterly. “And you hated being twenty.”

A knock sounded at the door, soft but firm.

Delilah froze.

“Nope,” she said aloud, already walking to the back. “Nope, nope?—”

Another knock.

She turned, groaning under her breath. “Rollo, if you are standing out there like some pine-scented apology, I swear—” She pulled open the door. And blinked.

Not Rollo.

Hazel Fairweather.

Delilah instinctively straightened her spine.

Hazel was the kind of woman you couldn’t slouch around, even when she didn’t say a word. Elder of the town council. Seer. Dryad-blooded. She didn’t walk so much as arrive —tall, willowy, her hair a wild crown of braids threaded with living vines that shifted with the breeze.

And tonight, those vines were more thorns.

Never a good sign.

“Can I come in?” Hazel asked, voice soft and knowing but yet still cold.

Delilah stepped aside.

Hazel swept in like a storm wearing velvet, her long cloak trailing tiny purple blossoms that shimmered faintly in the dim shop light.

Hazel had never warmed up to Delilah, though Delilah had also left at the age most got to know Hazel.

“You look like someone who kissed an old flame and then set herself on fire,” Hazel said without missing a beat.

Delilah’s cheeks flamed. “Do all dryads read minds now?”

Hazel smiled. “Don’t need to. You’re practically glowing.”

“Pretty sure that’s residual embarrassment.”

Hazel wandered to the center of the room, fingertips brushing over a hanging satchel of dried lemon balm. The air thickened.

“I came because the forest sent me,” she said finally.

Delilah stilled. “What do you mean?”

Hazel turned, vines curling gently down her arms. “There’s a storm brewing, Delilah Moonstone. And it isn’t just twisted roots or wayward rogue magic. It’s deeper. Older.”

Delilah’s throat went dry. “I’ve felt it. I just don’t know what it wants. ”

Hazel walked closer, stopping just a few feet away. Her eyes were green—not hazel, ironically—but the kind of green that came from untouched groves and forgotten glades. She smelled like cedar and something wild.

“The forest showed me a vision,” she said. “Of two fates entwined.”

Delilah’s heart skipped. “Mine?”

Hazel nodded. “Yours. And Rollo’s.”

Delilah swallowed. “What kind of vision?”

Hazel reached out, gently touched the back of Delilah’s hand. Her skin was warm, almost humming.

“He will mark you,” Hazel whispered. “Or the woods will claim you both.”

Delilah sucked in a breath. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know yet,” Hazel said, voice uncharacteristically unsure. “The threads are tangled. But the choice lies in the binding.”

Delilah shook her head, stepping back. “No. I can’t just... fall into this because the forest says so.”

“Fated doesn’t mean forced, ” Hazel said, repeating Wren’s words. “It means found . But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Or that it’s safe.”

Delilah glanced at the door, heart twisting.

Hazel tilted her head. “You still care about him.”



“That’s the problem,” Delilah whispered.

Hazel gave her hand one last squeeze. “Then you best figure out what you’re willing to risk.”

Then she turned and left, her vines trailing petals in her wake.

Delilah stood there long after the door clicked shut, Hazel’s words blooming like dread in her chest.

He will mark you, or the woods will claim you both.

And somehow, she didn’t know which scared her more.

### ROLLO

The dream came just before dawn.

Rollo stood barefoot in the heart of the Whispering Woods, shirtless beneath a bruised sky thick with storm and the lingering perfume of wildflower.

The moon hung low and swollen, casting its silver light down his back like spilled water, catching on the old scars along his shoulder blades, painting him in reverence.

The forest wasn't silent—it hummed, alive and ancient, its breath stirring the moss beneath his feet and the ferns that curled protectively along the clearing's edge. Around him, the trees leaned in—not menacing, but reverent. Witnesses.

And then Delilah stepped into the clearing.

Barefoot, hair loose, lips parted like she'd just whispered a spell. Her skin glowed gold beneath the flicker of fireflies, every inch of her bathed in moonlight like the forest had crowned her queen.

She didn't speak.

The space between them bent, warm and magnetic.

He felt her pull like the tide—deep, inevitable. And the bear inside him rose, sensing her nearness, pacing just beneath the surface of his skin. It wasn't just desire—it was recognition. Claim. Something older than time itself.

She stepped closer, her eyes catching the moonlight, hazel turning to molten amber. Her fingertips brushed his chest, slow and deliberate, and he swore he felt her magic reach into his bones and settle there.

He reached for her then, his palms sliding over the gentle flare of her hips, thumbs brushing the dip of her waist. The earth throbbed under their feet. Roots began to rise from the soil—slow and pulsing—not to bind, but to bear witness . They curled gently around their ankles, humming with power.

Delilah tilted her head, exposing her throat.

Trust. Submission. Not weakness— choice.

He leaned in, breath hot against her neck, lips brushing her skin just below her ear. Her hands slid up his back, fingernails dragging lightly across his shoulder blades, setting fire to every inch of him.

“Say it,” he whispered against her pulse.

She didn’t.

But she arched into him, and it was enough.

He dipped lower, kissing the slope of her shoulder, the hollow between her collarbones. Her breath hitched, and the roots pulsed harder, heat rising in waves from the ground as if the very forest wanted them joined.

He dropped to his knees in the moss, hands cradling her hips, face pressed to the soft flesh just above the curve of her hip. Right where the mark would go.

Where she’d wear him.

His magic. His name. His soul.

His bear growled low, pleased, possessive.

He opened his mouth and his teeth grazed her skin.

She shivered. And then her voice—clear, sad, steady—cut through the fog of hunger.

“Rollo... if you take me, you can’t leave. And neither can I.”

The forest stilled. Even the roots paused, breath held.

Rollo looked up at her, and in her eyes was every year they’d spent apart. Every wound, every scar, every word left unsaid. And love. Still there. Raw and trembling.

He parted his lips to speak. To promise to stay. But the world split with a terrifying shudder.

He woke with a gasp, tangled in sweat-damp sheets, lungs heaving like he’d run for miles.

The morning light bled through the cabin window, weak and unsteady. His hands curled into fists against the mattress. His chest ached with the weight of what hadn’t happened—what almost had.

And deep inside, the bear growled once more.

The sun hadn’t cleared the ridge yet, but the sky had lightened to that soft pink-blue hush that always came before the birds stirred. The sanctuary cabin was still wrapped in shadows, the animals quiet in their nests and stalls, even the phoenix pup tucked tight in his nest of warmed stones.

Rollo sat up, scrubbed a hand over his face, and breathed out hard.

The dream lingered.

Her skin. Her voice. The need.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, bare feet hitting the wood with a muted thud. Every muscle in him tensed. The fire from the dream hadn't gone—it still coiled low in his gut, thick with guilt and hunger.

Because he wanted it to be real.

He wanted her.

Not just the kiss they shared. Not just the way her fingers curled naturally in his. But all of her—laughing, angry, stubborn, vulnerable. He wanted to claim her not like an animal but like a man who knew, with every breath, that she was his match in every damn way that counted.

But she had pulled away.

And after that... he hadn't expected to see her today. Maybe not again.

He'd ruined it once. Maybe she'd decided not to give him the chance to ruin it again.

The thought hollowed something in his chest.

He stepped outside into the crisp morning, air damp with dew and the scent of green things waking.

That's when he saw it.

Near the sanctuary gate, nailed into the outer wooden post, was a totem. Twisted bone. Black-thread binding. A hunk of petrified root in the shape of a bear's claw. The air around it sizzled faintly, crackling with residual magic.

Garrick.

The name thundered through Rollo's head as he approached.

A warning. A claim. A threat.

Rage flared fast and white-hot. He tore the totem down with one hand, the bones snapping in his grip. The black-thread came alive, snaking up his wrist like it wanted to bite.

He growled, letting the bear rise just enough to glow gold beneath his skin.

"Not here," he snarled.

He crushed the totem beneath his heel, grinding it into the dirt until nothing but ash and splinters remained.

The scent of corrupted magic lingered, oily and wrong.

Rollo stood along the borders of the sanctuary, chest heaving, jaw clenched so tight it ached.

The woods were no longer whispering. They were watching. And Garrick had crossed a line.

You can't protect what's already broken, Garrick had said.

Rollo stared into the trees.

“Watch me,” he growled. Then turned back toward the cabin.

Delilah wasn't due for another hour, if she was coming at all. And a selfish part of him hoped she would. That the kiss hadn't scared her away completely.

But he wouldn't blame her if it had.

He ran a hand through his hair and started boiling water for the phoenix pup's morning broth, trying to push the dream, the totem, and the taste of her kiss out of his head.

But the forest wasn't quiet anymore.

And neither was his heart.

### DELILAH

The morning sun cut across the apothecary's wooden floor in long, soft beams, dust motes drifting in their wake like lazy fireflies. Delilah stood by the window with her tea—cool now, forgotten—and stared out at the path that led toward the sanctuary.

She hadn't slept. Not really.

Every time she closed her eyes, she felt Rollo's breath on her lips, remembered the way he tasted like cinnamon and heartbreak. The kiss still tingled on her mouth like it had stitched itself into her skin.

And Hazel's words echoed louder than any dream.

He will mark you, or the woods will claim you both.

Delilah had half a mind to stay put. Let the day pass without a single step in his direction. Let silence make things simpler.

But something tugged at her—deep and unrelenting. A pull she couldn't name. Maybe it was the bond. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was the part of her that still, after everything, wanted .

She didn't even realize she was moving until she was halfway down the path, wind tugging at her shawl and the scent of the forest growing sharper with every step.

The sanctuary was quiet when she arrived.



No sign of Rollo out front, but the door was cracked open, as if expecting her. The phoenix pup chirped from his pen and then promptly turned back into his nest, unimpressed by her presence.

She stepped inside, heart thudding against her ribs.

“Rollo?”

His voice came from the back, muffled. “Greenhouse.”

Of course.

She hesitated, then pushed through the side door into the greenhouse.

The moment she stepped in, warmth wrapped around her like a hug. The air smelled of honeysuckle, damp soil, and something distinctly green. The enchanted glass panels let in the sun in soft ribbons, and the vines above rustled faintly, as if whispering secrets between themselves.

He stood near the back, elbow-deep in a planter of moonleaf, shirt sleeves rolled up, dirt smudged across his forearm and the edge of his jaw.

He looked up—and froze.

“Didn’t think you’d come.”

“I almost didn’t,” she admitted, stepping forward. “Thought about hiding behind jars and letting the awkwardness take care of itself.”

He wiped his hands on a cloth and set it aside, eyes never leaving hers. “I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

They stared at each other for a moment. The only sound was the soft rustle of the wind through the herbs and the creak of old wood adjusting in the heat.

Delilah's throat was dry. "About yesterday?—"

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to push you. The kiss... I wasn't trying to corner you into anything."

She blinked, startled by the honesty.

"I meant it," he added. "But I didn't expect it."

Delilah stepped closer, arms wrapped around her middle. "That's the problem, Rollo. I did expect it. I've expected it for years. And I kept hoping you'd catch up."

He looked like she'd struck him.

She softened. Just a little.

"I'm not angry," she said, voice quieter. "But I am scared. Hazel came by last night."

That got his attention. "What did she say?"

Delilah's eyes dropped to the stone path beneath their feet. "That the forest is shifting. That something old is coming. And... that you'd either mark me, or the woods would take us both."

Silence. Long. Dense.

Then, in a voice rougher than she'd ever heard from him, Rollo asked, "And what do you want?"

Her eyes snapped back to his.

“What?”

“I know what Hazel said. I know what fate wants. But you , Delilah—what do you want?”

She swallowed. Her hands trembled, so she balled them into fists.

“I want... not to be afraid,” she said. “I want to know that if I give you all of me, you won’t disappear again. And that the reason you want me is because of me, not a bond or fate type of thing.”

Rollo crossed the space between them in two strides.

“It’s not. And I won’t,” he said, voice low and fierce. “Not again.”

Delilah’s heart pounded. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can.” He stepped closer. “Because I’ve already made the choice. Every day since you came back, I’ve chosen you. I just haven’t said it out loud. Hell, the moment you left, I knew I was wrong.”

He raised a hand, cupped her cheek.

Delilah leaned into it without a second thought.

“You’ve always had me,” he said, thumb brushing beneath her eye. “Even when I didn’t deserve it.”

She closed the space between them, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him in

like gravity itself demanded it.

Their mouths met.

This kiss wasn't like the one at the bridge.

This one burned.

It demanded.

She melted against him, chest to chest, as his arms wrapped around her. One hand tangled in her hair, pulling gently, the other held her firm against him like he could keep the world from falling apart if he just anchored them together.

The air shifted.

Flowers bloomed—literally.

Around them, petals opened with a soft rustle. Moonvines curled toward the sky, vines trembled, blossoms glowed faintly in the greenhouse's enchanted light. The scent of honeysuckle, damp moss, and some new floral note she couldn't name swirled like incense.

"I think your greenhouse is reacting," she whispered between kisses.

He grinned against her mouth, eyes gleaming. "You're the one with magic in her blood."

She laughed breathlessly, tugging his shirt over his head. Her fingers ran down the broad expanse of his chest, calloused palms meeting warm, wild skin. "You started it."

“Then I’ll finish it.”

He kissed her again, harder this time, and began to undress her slowly.

Reverently. Her dress slipped from her shoulders, caught at her hips before pooling at her feet.

He kissed her collarbone, then the top of her breast, then lower, and every brush of his lips coaxed a memory, every touch an ache she’d buried.

Delilah gasped as he dropped to his knees before her, strong hands gripping her hips as he looked up through those dark lashes and said, “Lay down for me, sweetheart.”

She did.

The moss beneath her was soft, cool, and kissed with sunlight. He hovered above her for a beat, just looking.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he murmured. “Golden and soft and all mine.”

His hands slid up her thighs, spreading them. His breath hit her pussy before his mouth did, hot and wanting. She felt the tremble run through her as he licked her slowly, tongue gliding through her folds like he was savoring every inch.

“Oh gods—Rollo,” she moaned, fingers tangling in his thick hair.

He groaned low against her, the vibration deep and primal. “Fuck, you taste like honey and fire.”

He licked her clit, slow and rhythmic, then sucked it between his lips. Her hips bucked. He didn’t stop. Just pinned her down gently and kept eating her like he

needed it to live. Her climax built fast, already too close from how badly she'd needed him.

“Right there—please—Rollo?—”

Her moan shattered into a sob as she came, thighs clenching around his head, cunt pulsing against his tongue.

She barely had time to catch her breath before he stood and scooped her into his arms.

“I’m not done,” he said, voice husky with need, and carried her straight into the bedroom.

She was still shaking, boneless and soaked with release, but there was more in her—more fire, more ache. And from the way his cock jutted heavy and thick between them, Rollo was just getting started.

He set her down on the bed like she was something sacred, then stripped off what little he still wore.

Gods.

Rollo was carved from hunger and devotion. Broad chest dusted with dark hair, his cock thick and flushed, bobbing slightly with each step as he climbed onto the bed and knelt between her legs.

Delilah spread for him, unabashed.

“Your turn,” she said, breathless. “I want you to feel how much I missed you.”

He reached down and ran his fingers through her folds, groaning at the wet heat.

“Fuck, Delilah—you’re dripping for me.”

“Then do something about it.”

He grinned—feral, hungry—and pressed the tip of his cock to her entrance. Slowly, he pushed inside.

The stretch made her gasp. He was thick. She felt every inch, every ridge of his cock as he sank deeper.

“Gods,” she breathed. “You’re... so deep?—”

“Feel that?” he rasped, jaw clenched. “That’s me inside you, where I belong.”

Her walls gripped him, fluttering around him, slick and hot and pulsing.

“You’re squeezing me like a vice,” he groaned, bracing himself over her. “You feel like fucking heaven.”

He began to thrust—slow, deep strokes that dragged his cock along her walls, brushing her clit with every grind of his hips.

She clawed at his back, moaning shamelessly. “Don’t stop—don’t you fucking stop?—”

“I’m not stopping till you come on my cock,” he growled. “Till I feel this pussy clench and milk me dry.”

His thrusts got harder, faster, their bodies slapping together in time with every pant

and curse. The room filled with the sounds of sex—wet, slick, raw.

Her orgasm hit like a tidal wave.

She screamed his name, back arching, body locking around him. Her cunt clenched so hard he nearly lost it right then.

“Delilah—fuck?—”

He buried himself deep and came with a shuddering groan, cock pulsing, spilling inside her as he collapsed against her chest, both of them gasping.

But it wasn’t over.

Not for them.

She dragged her fingers down his back, whispering, “Again.”

He lifted his head, eyes dark with need. “You sure?”

“I can’t get enough of you.”

His cock twitched inside her, still half-hard, still thick.

“Then ride me,” he said, flipping them so she was straddling his hips. “I wanna watch you come undone.”

And she did.

Again.



And again.

Until the sun dipped lower through the enchanted glass, and the only sounds left were whispered vows, soft moans, and the rustle of sheets where love had rooted itself deep.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:38 am*

ROLLO

The bed was warm. And empty.

Rollo blinked into the soft gold light of morning, his arm reaching instinctively to the space where Delilah should've been—but found only the soft indent of her shape and the faintest trace of her scent: lavender and something sweet.

Panic struck like lightning to the chest.

He sat up, sheets tangled around his waist, breath caught somewhere between a growl and a question.

She was gone.

After everything —after the greenhouse, after the bond that felt like it had been stitched into his bones—the entire night and day they spent tangled with each other... she'd left?

He ran a hand through his hair, stood, shoved on jeans and the flannel from the chair, barely registering the chill that clung to the morning air seeping through the cracked window.

The sanctuary was quiet.

He got a hint of something suddenly, mint and willowbark. A trace of yarrow. He followed the scent out back. And there she was.

Curled on the stone bench beneath the arbor, copper kettle perched on the wrought iron brazier, steam curling into the morning like soft ribbon.

Her hair was twisted up into a knot, loose strands catching the light like chestnut silk.

Her hands moved with slow precision as she stirred the tonic, lips pressed tight in thought.

Relief hit him so hard his knees nearly buckled. But he didn't say anything at first. Just watched her, happy she hadn't taken off.

Delilah looked up before he spoke, like she felt him before she saw him.

Her expression softened instantly.

"You okay?" she asked.

He huffed. "Could ask you the same."

She gave a half-smile. "I couldn't sleep. Figured I'd make use of it."

He moved toward her slowly, careful, like he didn't want to startle the moment.

"You left."

She winced, just barely. "Not left left. Just... needed a second."

Rollo didn't sit right away. He watched her stir, watched the way the wind caught the ends of her shawl, how the skin of her neck flushed when she was caught in emotion but trying to look calm.

“Was it too much?” he asked softly.

She stilled. Then shook her head. “No. That’s the thing. It wasn’t too much. It was—” She bit her lip. “It was exactly what I wanted. And that’s what scared me.”

He sat beside her then, close but not crowding, their knees brushing as the kettle bubbled quietly beside them.

“I’m afraid,” she said, voice raw. “Of giving in. Of building something with you again and waking up alone all over again. I know I said that before, but it still is something I can’t just ignore.”

Rollo didn’t flinch. He didn’t look away.

He reached for her hand, calloused fingers wrapping around hers with that slow, deliberate warmth he never forced.

“I was scared too,” he said. “Back then. You were everything. Too much. Too real. I thought if I said it out loud—if I called it fate—then I’d have to be someone who was worthy of it.”

She turned to him, brows drawn. “You were worthy.”

“I didn’t believe it,” he said honestly. “I was a half-grown mess of muscle and impulse.” He thought momentarily of how he could have ended up like Garrick. “You had dreams, purpose. I had... a temper and a family name that carried more shadow than pride.”

Delilah’s shoulders dropped a fraction, like something inside her had let go just a little.

“And now?” she asked, barely more than a whisper.

“Now I’m still a mess,” he said, smiling slightly. “But I know what I want. And I know what I’m willing to fight for.”

She let his words settle.

The kettle hissed.

Delilah looked down at their hands.

“I’ve spent so long pretending I didn’t want this,” she said. “Trying to bury it under bitterness and herbs and reasons why it couldn’t work.”

“I know.”

“But last night...” Her voice cracked.

He lifted her chin with two fingers, gently.

“Last night,” he murmured, “was only the beginning.”

She blinked, lashes wet but proud. “I still don’t trust fate,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to,” he said. “Just trust me.”

For a long, suspended moment, they just breathed—together. Then Delilah exhaled shakily and leaned her head against his shoulder.

In that moment, Rollo let himself believe that maybe the forest wasn’t the only thing worth saving.

### DELILAH

The day had mellowed into golden hush by the time Delilah had gotten back to the store. She had just finished an order and was restocking when Hazel knocked on the apothecary door, her presence as gentle as a breeze through tall grass—but just as stirring.

Delilah had just finished bottling a fresh batch of feverroot syrup, sleeves rolled up, hair messily pinned atop her head with a twig she hadn't realized she'd stuck there during her mixing frenzy. Thistle had claimed the sunny spot by the window, twitching his ears at every little rustle outside.

The knock wasn't loud, but it felt important.

"Come in," Delilah called, wiping her hands on her apron.

Hazel stepped inside, her silhouette framed by late-day light, and Delilah's breath ceased when she saw what she was carrying.

Nestled in her arms like a wilting bundle of vines, was a child. No— not a child. A dryad. Young, maybe a decade or two in age, though their kind didn't age like others. The little one's skin had gone pale, bark-gray instead of mossy brown, and faint white petals drooped from their tangled hair.

"She's been touched by what's sickening the forest," Hazel said, voice even, though a sliver of worry cut through the calm. "She won't take root. Refuses water. The others are afraid."

Delilah's heart lurched.

"Bring her here." Her tone was brisk, but her fingers trembled as she cleared the long table near the hearth. "Lay her down gently. I'll do what I can."

Hazel obeyed without ceremony, setting the dryad down like she weighed nothing, brushing her fingers through the child's limp hair. She whispered soft words in a language older than any spellbook, the syllables curling like roots through the air.

Delilah knelt beside them, her hand hovering just above the dryad's sternum. Her magic buzzed low under her skin, uncertain.

The little dryad's pulse was faint. Her connection to the land—muted.

It was like someone had poured rot into the roots of a flower and locked the sun away.

Delilah drew a slow breath and pulled her satchel to her side.

She began with the base—white ash for purification, violet sage for calming, honey-thistle for strength. Each herb ground carefully, whispered over, sung to. She added a single moonvine petal—rare, potent—and let it dissolve into the salve as it turned from pale blue to glowing silver.

"She's not just fading," Delilah murmured. "Something's leeching her magic."

Hazel nodded solemnly but said nothing.

Delilah placed her palms gently over the girl's chest and belly and closed her eyes.

She reached deep—not with force, but with invitation.

She imagined the grove at the peak of summer, green and wild and bursting with light. She imagined the whispering woods healthy again, buzzing with insects and alive with birdsong. She imagined safety, warmth, belonging.

And then she poured that image into the child.

“Take root,” she whispered, a tear slipping down her cheek. “Breathe, little one. The forest still wants you.”

A shudder rippled through the girl’s limbs.

The faintest flicker of gold beneath her bark. A glow. A tremble.

The petals in her hair shivered.

And bloomed.

A soft gasp escaped Hazel, who reached out as the dryad’s limbs regained color—no longer pallid, but flushed with new green and gold.

Delilah sat back, panting, her hands trembling but her heart full.

“She’ll still need watching,” she said hoarsely. “But the rot’s pulling back. Her roots are waking.”

Hazel stepped forward and—unexpectedly—dropped to her knees beside her.

She cupped Delilah’s face with warm, weathered palms.

“The forest sees your heart, child.”



Delilah blinked, stunned.

Hazel smiled softly, then reached into her wild hair and pulled a vine from behind her ear. It shimmered with life—fresh, living—and at its end, a moonblossom bloomed bright as twilight.

With delicate care, Hazel began weaving the vine into Delilah's curls. One flower. Then another. A second vine followed, tucked just behind her other ear.

The scent was sweet. Ancient.

“This is how the elders mark kin,” Hazel said, her fingers weaving deftly. “It means you're of the land. Of us . You didn't need to be born to it. You only needed to come back.”

Delilah's throat closed, the weight of years pressing on her shoulders and lifting in the same breath.

“I thought I burned that bridge,” she whispered. “When I left for Salem. When I stayed away.”

Hazel's eyes sparkled with something deeper than forgiveness— recognition.

“You wandered,” she said. “That's allowed. But you found your way home. That's what matters.”

When she finished, Hazel stepped back, surveying her work with a small, proud nod.

“You wear the land now. Let it protect you.”

Delilah reached up, fingertips brushing the flowers woven through her hair, and for

the first time since she'd stepped foot back into Celestial Pines, she didn't feel like a visitor wearing borrowed skin.

She felt seen.

She felt claimed.

By something older and wider than fate.

And for once, she let herself believe she truly belonged.

### ROLLO

The sun dipped low over the treetops, painting the sanctuary in shades of honey and rust. The greenhouse still smelled faintly of blooming moonvine—his and Delilah’s magic lingering like a secret whispered into the soil.

Rollo stood just outside the barn, a hammer in one hand and a loose board under his boot. The day had been quiet. The kind of quiet that made his skin itch.

That’s when he heard the familiar crunch of gravel. He looked up, already halfway bracing for a wild fox or one of the crows from the northern pines—until he saw him.

Dax Tarrow.

Another bear shifter. One of the few left in town who still wore their animal like a second skin rather than a weapon. His beard had grown out, silver streaks threading through the black like old roots, and his shirt looked like he’d slept in it—and probably had.

Rollo straightened, squinting. “Didn’t expect to see you around here.”

Dax grinned, crooked and tired. “Didn’t expect to come. But... I had a feeling.”

Rollo motioned him toward the porch and set the hammer down. “You here for a visit, or did something bite you on the way in?”

Dax settled onto the bench with a grunt, pulling a flask from his jacket and offering it.

“Both.”

Rollo took a swig. Strong. Smoky. Burned in all the right ways. Like chewing embers.

“You look better than the last time I saw you,” Dax said, side-eying him with a crooked grin. “Less haunted.”

Rollo let out a short, dry laugh. “Don’t let the flannel fool you. Still haunted. Just better at hiding it.”

Dax tipped his chin, skeptical. “Nah, this ain’t just better stitching on the same scars. You’re lighter. You’re walking different.”

Rollo didn’t answer at first, but his gaze flicked to the greenhouse, where faint blossoms still glowed from last night.

“Delilah’s back.”

That made Dax’s eyebrows lift. “Huh. Now that explains it. I’d heard whispers she was in town again, but I didn’t think you two would be?—”

“Back at it?” Rollo finished, voice dry but not bitter.

“Well,” Dax shrugged, “last I knew, y’all were on opposite sides of a silent war.”

“We were,” Rollo admitted, running a hand down his face. “But... things shifted. Doesn’t mean it’s easy.”

Dax gave a low whistle. “Damn. You really are different.”

Rollo glanced back at him. “That what brought you here? Personal check-in?”

Dax’s smile faded. He leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees. “No. I came to tell you something. Something’s been chewing at me.”

Rollo straightened, his gut already tightening. “I’m listening.”

“I was out near Hollow’s Pass last week,” Dax began, “tracking a rumor about a stag gone feral. Thought maybe it was just noise—but I swear on my mother’s roots, I saw him.”

Rollo didn’t move. “Garrick?”

Dax nodded grimly. “Didn’t get close. But the gait? The scent? That was him. Same twitch in his left leg, same crooked shoulder from the time he took that blow near the old temple ridge. Ain’t no mistaking him.”

Rollo’s stomach turned. “He was near town?”

“Too near,” Dax said. “But that’s not what spooked me most.”

He glanced around, cautious. Then lowered his voice.

“When I got back, I dropped it in casual conversation. No names. Just testing the waters, see if anyone else’d seen or heard him.”

Rollo raised a brow. “And?”

“One of the younger wardens—again, I don’t know who exactly, just heard it through a buddy at the tavern—starts talking like Garrick was misunderstood. Like exile was too harsh. Said maybe the Council rushed it, maybe he had a point, maybe—just

maybe—he's not as far gone as folks think."

Rollo sat up straighter, jaw hardening. "Someone's defending him?"

Dax nodded grimly. "More than defending. Pleading his case. Like he's some fallen hero just waiting for a second chance."

Rollo's bear bristled under his skin.

"He chose his path," Rollo muttered, voice clipped. "Started testing forbidden spells, talked like the Moonlit Pact was shackles instead of salvation. When he crossed into cursed grounds and came back wrong, we didn't exile him. He walked out."

"I remember," Dax said. "But not everyone does. Some of the new blood don't know what went down. They just hear pieces. And sympathy's dangerous when it ain't earned."

Rollo stood, pacing the porch. His fists clenched, the wood creaking under his boots.

"The wardens are supposed to uphold the Pact. If he's got even one voice among them..."

"We've got a rot starting," Dax finished. "And you know how it works. Quiet. Creepin'. Dressed in good intentions until it's too deep to pull out."

Rollo nodded, jaw set. "I need to find out who. I need names. Evidence."

"That's just it," Dax said, exhaling. "I don't have names. My buddy—he said he overheard the sympathizing talk, didn't get a clear look. Could've been anyone. Just some Moonlit Ward member over in the supply shed, talking like Garrick was done dirty. But if it was a warden..."

Rollo turned, eyes dark. “Then we’ve already got a crack in the wall.”

“And if Garrick’s got someone feeding him intel?” Dax added. “Hell, he might not need to knock. Someone might already be opening the door.”

Silence stretched.

Rollo’s mind turned to Delilah, to the healing glow in the greenhouse, to the kiss that tasted like coming home and danger all at once.

He couldn’t let this touch her.

“You gonna tell the Council?” Dax asked.

Rollo hesitated. Then shook his head. “Not yet.”

Dax grunted. “Didn’t think so.”

“I can’t bring this half-baked. Not with tensions already high. I need proof. I need to know. And I need Delilah out of the blast zone.”

Dax stood, clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, you always did play the long game. But be careful. Sympathizers ain’t always obvious. Sometimes they look like allies.”

Rollo nodded, gaze hardening toward the tree line.

He didn’t know who to trust.

But he knew what he had to protect.

When Dax left, Rollo watched him disappear into the trees.

And then he turned back to the sanctuary, jaw tight, bear pacing in his blood.

Something was wrong inside the town.

And he'd find it, before it found her.



### DELILAH

The market street was busier than usual.

Delilah had only stopped for rosemary and sleeproot, but now she found herself walking slower, her bag hugged close to her hip, the weight of whispered words catching on her like burrs in wool.

“Did you hear she’s back for Wren’s estate?”

“Well, what else would bring her crawling home after all these years?”

“Some folks just can’t stay away when there’s something to claim...”

She paused at a corner stall, pretending to inspect a jar of pickled starfruit, but her ears rang. Her jaw locked so tight her molars ached.

They didn’t even lower their voices.

It shouldn’t have stung. She’d left. She hadn’t explained why. Maybe they were owed a whisper or two.

But it did sting. It burned.

She made it as far as the next alley before she ducked off the cobbled path and leaned her back against the cool stone wall, clutching her bag like it might hold the courage she was losing.

Her chest tightened. Breath came in short, useless bursts.

Inheritance.

Like she hadn't scraped together every coin in Salem just to get back. Like she hadn't come running the second Wren called, heart in her throat and roots in her hands.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She needed somewhere quiet. She needed a damn minute.

The Spellbound Sip was soft as memory. Always was.

A little too warm, full of smells that clung to the skin like perfume—baked fig, smoked cinnamon, whispering mint. And magic. Always that hum of background charm, subtle as breath, altering the flavor of each drink to suit the soul.

Delilah stepped in, the bell chiming soft and melodious overhead.

Nerissa glanced up from behind the bar, her eyes—sea green and just shy of knowing—flicked to Delilah's face.

She said nothing. Just reached for a mug and started to brew.

Delilah sank into her favorite corner seat near the wide window and dropped her bag. Her shoulders shook. She hated that. Hated being seen soft. But Nerissa didn't call attention to it.

Instead, she brought over a tall ceramic cup swirling faintly with gold and pink steam.

Lemon mist. Flirtation. Comfort. A gentle nudge toward joy.

Delilah took it with both hands and murmured, “You ever just wanna hex a whole room?”

“All the time,” Nerissa said, settling into the seat across from her, her voice like silk dragged through lake water. “But then I remember karma always has better aim.”

Delilah gave a watery laugh and sipped.

It tasted like sunshine and honeyed citrus and something else—something nostalgic. Her shoulders loosened by inches.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Nerissa tapped her fingers lightly on the table. “So... inheritance, huh?”

Delilah groaned, laying her head against the glass. “You heard.”

“This is Celestial Pines,” Nerissa replied. “I knew you were here before your boots hit the moss.”

“They think I came back for a payout,” Delilah said. “Like I haven’t been busting my knuckles in the sanctuary and staying up nights with Wren’s spells gone sideways.”

Nerissa tilted her head. “People say things when they don’t know the whole story. Especially when they’ve made peace with your absence.”

Delilah blinked. “Peace?”

“They made you a ghost,” Nerissa said gently. “And now you’re back, real and radiant and not fitting the story they told. So they poke. That’s not about you. That’s about them. ”

The words hit deep. Right in that sore, cracked-open spot she'd been ignoring.

Delilah lifted the mug and took another long sip. Her pulse slowed.

"You always this wise?" she asked, eyes narrowing playfully.

"Only between moon phases and gossip drops," Nerissa replied with a wink.

There was a pause, comfortable now. Then Nerissa smiled sly. "So... you and Rollo?"

Delilah choked slightly. "You don't waste time, do you?"

"Not when people start glowing like you did walking in here, despite the rumors."

Delilah flushed, but smiled. "We're... figuring it out."

"Figuring it out while twining moonvine in a greenhouse with your shirts off?"

Delilah laughed outright, the warmth breaking through her fog. "Okay, that was not intentional. Magic happened."

Nerissa smirked. "It always does, with the right people."

Delilah nodded slowly. "He's different. Softer. Still growly, but he sees me now. All of me."

Nerissa's smile turned wistful. "I'm glad. Honestly. Rollo took it hard when Garrick fell. They were close."

Delilah blinked. "Garrick?"

Nerissa's brow furrowed. "You didn't know?"

"I remember him. Sort of. He was older. Quiet. I knew him and Rollo were close, part of the same clan once upon a time. But I didn't realize anything happened."

Nerissa leaned in, voice dropping low like the truth itself was sacred and dangerous.

"After you left, Garrick got twisted up in some dark magics. Real boundary-pushing stuff. He started talking like the Pact was a leash, not protection. That the town was going soft. He poked at rituals we weren't meant to dig up.

Started claiming the forest owed him something."

Delilah's jaw tightened. She didn't interrupt, but something sharp and hot bloomed under her ribs.

"Things escalated fast," Nerissa continued. "He lost control during a shift. Hurt someone. Said she deserved it—said the land would cleanse itself through him. It was... ugly. Real ugly."

Delilah's fingers curled around her mug. "And the Council exiled him?"

"They had no choice," Nerissa said softly. "He broke the Pact. And not just in spirit. In blood."

Delilah blinked slowly, fury and confusion dancing behind her eyes like lightning waiting to strike. "And Rollo never told me."

Nerissa didn't flinch. "Because it wrecked him."

Delilah bit down the anger, buried it under reason. But it still simmered—because she

should've known. Because it mattered.

"He and Garrick were thick as moss on bark," Nerissa said. "Closer than brothers, and that exile? It shook something loose in Rollo. He got real quiet. Nervous. Like he was afraid whatever Garrick had... might be buried inside him, too."

"He thought he'd turn into him," she whispered.

Nerissa nodded. "And instead of letting that fear hollow him out, he took over the sanctuary. Poured every ounce of himself into protection, control, care. That man didn't just rebuild the animal wards—he rebuilt himself right alongside them."

Delilah looked away, blinking back the sudden sting behind her eyes.

She wasn't angry anymore. Not really.

She was heartbroken for him.

He'd been carrying that weight in silence. All this time. Afraid she might see the worst in him when all she ever wanted was to hold the best.

"I should've seen it," she murmured.

Nerissa shook her head. "He never let you. You were the light he didn't think he deserved. He's just now learning to stop hiding from it."

Delilah ran a hand through her hair, touching the moonblossoms Hazel had woven into it the day before.

"I need to talk to him," she said, standing.

Nerissa smiled, warm and certain. “Good. Remind him he’s not Garrick. That he’s never been.”

Delilah took one last sip of lemon mist—flavored now with clarity—and turned for the door.

And as she stepped back into the sunlight, she didn’t feel hollowed by the gossip anymore.

She felt filled with purpose, and love, and the knowledge that Rollo had clawed his way out of shadow.

And now, it was her turn to show him he never had to do it alone.

“Thank you,” she said again, but this time it wasn’t just for the tea.

Nerissa patted her hand. “Anytime. And remember—just because the woods whisper doesn’t mean they speak the truth. You do belong here. Some of us never stopped waiting for you.”

### ROLLO

The forest was holding its breath. Rollo felt it in his bones.

He stood at the southern edge of the sanctuary grounds, a hand pressed to the protective ward stone buried just beneath the twisted roots of the elder maple. It should've hummed warm beneath his skin. Steady. Quiet.

Instead, the pulse was erratic—like a heartbeat knocked out of rhythm. Something was interfering with the protective barrier.

His jaw tightened. He could smell it—barely there, but wrong. Sour. Twisted.

Garrick's magic.

It coiled through the air like smoke from greenwood fire—sharp, sickly, and far too familiar. The glyph hidden in the bramble hadn't been etched by a student or a curious traveler. It was carved with purpose. Rot etched into protection.

He crouched, pushing aside a curtain of thistle and brush.

In the dirt—half-concealed by moss—was a sigil. Old. Twisted. Marked in blood that had dried to a rusted smear and ash from a burned offering.

Rollo's stomach turned.

He didn't need a Council decree to know what it meant. Garrick had been here.



Recently. Marking the ward from inside. And someone had helped him.

He ran his hand through his hair, tension building like thunder behind his ribs. Every part of him wanted to rip the glyph out by the root, but he forced himself to memorize it first. He'd need to report it—to someone. Eventually.

But not now. Not with everything unraveling this fast.

He was still crouched there when he heard footsteps.

Soft. Controlled. Determined.

Delilah.

Rollo straightened slowly, brushing dirt from his palms. But the weight on his shoulders didn't shift. If anything, it grew heavier.

She stepped into the clearing like a storm dressed in sunlight—her stride sharp, eyes hard, chin lifted just enough to let him know she wasn't here to ask gently.

“You didn't tell me,” she said, her voice even, but every word landed like a blade. “About Garrick. About any of it.”

He froze, caught mid-breath.

So she knew.

“Delilah, let me explain...”

“I came here today,” she said, quieter now, “to ask. Not accuse. I wanted to understand what Nerissa meant. What happened between you and Garrick. Why it left

you so afraid.” Her voice trembled, but her hands were steady.

Rollo took a moment to answer. It’s not the question he was expecting.

“I didn’t want to become him,” he finally said. “Garrick was like a brother to me and then he just kind of... went off the rails. It was all after you left so I never bothered to tell you. But we were so much alike and, well, you remember.”

She nods once. “Yeah, you two were together a lot.”

He rubbed the back of his neck trying to find the words he had never told anyone before. “I was afraid that if Garrick could do what he did, I assume Nerissa told you?”

Again, she nodded.

“Well, if he did that, and I felt that same urge, what would stop me from becoming that as well? I grieved for my friend, I was still grieving over you. It all became a lot. So, I shut down and tried to figure out who or what I was.”

Delilah stepped closer now and reached for his hand in understanding, but before she could say anything she looked down and saw what he had uncovered. She froze and gestured to the glyph, sick and curling at the edges, pulsing with something dark and familiar.

“This... this is twisted magic. This doesn't belong here,” she breathed, her eyes never leaving it.

“I didn’t put it there”

“This” Her eyes turned cold now. “This is the magic that Garrick has been using?”

One of the reasons he was exiled?” Her voice had turned to ice covered fury.

Rollo nodded slowly, now only realizing that she hadn’t known it was his magic sickening the land, but now, she did. And she obviously knew he had known it as well.

“You knew this was his. Didn’t you?”

He nodded, slow. “I did.”

Her face went pale.

“For how long?”

Rollo opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked down. “Since the phoenix pup. I felt it then. But then I saw him in the woods and I knew it was him. A week, maybe more.”

Delilah recoiled like he’d struck her. “You talked to him? And you’ve known for over a week?”

Rollo took a step forward. “I didn’t want to panic you. I needed time to?—”

“You needed time ?” Her voice cracked. “Rollo, Wren is dying. The land is sick. The wards are failing. You didn’t think I needed to know? You asked me for help even!”

“I was protecting you,” he said, even though the words felt hollow now.

Delilah’s lips parted, and for a moment, it looked like she might scream. But she didn’t.

She just breathed —shaky, slow—and that somehow felt worse.

She stepped closer, her voice low, sharp. “This isn’t just about some rogue friend with a vendetta. This is about the land. About Wren. Whatever’s poisoning the forest is poisoning her too.”

“I didn’t want to believe it was him,” he said, voice thick. “I hoped—gods, I hoped it was a mistake. That I’d misread the signs. I didn’t want to bring this to you until I was sure.”

“But you were sure,” she said. “You knew the moment you found that pup. You saw him. You talked to him,” she whispered, voice cracking. “And you didn’t tell me.”

“He threatened you,” Rollo said suddenly, the words ripped out like a wound. “That’s what he did when I found him. Said I couldn’t protect what was already broken. Said your name like it was a warning.”

Delilah’s breath caught, but she didn’t cry.

“You should’ve told me.”

“I deliberately lied when I asked.”

“I didn’t lie,” he said quietly. “I just didn’t tell you everything.”

Her laugh was bitter. “That’s called a lie by omission, Rollo.”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“No,” she said, stepping in now, fury tremoring through her like lightning held in flesh. “You were trying to control it. Just like you’ve always done. The land is sick ,

Rollo. It's weak . Wren is weak. If I'd known?—”

“If you'd known, what?” he snapped, louder than he meant. “You would've thrown yourself into the trees and tried to pull the rot out with your bare hands? That's exactly why I didn't tell you!”

She blinked. Tears welled—angry ones. Betrayed.

“You don't trust me,” she whispered. “You still think I'm that girl from before. That I can't handle truth.”

He took a step toward her, reaching. “That's not it.”

She stepped back.

“You think keeping me in the dark is some kind of noble act,” she said, voice shaking now. “But it's not. It's cowardice. It's selfish.”

“I didn't want to lose you,” he said, almost pleading. “I couldn't risk it.”

“You already have ,” she snapped.

The words hit like claws.

She swallowed hard, blinking back tears she clearly didn't want to show.

“I came back here for Wren. For the town. For you. I stayed when I wanted to run. I gave you everything I could. And I thought—maybe—we were doing this together.”

“We were. We are. ”

“No,” she said, voice quiet now, hollow. “We’re not. Because you made a choice for both of us. And it put me—and Wren— at risk. ”

Silence fell. Dense and unrelenting.

She stepped back, arms wrapping tight across her chest like she had to hold herself together.

“I need to think,” she whispered. “I need to figure out if I can trust someone who doesn’t trust me back.” Her eyes glistened, but she didn’t blink. “How can I trust you if you won’t trust me ?”

The question lingered in the clearing like smoke.

Rollo couldn’t answer it.

She stared at him a moment longer—long enough for him to see the heartbreak replace the fire and then walk away.

Rollo’s throat worked, but he didn’t stop her.

He didn’t chase her.

He watched her turn and walk away, her shoes crunching over broken twigs, her hair catching sunlight like fire, the distance between them growing longer with every step.

And for once, he let it. Because she was right.

And no amount of protecting her could fix what his silence had broken.

DELILAH

The wind bit a little sharper on the way back to the apothecary.

Or maybe that was just her.

Delilah pushed through the door, barely remembering to lock it behind her before she set the kettle on and fell into the old rocking chair by the hearth. Her hands trembled around the edges of her shawl as she pulled it tight—not from cold, but from the weight in her chest.

She had asked for the truth. She had begged for it. And he'd kept it like a secret spell sealed in bone.

Worse, he hadn't trusted her with it. Not as a witch. Not as his mate.

The betrayal sat heavier than any heartbreak.

But she couldn't fall apart. Not now. Not when there was still someone who needed her.

Wren.

Delilah blinked and stood abruptly, her movements clipped, efficient. She crushed herbs with more force than necessary, gathered the dream salve and moonwort infusion without spilling a single drop. Her breath was tight, shallow, but her hands—those never wavered when it came to healing.

Wren lay on the small daybed in the back room, bundled in three layers of moss-dyed quilts. Her skin was paler than usual, bark-brown fading to ashen gray. The flowers in her hair had wilted, only a few clinging to life near her temple.

Delilah sank beside her.

“I’m sorry,” Delilah whispered, brushing a trembling hand over Wren’s brow, her fingers brushing the dried petals nestled in her grandmother’s silver curls. “I should’ve seen it sooner. I should’ve pushed harder. I should’ve known.”

The weight of those words hung in the still air like fog clinging to grave markers.

Wren stirred faintly, breath shallow but steady, her thin chest rising and falling beneath the moss-green quilt. Her eyelids fluttered before her gaze—clouded by spirit-sickness but still sharp beneath the veil—met Delilah’s.

“Child,” Wren rasped, her voice rough as brittle leaves but still carrying the soft steel of her spirit, “don’t carry guilt like the shawl you wear.”

Delilah’s throat tightened at the words. She hadn’t realized until now that she’d wrapped Wren’s old shawl around her shoulders, unconsciously holding on to something tethered to life and memory.

“Then tell me what to carry,” she whispered, voice shaking. “Because I feel like I’m losing you.”

Wren smiled faintly, the corners of her mouth twitching like old bark curling under sun. “You’re not. Not yet.”

The strength it took to say those words wasn’t lost on Delilah.



Tears burned her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Not yet. Not while Wren still fought.

She reached for the ceramic jar of cool salve—lavender-root, beeswax, powdered elderberry—and dipped two fingers in, her hands no longer shaking.

With solemn care, she placed her palm over Wren's chest, fingers splayed wide.

The skin beneath was too warm and too still at once, like embers waiting for breath.

Then she began to trace the sigils.

One for grounding, Salem-style runes braided with forest-born glyphs.

One for connection, drawn from Wren's own notebook, worn with age and margin notes.

One for renewal.

The skin beneath her fingers shimmered faintly, reacting to the touch of old magic. A hum rose around them like low wind through pine needles, and Delilah inhaled deeply.

It's not enough. Not yet.

But it had to be.

She began the chant, her voice low, clear, and steady.

Each word dropped into the air like a stone sinking through water—rippling, resonant, reverent. Her magic stirred behind her ribs, soft at first, then building into

something warm and raw. It climbed her throat, spread through her limbs, curled around her fingers like vines seeking sun.

She closed her eyes, leaned closer.

And Wren's hand rose—slow, but sure—and closed around Delilah's wrist with a surprising strength.

The chant faltered.

“Wren?” she breathed, blinking.

Wren's lips parted. “Love isn't safe,” she whispered. “It's sacred.”

Delilah frowned, momentarily confused by the shift.

Wren's eyes, fogged moments ago, were startlingly clear now—crystalline and rooted in something ancient.

“You're trying to save me with your hands,” Wren continued, her voice almost a song, “when your heart's the stronger vessel.”

Delilah's lip trembled. “I can't lose you. You're my anchor, my roots—everything that holds me steady.”

Wren's fingers tightened, then loosened, her breath catching.

“And you ,” she said, “are the bloom.”

She smiled, soft, loving, tired.

“The forest knows you. It chose you. But it’s not enough to be chosen, my girl. You must choose it back. Choose your place in it. Claim it.”

Tears fell this time.

Delilah bent low, pressing her forehead to Wren’s knuckles. “I’m trying.”

“I know.” Wren’s eyes slipped shut again. “But don’t just try, child. Be. ”

Delilah stayed like that for a long moment, listening to the shallow rise and fall of Wren’s breathing.

Then she stood, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of the shawl she no longer saw as a burden—but a mantle.

“I’m not giving up,” she whispered fiercely, almost to herself.

The candlelight flickered across the room, and somewhere beyond the walls, the forest stirred.

It had heard her.

She spent the next hours gathering, brewing, whispering. She lit spirit candles. Burned offerings of cedar and elderflower. She traced a spiral rune over Wren’s pulse point and poured her magic into it—her blood, her breath, her grief.

She didn’t think about Rollo.

Except she did.

Every time she poured her heart into the chant, she remembered his arms. The way he

looked at her like she was the moon itself. The way he didn't tell her.

She felt her magic slip—just a little.

“Focus,” she whispered to herself. “For Wren.”

The ritual deepened, pulled at the thread between Delilah's spirit and the forest's. She swayed as power moved through her, sweat beading along her brow. The runes glowed faint green. For a moment, Wren's breath came easier.

It flickered.

Delilah's knees hit the floor.

“Please,” she gasped. “Just a little more.”

The magic around her crackled, thick with resistance. But still, she gave it everything.

When she finally collapsed at Wren's bedside, her energy spent, she barely registered that the wind outside had gone still. The flowers in Wren's hair hadn't bloomed again. But they hadn't faded further either.

Delilah leaned over, pressing her forehead to her grandmother's chest, whispering, “Hold on. Just a little longer.”

She didn't cry. Not because she wasn't broken.

But because she was still whole enough to fight.

### ROLLO

The wind was sharp up near the old clan site—too sharp for spring.

Rollo stalked through the trees, fists clenched, each step loud with purpose.

The air stank of burnt cedar and iron—magic twisted in a way that soured the back of his throat.

Shadows clung tighter here, stretching long beneath the skeletal trees that had once stood proud as the bear shifter heart of Celestial Pines.

Now the old camp was nothing but broken rings of stone, moss-covered timber, and memories that tasted like ash.

He hadn't been back in years. Not since the exile. Not since Garrick spat his last words and vanished into the whispering woods like a curse.

But today? Today he wasn't waiting.

Garrick had left his mark—literally. The sigils weren't warnings anymore. They were challenges. Taunts. Lines drawn in blood and soil just outside the sanctuary's reach. And Rollo was done letting him scratch at the edges.

The wind shifted. And Rollo knew, before he heard a sound, before the temperature dropped—that he wasn't alone.

A figure stepped out from behind one of the old totems, tall and lean as ever, eyes like hollowed-out coals.

“Didn't think you'd come crawling,” Garrick drawled.

Rollo's bear surged beneath his skin, rising like a storm. “Wasn't crawling. I came to end this.”

Garrick grinned, slow and venomous. His hair was longer now, tangled with twigs and bone beads. Magic clung to him like a second skin—feral, corrupted, wild.

“Funny,” he said. “That's what I told myself when I left this cursed place.”

Rollo moved closer, eyes locked on the other man's twisted shape, the heat of his own magic starting to burn under his skin. “Why come back then? Why poison the land? What do you want?”

Garrick tilted his head, hair matted and shadowed eyes gleaming. His smile was thin, ugly.

“What was always mine,” he hissed. “Respect. Fear. And her.”

The words landed like a punch to the gut.

Something in Rollo cracked—low and hard in his chest.

“You don't say her name.”

Garrick chuckled, slow and deliberate, like a wolf savoring the kill. “Didn't need to. You brought her up all by yourself.”

Rollo's fists clenched.

Garrick's voice dropped to a mocking purr. "You think this is about you? About your little sanctuary and your oaths? No, no, Rollo. This started when she came back. Her magic always sang louder than yours. Always felt like something real. Something wild."

He stepped closer, and the ground beneath them hissed like it disagreed with his very presence.

"She was wasted here. Then she left, and I thought... fine. The forest'll forget her." His jaw ticked. "But it didn't. I didn't."

Rollo's stomach turned. "You poisoned the land to bring her back."

"I made the land scream," Garrick said, his voice almost reverent. "Because if anything could lure her back, it'd be pain. She's a healer, Rollo. Pain's her beacon."

Rollo's rage deepened into something colder.

"You used this place. You hurt Wren. Hurt the people who trusted you—just to what? Steal her back?"

Garrick's grin twisted further. "I never had her, not really. You did. But she looked at me once, you know. Back then. At the equinox fire. I caught her staring, just a little too long. She liked power. And I am power."

"You're rot," Rollo growled.

"She was never bad on the eyes," Garrick said, ignoring the insult. "But it's not just that. She's the key. Her blood, her magic—it could cleanse or corrupt. She belongs

in the wild. Not caged in that dusty apothecary like a parlor trick.”

“And you thought she’d choose you ?” Rollo spat.

Garrick’s smile fell. “I thought she’d see I was willing to burn down the world for her.”

“Then you’re more gone than I thought.”

Rollo shifted mid-step—bones snapping, coat bursting through skin, his massive frame landing with a growl that rattled the trees.

Garrick was already moving, his own shift not clean—not smooth like it once had been. The corruption had changed him. His bear was thinner, gaunt around the ribs, eyes too bright with something feral.

They collided in a crash of fur and claws, tumbling through old stones and dead leaves.

Rollo hit first, driving Garrick into a fallen log with enough force to crack bark. But Garrick writhed like smoke, his claws dragging through Rollo’s shoulder, tearing through muscle and fur alike.

Pain bloomed, white-hot. But Rollo barely registered it.

He threatened Delilah.

That thought drove him harder, snarling, snapping. His claws caught Garrick’s flank, and blood sprayed, dark and foul-smelling.

They broke apart and circled, panting.



“You always were a coward,” Garrick spat, shifting back to half-form, blood dripping from his chest. “Always hiding behind rules. Behind women.”

“You left us,” Rollo growled, voice rough, chest heaving. “You chose exile.”

“I chose freedom! ” Garrick barked. “And I offered it to you! But you were too scared. You let that pathetic council leash you—and now you’re their lapdog.”

Rollo lunged again, slamming Garrick against the stones of the old fire pit.

“You corrupted the woods,” he snarled. “You’re killing the land. You’re killing Wren .”

For a moment—just a flicker—Garrick faltered.

Then he laughed, wheezing. “And you still don’t get it.”

He surged forward, using the last of his strength to sink claws deep into Rollo’s side. Rollo roared, collapsing to one knee as blood soaked his ribs.

Garrick leaned in close, breath rancid.

“She’ll never be yours,” he hissed.

Rollo’s vision blurred. But his voice was iron. “She was never yours to name.”

With the last of his strength, he slammed a fist into Garrick’s jaw. Bone crunched. Garrick fell back with a snarl.

When Rollo looked up again, the clearing was empty.

Garrick had vanished—dragged himself into the woods with a trail of blood and something darker behind him.

Rollo slumped back, gasping, pain singing through every nerve.

The last thing he saw before the darkness took him was the old totem stone—split down the center, like a warning carved into fate.

DELILAH

The forest was quieter than usual.

Not peaceful—just still. Like it was watching.

Delilah knelt beside a patch of starbloom near the roots of a crooked ash tree, her fingers moving carefully over each blossom.

These hadn't been touched by Garrick's corruption yet—thank the stars—and she needed every clean petal she could find.

Wren's fever had returned in the night, and the moonroot poultices weren't holding like they used to.

She brushed dirt off her hands and tied the small bundle into linen, pressing it to her chest. The air smelled like pine and damp moss—but there was something else beneath it. Metallic. Tense.

Her mind wandered, as it always did lately.

To him.

To Rollo.

And the mess they'd left in the clearing after she turned her back on him.

She'd told herself he deserved it. That he'd lied. That he'd put Wren at risk. That he saw her as something delicate, breakable, in need of protection instead of partnership.

But the longer the silence stretched between them, the more the edge of that fury dulled—and gave way to something far more complicated.

Maybe he was just scared, she thought.

Maybe he thought protecting me was the only way to protect himself.

She stood slowly, brushing leaves from her skirt, the linen pouch of herbs crinkling softly against her chest.

She'd meant to go straight back to the apothecary. But her feet turned, almost on their own. Toward the north ridge. Toward the old clan site.

It wasn't even a conscious thought. Just... a pull. Like the forest itself had nudged her shoulder and whispered, Go.

He had taken her there once, a long time ago—when the world was still soft between them and every moment felt like a promise. They'd danced under the blood moon, kissed behind the stone totems, whispered secrets into each other's hands.

Maybe that place still held something they'd both forgotten.

Maybe it would help her decide what came next.

The climb was steeper than she remembered, or maybe the tension in her chest made it feel that way. Her shoes snapped dry twigs. A crow cried overhead.

When she crested the ridge, the wind hit her first. Then the scent.

Blood.

Her stomach flipped. And that's when she saw him.

Rollo lay half-shifted near the edge of the old fire pit, one hand clawed, the other human. His chest rose shallow and uneven. Blood matted the fur on his side, staining the ground in dark, thick streaks. The earth beneath him was scorched, and something in the air pulsed—like the forest was angry.

“Rollo—” she dropped beside him, knees hitting earth hard, hands already glowing with green-gold light.

He didn't move. Didn't speak.

His chest barely lifted beneath the shredded bloodied shirt, and the slow, shallow rhythm of his breath made her stomach twist. His face—usually so solid, so steady—was slack and too pale beneath the cuts and bruises blooming across his skin.

“No, no, no—don't you dare.” Her voice cracked as she pressed her hands to the worst of the wounds, ignoring the searing sting of corrupted magic laced through his blood. “You don't get to go quiet on me now.”

Her magic surged, wild and desperate, seeping into him like roots reaching for water. She felt resistance—deep, angry. This had to have been Garrick. Rollo should have healed by now. Garrick's spellwork wasn't just poison. It clung.

She gritted her teeth, leaned over him, and poured more of herself into the spell.

“You stubborn, thick-skulled idiot,” she murmured, her voice breaking. “Why would you come here alone?”

The blood beneath her hands hissed as the magic began to purify it, burning off the black shimmer threaded through his wounds.

“Garrick,” she whispered, fury trembling through her ribs. “Always has to be dramatic.”

The forest around her stirred. The trees groaned. The very roots beneath her seemed to shudder. And then, from the shadows, the whisper came—not from lips, but from bark, from leaf, from earth.

“Time is short.”

Delilah froze, one hand still glowing against Rollo’s ribs.

Another voice joined, deeper, solemn. “She has bound him. For now.”

A third—older, lighter—followed: “But the wound is deeper than it seems.”

Delilah’s throat tightened. She looked up. The trees were still. But the shadows moved.

“You can’t take him,” she whispered, voice shaking. “Not yet.”

A final voice, like a breeze over still water, echoed gently, “He is hers. And she is ours. But balance must be restored.”

Delilah’s hands trembled as she reached to cup Rollo’s face.

His skin was a little warmer now. The color no longer so deathly. But he still didn’t stir.

“Stay with me,” she whispered, eyes stinging. “Don’t you leave me like this. Not when I finally?—”

She didn’t say it. But her magic did.

It surged, stronger than before—drawn from a place deeper than blood or bone.

Love.

Power bloomed from her palms like spring through frost. The air snapped and crackled, the leaves overhead trembling in a gust that didn’t belong to weather.

Rollo’s breathing steadied—fragile, but real.

Then the magic snapped back, hard.

Delilah cried out, nearly collapsing over him. Her arms shook with exhaustion, her forehead pressing against his shoulder.

“You idiot,” she whispered, voice wrecked. “You could’ve died.”

Again she heard the whisper, “Time is short. You have exhausted your efforts.”

“Our efforts.” the three voices sang together.

“I understand,” she pleaded. “But I had to save him. He’s mine. He can’t die.”

“So be it. You’ve been warned. But you are ours and we will need balance restored.”

A steady thrum of breath came from Rollo’s massive chest. It wasn’t enough. He was alive—but he needed shelter. Healing. And she couldn’t carry him alone.

She pulled herself upright, lifted her chin to the canopy, and called out—not with words, but with will.

Forest, she begged. Please. Help me get him home.

The silence that followed was absolute. Then the roots beneath Rollo shifted. Vines coiled under his back—gentle, like cradling arms.

The ground itself seemed to breathe , and slowly—inch by sacred inch—it began to carry him down the slope.

Delilah walked beside him, one hand resting on his chest, the other still glowing weakly.

She didn't know what would come next.

But he was alive.

And this time, she wasn't letting go.



ROLLO

Pain came first.

A low, heavy pulse behind his ribs like the echo of thunder after a storm. His limbs felt leaden, thick with sleep—or magic. Maybe both. Something inside him stirred—his bear, sluggish but alive.

Then the scent hit him.

Cedar. Sage. And her.

Delilah.

His eyes cracked open to warm light spilling through wooden slats in the ceiling above—the familiar beams of his sanctuary cabin. The air hummed with the comfort of home, but it was the presence beside him that made his breath catch.

She was curled in the old armchair near the bed, knees tucked to her chest, one hand loosely holding his. Her head rested against the armrest, her hair a wild halo of curls and forest dust. Her boots were kicked off, and her shawl had slipped from her shoulder.

And still, she held on.

He tried to speak, but only a rasp came out.

Her eyes snapped open.

She blinked, sat up quickly, eyes searching his. “Rollo?”

He tried again. “You stayed.”

She nodded, brushing hair from her face. “Of course I stayed.”

He winced as he shifted slightly. “What happened?”

“You almost bled out,” she said gently, but her voice trembled. “I found you at the old site. The forest—” her hand tightened around his. “It helped bring you back.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Her eyes were puffy. Her hands looked like she hadn’t let go of him for hours.

“Delilah...”

“Don’t.” She shook her head, blinking fast. “Not yet.”

He nodded once, silent.

They sat like that for a stretch, the silence not cold, just heavy with everything they couldn’t yet say.

She spoke, voice softer now.

“I was mad. Furious, really. Still am, a little.”

“I know.”

“But then I saw you—” Her voice caught. “And everything else just... fell away.”

He watched her, his heart aching in ways the wounds couldn't touch.

She leaned forward, her forehead gently resting against the back of his hand.

“You idiot,” she whispered. “You tried to face him alone.”

“I thought I had to.”

“You never have to do anything alone,” she said fiercely, looking up. “Not anymore.”

He blinked slowly, swallowing the emotion that choked his throat. “You came back.”

“I always will.”

He lifted her hand, rough fingers brushing her knuckles. “I believe you.”

A soft smile tugged at her lips, watery and fierce all at once.

She reached for the poultice near the nightstand and began checking his bandages, her movements careful but practiced.

“I don't deserve you,” he muttered.

She stilled. “No. You don't.”

He grimaced. “Fair.”

“But I don't deserve you either,” she said, meeting his gaze. “That's not the point.”

“Then what is?”

She leaned forward again, pressing her lips to his temple. “That we choose each other. Even when it’s hard.”

His chest ached—not from the wound, but from everything that lived beneath it.

“Delilah...”

She looked at him, open and waiting.

“I love you,” he said, voice thick. “I never stopped.”

Tears welled again in her eyes, but she smiled. And for a moment, everything else faded. The forest. The war stirring in the shadows. The pain.

All that remained was her.

And the home he’d never really lost, not as long as she still held his hand.

### DELILAH

The sun rose soft and pink over Celestial Pines, dusting the mountaintops in honey light. A gentle fog clung to the hollows, reluctant to let go of the night. Birdsong filtered through the half-open shutters of the apothecary, and the smell of wild mint and clover tea filled the air.

Delilah stood at the basin, rolling the stiffness from her shoulders. Her hands ached from channeling too much magic too fast, but she didn't regret it. Not one bit.

Rollo was alive.

Sleeping, but alive. He hadn't stirred much since waking the night before, but his pulse had steadied. The poison had set into his bloodstream like tar, clinging in a way that made the healing slower than it should have been.

Still, he was breathing.

And that was more than she could've asked for yesterday.

She wrapped the sachets in linen bundles, humming low under her breath. The apothecary smelled like sage smoke and beeswax and just a hint of lemon balm—the kind of scent that made her think of safety. Of home.

Wren had stirred earlier, enough to drink half a mug of enchanted elderflower tea before mumbling something about fae taxes and falling back asleep.

A knock at the back door pulled Delilah from her thoughts.

Junie Bell poked her head in, curls piled on top of her head in a chaotic bun, a strand of orange ribbon tangled somewhere near her temple and her cheeks already flushed from either the spring wind or the stress of organizing too many townsfolk.

“You still alive in here?” she called, grinning as she stepped into the apothecary’s warm hearth scent.

“Barely,” Delilah said, wiping her hands on her apron and flicking a bit of dried lavender off her wrist.

Junie had been her best friend once—back when moonvine wreaths and first crushes felt like the world’s biggest worries.

They’d grown apart when Delilah left for Salem, but the bond hadn’t unraveled completely.

And now, with everything stirring under the surface of Celestial Pines, it was slowly stitching back together.

“Good,” Junie said, rolling her eyes with fondness. “Missy’s got the charm rings laid out on the town green. Said if you don’t come now, she’ll assign someone else to the root protection sets and make you do the last-minute dress blessing.”

Delilah groaned. “She wouldn’t.”

Junie smirked. “Oh, she would. You know Missy gets twitchy without full control of the ceremonial layout.”

Delilah laughed softly, grabbing her basket of charm tools and slipping a kiss to

Wren's temple before following Junie out the back.

Missy Harrow was exactly where Delilah expected her to be—planted at the base of the old warded gazebo like a general overseeing her troops.

Her dark curls were bound in a sleek braid wrapped in silver cord, and she had the fierce look of someone who'd wrangled magic students and town council egos before breakfast. Delilah had learned spellcraft from her as a teenager—Missy had run the town's charm circles since before Delilah could write her name in moon sigils.

And now, like nothing had changed, she greeted Delilah with a dry smirk and a half-chewed sprig of clover between her teeth.

"About time," she drawled. "We've got three dozen ward rings to charm and not enough hands."

Delilah settled cross-legged beside her on the embroidered picnic cloth, fingers already reaching for the thistle thread and star-grass. "Don't tell me you started without me."

"I'd rather tie protection charms with wet string than do the whole set solo," Missy muttered. "Where've you been?"

Delilah glanced up, hesitating.

Junie filled the silence. "She and Rollo met with the council this morning."

That drew Missy's eyes like a hawk spotting prey. "And?"

Delilah exhaled. "We told them everything. Garrick's return. The corrupted sigils. Rollo's attack. The spreading sickness in the land."

Junie added, “They listened. Nodded. And said they’d handle it. ”

Missy snorted, spitting the clover to the side. “Of course they did.”

“They don’t want to disrupt the ceremony,” Delilah murmured, focusing too hard on the knot in her charm loop. “Said the town needed the unity. The magic of celebration.”

“Unity doesn’t mean silence,” Missy muttered. “It means honesty. Trust. That’s what makes the Pact strong—not pretending danger isn’t knocking on the ward lines.”

Delilah didn’t argue. She couldn’t.

The weight of secrecy pressed on her chest. The knowledge that Garrick still slithered unseen, twisting the land with every shadowed step, made her want to scream.

But she focused on the charms.

Knot by knot. Sigil by sigil.

They worked in a rhythm, the three of them. Missy handed off ring bases. Junie chanted the soft protection spells. Delilah threaded her magic through like weaving a tapestry.

Their shoulders brushed. Their laughter returned in fits and starts. For a while, it felt like old times.

Almost.

“Rollo okay?” Missy asked quietly, not looking up.



Delilah's hands stilled for a breath before resuming. "He's healing. Slower than normal."

"The poison?"

"Still lingering. But he's stubborn."

"He always was," Junie said with a small smile, nudging Delilah with her elbow. "You two always fit best in the middle of a mess."

Delilah's smile was tight but sincere. "He's trying."

They all knew what that meant.

Trying to be brave. Trying to be honest. Trying to love without fear.

Delilah wasn't sure either of them had quite figured it out yet—but they were trying together.

And for now... that mattered.

By noon, laughter rose over the market booths.

Kids darted around with chalk in hand, drawing sigils on cobblestones.

The Spellbound Sip handed out lemon mist iced teas and warm blackberry scones.

Even the town's stone fountain glittered, enchanted with glimmer-moss that made the water sparkle like starlight.

It felt like Celestial Pines again.

Almost.

After their charm batch was complete, Delilah walked home alone. The breeze had picked up, tugging petals from the blossoming moonvine along the fences.

She paused near the outskirts of the sanctuary.

The trees still whispered. The land still felt raw, wounded in places.

But she'd bound one of those wounds with her bare hands. And Rollo was resting just beyond that line of trees.

She pressed a palm to the sanctuary gate, murmuring a soft blessing. "Keep him safe."

Then she turned back toward the apothecary, heart a little lighter.

By dusk, the town shimmered.

The ceremonial firepit crackled at the center of the green, encircled by hand-dyed quilts and enchanted wind chimes that rang without breeze. The Council stood in simple robes, masked as tradition demanded, offering nothing but smiles and words of hope for spring's blessings.

Delilah stood outside of the crowd, wrapped in Wren's shawl, her hair woven with wildflowers Missy had tucked in earlier.

She didn't feel whole. But she felt steady.

And when she saw Rollo approaching, one arm bound tight across his ribs, Junie's arm slung protectively around his waist like a human crutch, she almost laughed and

cried at the same time.

He looked like hell. But he was upright. And his eyes were on her.

She stepped forward. And he smiled, slow and warm, like he didn't see the crowd or the fire or the ceremony blooming around them.

Just her.

### ROLLO

The firelight danced across the green, golden and soft like it had nowhere else to be. Children squealed, chasing glowing beetles under the spell-charmed lanterns, and the scent of sage and baked cinnamon apples clung to the air.

Rollo stood on the outer edge of the crowd, one arm pressed gently against his side, the gauze beneath his shirt still holding back the ache.

The poison had been slow to bleed out, stubborn as its caster, but Delilah's magic had done what no poultice or potion could—stitched him together from the inside out.

He spotted her through the crowd.

And for a second, the whole town blurred.

Delilah stood near the offering tables, dressed in deep forest green that shimmered in the light like dew-soaked moss.

Her hair was half-pinned, wild curls caught with starflower clips and little silver crescent moons and wildflowers woven in her hair.

The dress hugged her waist and flared at the hips, a scattering of tiny crystal beads sewn along the hem like stardust.

She looked like every bloom that had ever opened in spring.

His feet moved before his mind caught up.

When she turned and saw him, something in her eyes softened. She crossed the space between them with quiet grace, the hem of her dress brushing the grass, and took his hand without a word.

“Hi,” she said, voice low and close.

He swallowed hard. “You’re... you’re beautiful.”

Her smile curved, small and full of meaning. “You’re upright.”

“Barely.”

“That’s progress.”

They stood like that, hand in hand, the world spinning around them while theirs stilled.

“Wanna get outta here?” he asked, voice gruff.

Her brow lifted slightly. “You mean miss the ceremonial dance and Missy’s highly choreographed lantern lighting?”

He stepped closer, lips brushing the shell of her ear. “I mean be somewhere just us. Where I can tell you I love you without ten grandmothers eavesdropping.”

She shivered. “Then yes. Definitely yes.”

They slipped from the green beneath the arch of twilight roses, following the moonlit trail toward the tree line. The forest welcomed them—not cold and watchful like

before, but curious. Open.

By the time they reached the grove beyond the whispering pines, the world had quieted.

Fireflies blinked lazily between fern leaves. The moon spilled silver light across the mossy clearing like an invitation.

Delilah turned to face him, her hands sliding up his chest, careful not to press too hard against the bandages.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked.

“I wasn’t,” he murmured, leaning into her touch. “But I am now.”

The moon hung high over the clearing, casting silver over everything it touched—over moss, over skin, over love being remade.

Delilah tilted her chin, eyes flickering with emotion. “I was scared.”

“I know.” Rollo’s voice was rough, low, like gravel soaked in honey.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

Her voice cracked, and that did him in.

He kissed her—soft and sure, like planting something that would bloom come morning. Not a claim. Not a rush. Just truth.

He pulled her closer with the arm that wasn’t braced in gauze and ache, lips brushing her cheek, her jaw, the hollow of her neck.

Her scent—rose hips, clove, rain on dry earth—wrapped around him, made his head light.

Her fingers slid into his thick, dark hair, curling tight. Holding him. Anchoring him.

She tasted like magic and memory.

And when she sighed, it wasn't sad. It was surrender.

They fell together to the mossy forest floor like it had been waiting for them. Cradling them. Witnessing them.

Her dress slipped from her shoulders with a whisper.

He caught the moment—the way her skin glowed in the moonlight, the freckles on her collarbone like constellations, the dark olive of her flesh deepened by shadow and softened by the shimmer of dew.

He traced those freckles with his fingers, memorizing her again like a man who had almost lost everything.

“You're sure?” he asked.

Delilah cupped his cheek, hazel eyes sparking gold with magic. “I want you. Even bruised. Especially bruised.”

A huff of laughter escaped him, but it broke off when she leaned up and pressed her lips to a scar just below his ribs.

He shuddered. “That was a blade. Blackroot poison. Nearly bled me out.”

“And now?” she asked, kissing the mark again. “Now it’s just a line. One you lived through. One you don’t carry alone anymore.”

She pushed him gently onto his back, careful not to jar his injury. Her hands slid down his chest, across the bandages, then lower, teasing along the waistband of his pants.

“You’re a wild thing,” she murmured, eyes dragging across his body. “Towering. All muscle and moss and fury.”

“And you’re soft fire,” he rasped. “Sweet and untouchable until you decide otherwise.”

He let her undress him slowly—his boots kicked off, his pants peeled down over thick thighs and powerful legs. His cock stood proud, flushed and heavy, leaking at the tip.

She sucked in a breath, pupils blowing wide. “Fuck, Rollo...”

He reached for her, pulling her back into his lap with a low growl. Her thighs straddled him, wet heat brushing the length of his cock, and he nearly lost it right there.

His voice cracked. “You feel that? How much I want you?”

Delilah rocked her hips, pussy sliding against him, slick and hot and perfect.

“I’m soaked for you,” she breathed against his lips. “Been dreaming of you inside me every night you were healing.”

“Say it again,” he groaned.



“I want you. I need your cock, Rollo. I need to feel it stretch me. Fill me. Remind me you're still here.”

He hissed, every nerve on fire. “You’re gonna kill me, witch.”

“Not tonight,” she whispered, sinking lower to kiss his throat. “Tonight, I make you live.”

He flipped them carefully, her laughter like music as her back hit the moss. Her thighs parted beneath him, welcoming. Her pussy glistened in the moonlight, folds wet and open for him.

He ran a finger through her slit, groaning at how ready she was. She whimpered, bucking up toward him.

“So ready,” he murmured. “So perfect.”

He leaned down and kissed her again—deeper, more desperate—before trailing kisses lower. Her breasts, round and flushed, peaked under his mouth. He sucked one nipple into his mouth while his fingers teased the other, switching until she was writhing, her breath coming in gasps.

“I need you,” she cried. “Please, Rollo—fuck me.”

He lined himself up, sliding the tip of his cock through her slickness, teasing her entrance.

Her voice broke on a moan. “Don’t tease.”

“I’d never,” he growled. “Just... need to feel this.”

He pushed in slowly, inch by inch, the thick head of his cock stretching her open, coaxing a gasp from her lips.

Delilah's back arched off the moss, dark waves spilling behind her like ink, her fingers clawing into his shoulders as her pussy clenched around him.

"Fuck," he rasped, jaw tight. "You're so tight. So fucking warm."

She writhed beneath him, thighs trembling as she adjusted to his size. "You feel... gods, you feel huge. "

His cock throbbed inside her, buried to the hilt.

She was snug, hot, her slick walls gripping him in waves.

He paused there, fully seated, eyes locked on her face.

Her lips were parted, her chest heaving, the curve of her breasts rising and falling with each shallow breath.

Her hazel eyes were dark and wild, blown wide with pleasure.

"Shit, look at you," he muttered, brushing her damp hair from her face. "So fuckin' perfect like this. Wrapped around me. Meant for me."

Delilah's breath hitched, fingers sliding up into his hair to pull him down. "Move," she whispered, voice ragged. "I can take it. I want it."

He didn't make her wait.

Rollo rolled his hips, pulling out just enough to make her whimper, then slid back in

slow and deep. She moaned low in her throat, her entire body responding, arching to meet him.

Her pussy sucked at his cock, slick and fluttering around him as he found a rhythm—measured, deliberate, each thrust like a vow.

“I can feel every fuckin’ inch of you,” he grunted. “You’re squeezing me like you don’t wanna let go.”

“I don’t, ” she gasped, wrapping her legs around his waist to pull him deeper. “Deeper, Rollo. Give it to me.”

“Yeah?” He leaned in, lips brushing her ear. “You want it rough, sweet witch? Want me to ruin you a little?”

Her nails raked down his back. “Yes. Ruin me. I want to feel you for days.”

That was all the permission he needed.

He adjusted slightly, bracing his good arm beside her head while the other gripped her thigh, hiking her leg higher. The new angle had his cock sliding against that spot inside her that made her whole body jolt.

She cried out, thighs clenching around him. “There—fuck, right there?—”

“Yeah?” he panted, grinding his hips. “You like how I fill this sweet pussy up? How I stretch it open just for me?”

Delilah’s head fell back, lips parted in a breathless moan. “You feel so fucking good, Rollo. I can’t—gods, I can’t even think?—”

“That’s right,” he growled, dragging his cock out slow, then slamming it back in with a wet slap. “Don’t think. Just feel. ”

The sounds between them turned shameless—moans tangled with curses, the slick drag of cock in pussy, the steady slap of hips meeting hips, moss crushed beneath them. The scent of sex and sweat and earth mingled in the air.

He fucked her harder now, breath coming in ragged bursts, the muscles of his back flexing with each powerful thrust. His cock pounded into her, thick and unforgiving, but she met him stroke for stroke, her body open, greedy for everything he gave.

Delilah’s magic stirred with her pleasure—her hazel eyes flickering gold, little sparks dancing along her skin like starlight.

“Fuck, you’re glowing,” he groaned, forehead pressed to hers. “You’re glowing, baby.”

“That’s what you do to me,” she panted. “You make me come alive.”

He grunted, hips stuttering as her pussy clenched tight. “Gonna make you come, Delilah. Gonna fuck you through it.”

“Don’t stop—don’t you dare stop?—”

He reached between them, fingers finding her clit, rubbing tight, filthy little circles as he drove into her, relentless now. She cried out, shaking beneath him, her whole body tensing.

“Oh gods—Rollo— Rollo ?—”

Her orgasm hit hard. Her pussy clamped around him, fluttering, pulsing. She sobbed

his name, hips grinding up as waves of pleasure rolled through her.

He barely held on, her tight heat milking him, demanding his release.

“Fuck—Delilah— fuck —” he snarled, cock jerking deep inside her as he came with a roar, spilling into her in thick pulses. His vision blurred, his muscles locked, the world going silent around the thunder of his heartbeat.

They stayed tangled together, sweat-slick and breathless, the heat between their bodies as fierce as the moonlight above.

His cock was still buried deep, twitching inside her as he brushed his lips across her cheek, her throat, her swollen mouth.

They lay there, tangled in sweat and moss and starlight. His heart pounded. Hers pressed against his.

After a while, her fingers drifted over his chest. “No more hiding?”

He kissed her temple, lips brushing her damp curls. “No more.”

And beneath the sacred hush of the trees, Rollo held the woman who saved his life, and Delilah held the man who finally stopped running.

The bond between them wasn’t just flesh. It was forest-deep. Soul-steady. Magic-woven.

And this time... nothing and no one would break it.

### DELILAH

M orning found them tangled in moss and moon-drenched warmth.

The world had changed overnight—not in any sweeping, grand way, but in the hush of the trees and the rhythm of breath beside her. Delilah blinked against the rising sun as it broke through the pine boughs, gold spilling over Rollo’s bare shoulder and illuminating the curve of his jaw.

He looked peaceful, for once. Still.

Her fingers traced the line of his collarbone, slow and careful, skimming over the edges of old scars and new bruises. The bandages she’d wrapped held firm, but she could feel the heat still radiating from where Garrick’s poison had rooted deep.

The forest had been quiet all night.

But as the light deepened and dew slicked the air, the hush took on another tone. Like breath held too long.

She closed her eyes and leaned closer to Rollo, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear.

He stirred with a groggy rumble, one hand lifting to rest gently on the curve of her back.

“Mornin’,” he murmured, voice thick with sleep.

“Hey,” she whispered, smiling softly.

He kissed her hair and pulled her closer, his touch protective even in half-consciousness.

They didn’t say anything more for a long while. The birds began their morning chorus above, and the scent of crushed wild thyme clung to her skin. Everything should’ve felt safe.

But Delilah’s magic stirred uneasily.

She sat up slowly, brushing moss from her shoulder. The warmth of Rollo’s body slipped away as she rose, and he made a sleepy sound of protest.

“Just stretching,” she said quietly.

She stepped away, wrapping herself in his flannel and staring into the trees.

That’s when she heard it.

Not words, not exactly—but something deeper. Older. Woven into the rustle of the branches and the groan of ancient roots beneath her feet.

It’s almost time.

Her breath caught. She turned in a slow circle, eyes scanning the treeline.

“Who’s there?” she whispered.

The wind didn’t answer—but the leaves shivered all at once, as if touched by something more than breeze.

The warning was clear. The magic she'd used to save Rollo hadn't just been a gift. It had been a bargain. And the forest—alive, aware—was beginning to collect.

She knelt, placing her hand on the moss. The earth thrummed, faintly echoing the magic now twined between their souls.

"I understand," she murmured. "I'm listening."

The forest rustled again. And then silence.

She didn't realize Rollo had come up behind her until his hands gently slid around her waist.

"You felt it too, huh?" Rollo's voice came low, a rough scrape of concern and wonder beneath his breath.

Delilah didn't answer right away. She leaned into him, grounding herself in the solid warmth of his chest, the familiar scent of pine and soil. Her heart was still rattling from what the forest had whispered—but she nodded.

"Yeah," she murmured. "It's getting louder. More urgent."

Rollo's arms tightened around her waist, protective even in the softness of the moment. "It felt like something shifted... inside me. Not just the pain. Deeper."

She turned slowly, meeting his eyes, and saw the flicker of worry there. Not fear—he'd always met fear head-on. But something close. Something vulnerable.

"You think it means what I think it means?" he asked.

She exhaled. "Something's coming. Something big. And I think..." She hesitated,



eyes flicking to the canopy. “I think the forest is calling in what’s owed.”

His brow furrowed. “Owed?”

Delilah nodded. “When I found you, you were barely breathing. Your body wasn’t responding—not even to healing spells. I panicked. I didn’t have enough magic to purge the poison. Not on my own.”

He stilled.

“I didn’t pull from herbs or charms,” she continued. “I called the land. The forest. Whatever ancient spirit still listens beneath these trees.”

He stared at her, silent.

“I gave it something,” she said softly. “Something I couldn’t name. I just... poured myself into you. And the forest let me.”

“You channeled through the earth,” he whispered. “Through you. ”

“It’s old magic,” she said, voice cracking slightly. “Not just healing. It binds. Tethers. And now we’re tied in a way that... I don’t fully understand.”

Rollo looked down at his hands, then at hers.

“That’s what I’ve been feeling,” he murmured. “Like I’m not just breathing my breath anymore. Like you’re in my blood.”

She smiled faintly. “I am.”

He was quiet for a long moment, then said, “Do you regret it?”

Delilah turned in his arms fully, lifting her gaze to his. “Not a chance.”

Relief passed across his features like dawn breaking open a storm. His mouth curved into a slow, crooked smile, one that settled deep in her ribs.

“Good,” he said.

She reached up and touched his cheek, brushing her thumb along his jaw. “But we need to be ready. That bond? That power? It’s not just between us. It’s part of whatever’s waking up.”

His eyes darkened with understanding, his hand curling around her waist. “Then we don’t face it alone.”

“We can’t afford to.”

“We won’t.”

They dressed in silence, folding the night away like a sacred thing.

By the time they stepped back onto the trail toward the sanctuary, the sun was rising bold and bright above the mountain ridge. The town was still, but the air felt... charged. Like magic had stretched its arms and yawned.

As they walked, Delilah reached for Rollo’s hand. He took it without hesitation.

No hiding. No fear.

Just them.

### ROLLO

R ollo hadn't knocked on the apothecary's front door in years. Not properly, anyway.

He stood on the front step now, heart drumming harder than it had during any of his fights with Garrick or ever before. Harder than the moment Delilah had poured her magic into his dying body. It was a different kind of vulnerable—one that didn't come with claws or blood, but something deeper.

He ran a hand over the scruff on his face and adjusted the collar of his shirt, then knocked twice.

A pause. Then, from inside: "It's open, bear. Don't make me rise from bed to coddle your manners."

He cracked a small smile and pushed the door open.

The scent inside was familiar and grounding—mugwort, lemon balm, a hint of dried sage.

The hearth crackled low. Wren sat in her cushioned rocker by the fire, a knit shawl wrapped around her shoulders, a cup of tea steaming in her hands.

Her hair, streaked silver and wild as ever, had a sprig of blooming violet tucked behind one ear.

She didn't look frail today. She looked watchful.

“Wren,” he said quietly.

She didn’t glance up. “I already know what you’re here for.”

“Well... I was hopin’ I could at least say it first.”

Now her eyes lifted. Sharp. Bright. Amused.

She sipped her tea. “Go on, then.”

Rollo stepped in, the door clicking soft behind him. “I know things haven’t exactly been smooth between me and Delilah. And I know I’ve hurt her before. But I?—”

“You love her,” Wren finished. “Have for years. Even when you were too scared to name it.”

He nodded. “I do.”

Silence passed between them like a current.

“I nearly lost her,” he added, voice lower. “Twice now. And the next time... I want it to be because she walked away from me with her heart whole. Not ‘cause I pushed her out or failed to stand by her.”

Wren’s mouth twitched. “You rehearsed that?”

He grinned sheepishly. “A little.”

She shook her head with fondness. “Stubborn man.”

He took a breath. “I want your blessing, Wren. I want to court her proper. Like she

deserves. No more half-measures. No more runnin'. Just... me. Showin' up."

Wren set her tea down with a soft clink. She rose slowly, walking toward him with careful steps. She reached up—he bent slightly—and laid a wrinkled hand against his cheek.

"You already got my blessing," she said. "She's a storm and a bloom, that one. And you... you're her root. Been tangled since the day you met."

"But just so it's said plain—" she tapped his chest with a knuckle, "—if you ever make her cry again and I ain't the one dyin', you'll wish you were."

Rollo let out a short laugh. "Fair enough."

She smirked. "About time, bear."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Thank you."

"Go on then," she said, settling back into her chair. "She's probably already rearranging my entire greenhouse and acting like it's a favor."

He chuckled, turning toward the door.

As he stepped out into the afternoon sun, something bloomed in his chest—not fear. Not hesitation.

Hope.

And it felt damn good.

### DELILAH

The market was in full bloom.

Laughter floated through the air like pollen, caught between the jangling of charm bells and the bubbling chatter of friends trading jars of preserves and whispers of gossip.

Delilah carried her woven basket close to her hip, its weight familiar, filled with rosehips, fennel bulbs, and a half-pound of mossroot flour Wren had insisted on for her oatcakes.

The past week had been... good. Surprisingly good.

She and Rollo had settled into something new.

Something warm. He met her at the apothecary most mornings, always with a thermos of coffee from The Spellbound Sip and a dimpled grin that made her stomach twist. They hadn't put a name to it—whatever this was—but their touches lingered longer, their silences filled with meaning.

He called her “babe” under his breath when he thought she couldn't hear. And she never corrected him.

They were figuring it out.

Even if the world outside their quiet moments still spun too fast. Even if Garrick's

shadow still stretched longer by the day.

Junie waved her over from her herb stand, eyes crinkling. “Morning, moonvine!”

Delilah smirked. “Don’t start.”

“Oh, I will start and finish. That boy’s been walking lighter. You’ve been smiling more. Don’t play coy.”

Delilah set her basket on the table, plucking up a sprig of lemongrass. “It’s just... easier. Being home. Being with him.”

“‘Bout time,” Missy chimed in from the adjacent booth, where she was enchanting lavender sachets with subtle sleep charms. “Whole town’s been waiting for you two to stop circling like cautious cats.”

Delilah rolled her eyes, cheeks warming. “Well, maybe we were waiting for the right time.”

Junie leaned over. “There’s never a perfect time, hon. You just pick a moment and leap.”

Delilah’s laugh was soft, but she pocketed the advice anyway.

She reached for a string of protection beads—a new design Missy had woven with juniper and golden thread—but froze halfway through the motion.

A shiver crept up her spine. The hairs on her arms stood straight. A low hum pressed against her chest, like the forest had taken a breath... and held it.

She turned toward the trees.

From the edge of the market square, the Whispering Woods looked normal—lush and swaying—but she knew better. Knew when something wasn't right.

The trees vibrated. The wards flickered. Then the pain struck—low and deep in her gut, like her soul was being yanked sideways.

Delilah staggered.

“Hey—hey, you okay?” Junie's voice barely broke through.

Missy dropped her charmwork. “Delilah?”

Delilah opened her mouth to respond but couldn't find the words. Her vision blurred, the vibrant world around her going soft and distorted, like watercolors left out in the rain.

Another pulse hit.

She clutched her chest, knees buckling.

Someone caught her elbow. Maybe Junie. Maybe the ground. She couldn't tell anymore.

Voices blurred. The market twisted around her.

The forest roared in her head.

It's almost time.

Delilah collapsed, the world going black around her.



She came to in a haze of voices and the smell of damp earth.

“Delilah—can you hear me?” Rollo’s voice was thick with worry, somewhere near.

She tried to sit up, groaning as her head throbbed.

Warm arms eased her upright. His arms. She knew that scent, that grounding presence. Her head lolled against his shoulder.

“You’re alright,” he murmured. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Missy’s face appeared above her, pale and pinched. “We called Hazel. She’s on her way.”

Delilah blinked hard, her voice a whisper. “The woods... they cracked. I felt it.”

Rollo brushed the hair from her face. “Felt what?”

“Everything. All of it. The wards... the veil... it’s breaking.” Her voice shook. “It’s him. Garrick. His magic’s twisted into something worse.”

Rollo’s jaw clenched. “He’s pushing through.”

Missy murmured a quiet curse. “Then the council was wrong to wait.”

“Help me up,” Delilah rasped.

“No way,” Rollo said. “You just dropped like a stone. You’re staying down.”

“I’m not fragile,” she hissed.

“No,” he said gently, tightening his grip. “But you’re still healing. Just let us help.”

She slumped, frustrated but too weak to argue.

A moment later, Hazel appeared—her hair wild, robes trailing leaves, eyes lit with quiet fire.

She knelt beside them, placing a palm against Delilah’s brow. “Spirits are louder now. That tether you made? It’s bound you tighter to the land than you realize.”

Delilah’s heart stuttered. “Then what do I do?”

Hazel’s gaze was somber. “You anchor. You prepare. And you let yourself be held, child. Because this next bloom? It won’t come easy.”

Delilah nodded, tears prickling.

She didn’t want to be scared. But she was.

And all she could do now was hold tight to the hand wrapped in hers and pray they’d all survive whatever was coming.

ROLLO

The trees whispered his name.

Not lovingly. Not like they did for Delilah.

No—this was different. Urgent. Sharp as a blade against bark.

Rollo moved like the earth itself pushed him forward, steps landing heavy along the old hunter's path near the western ridge. His ribs still ached where Garrick's claws had landed weeks ago, but it wasn't pain that fueled his stride—it was rage.

Delilah had collapsed this morning. One minute she was laughing with Junie at the market, the next her knees buckled like a string had been cut.

And he'd known.

Deep in his marrow, in the bond they'd forged—he'd felt her pain roll through him like a tide.

It was Garrick. It had always been Garrick.

The bastard wasn't just poisoning the land anymore—he was draining it. And because Delilah had tethered her spirit to it to save him, she was now the one bleeding for it.

He crested the ridge.

The old clan site lay ahead—burnt stones, remnants of sacred bonfires, and the jagged arch of a fallen moonwood tree now split in half. The place where they'd once sparred, once shared rites of passage, now stood hollow. Dead.

And waiting.

Garrick stepped out from behind the tree like he'd been carved from its bark—shadow-thin and sharp-eyed. His magic hummed dark and coiled at his feet, rippling through the undergrowth like oil in water.

“Took you long enough,” he sneered. “Was starting to think you'd gone soft for good.”

Rollo didn't stop walking until they were a breath apart. “You hurt her.”

Garrick tilted his head. “She chose that.”

“She chose me ,” Rollo growled, “and to save me, she tied herself to the forest you're poisoning. You might as well have stuck your claws in her spine yourself.”

For a split second, something flickered in Garrick's eyes. Something bitter. “I didn't want her harmed,” he said. “Not really.”

“You didn't care if she was. That's worse.”

“She was never yours,” Garrick snapped, voice laced with venom. “You were too slow. Too afraid. You let fate slip right through your fingers and expected it'd just wait around for you.”

Rollo's fist clenched.

“And now?” Garrick’s smile twisted. “You think tying her down, marking her, claiming her makes it real? It just makes her your weakness.”

The words hit harder than claws. But Rollo didn’t flinch.

“She’s not my weakness,” he said, voice low. “She’s the reason I haven’t given up.” Then he struck.

The fight exploded like a thunderclap.

Rollo’s fist slammed into Garrick’s jaw, sending him stumbling back into the brush.

Garrick snarled, shifting halfway into his bear form—jagged claws, shadowed fur, eyes lit with corrupted magic.

He launched back, claws raking across Rollo’s side, but Rollo twisted, landing a knee in Garrick’s gut and slamming him down onto the roots below.

The ground shuddered. Magic flared—black for Garrick, deep amber for Rollo.

They circled each other, breath heaving, limbs scraped and bloodied.

“I didn’t want this!” Rollo barked. “You could’ve come back. We could’ve fixed it?—”

“I don’t want fixing,” Garrick snarled. “I want power . I want the town to bow to something stronger than tradition and fear.”

“You mean you,” Rollo spat. “You want them to bow to you .”

Garrick lunged.

They crashed into the sacred stones, shattering old wards that once protected their clan rites. Magic screamed through the air as they rolled, clawing, punching, snarling. They were no longer just men—they were beasts made of fire and memory.

Then the wind stopped. The trees leaned in. And the forest spoke.

Two towering shapes emerged from the surrounding grove—slow-moving, elemental, and impossible to ignore.

They rose from the soil like old gods returning to the surface, formed of ancient bark spiraled with lichen, glowing softly from within with threads of moonlight.

Their antlered crowns brushed the canopy, and their eyes, hollow as tree knots, pulsed with forest fire and judgment.

Their presence made the air still.

Birdsong stopped. The ground ceased breathing.

Their voices didn't come in words, not exactly, but through sensation—rippling up from the forest floor, buzzing deep in Rollo's bones like a dirge.

Enough.

The command vibrated through his chest, a living decree that even Garrick stilled beneath.

Suddenly, the earth split in jagged lines beneath Garrick's feet.

Roots shot up like spears, thick and fast, wrapping around his wrists and ankles with a sound like thunder cracking through stone.

The corrupted energy around him shrieked in protest, the dark veins of his magic convulsing under the spirit's purifying force.

"You can't have him," came the guardians' next decree, and this time the words were almost audible—like wind channeled through hollow trunks, ancient and absolute.

"You've taken enough," Rollo growled, rising to one knee, blood dripping from split knuckles and raw palms.

The spirits' light cast shifting shadows across his face, making him look half-wild, half-divine.

But Garrick didn't resist.

He only smiled.

A slow, sick curve of his mouth that spread like rot.

"I was never after you ," he said, voice smooth and curling with malice. His eyes gleamed, locked on Rollo's like a predator who'd already tasted blood. "I was after what you love."

He leaned his head back, as if inhaling the air left in the clearing.

"And I almost have it."

Rollo surged to his feet, fury riding his spine like lightning. "No," he snarled, voice like gravel breaking. "You'll never touch her."

The roots yanked Garrick backward, dragging him toward the grove's edge, where shadow tangled with light like war drums waiting to strike. The forest guardians

moved in unison, their limbs creaking like old wood, their command ironclad.

But Garrick—damn him—twisted just once more. Even bound, even fading into the dark, he turned.

His gaze cut through the magic between them.

“The bond is your weakness, Rollo,” he spat, his voice a blade of prophecy. “And when it breaks—so will you.”

Then the shadows swallowed him.

The grove pulsed once, and he was gone.

Silence fell.

The spirit guardians slowly turned to Rollo, their light dimming with somber gravity. One laid a hand—a great, gnarled limb of vine and bark—upon the cracked stone at the center of the clearing. Moss bloomed instantly around its fingers.

Their message, without words, echoed in his chest like a second heartbeat:

Protect the bloom. Or the rot will spread.

And then they, too, vanished into the trees, as if they had never been there at all.

Rollo stood alone, the clearing breathing slow again.

But his chest heaved.

Blood dripped from his fists, cooling on his skin.



And he didn't know what scared him more?—

That Garrick might be right.

Or that he might not be strong enough to prove him wrong.

DELILAH

The forest had always been her sanctuary.

Long before she'd left Celestial Pines, before Salem and circles of stone and endless books on botanical rites and alchemical bindings, the woods had been her first teacher. Her quiet refuge. It was where she learned to feel the difference between roots and rot.

And now it was where she went to run—not away, but inward.

Because if she stayed near Rollo any longer, she'd fall apart.

She moved through the trees in silence, skirts brushing moss, her boots damp with morning dew. Her hands were clenched into fists, tucked tight against her ribs. Not from anger. Not even fear.

But grief.

The kind that built quiet and slow, like ivy up a wall.

She didn't need Hazel's riddles or the spirits' whispers to know something had shifted. She'd seen the way Rollo returned from the grove—shoulders bowed under weight he didn't speak. His eyes darker. Not just tired, but fractured.

And he hadn't told her what happened. Just a muttered, "He's still out there," and a kiss to her forehead like it might be the last time.

That's when she knew.

He had confronted Garrick again. Alone. Because of her.

Because of the bond they shared now—deep and tangled and bright as fire—but double-edged. The more she poured into him, the more she tethered herself to this land, the more he saw her as something fragile. Something sacred, maybe. But not safe. Not for him.

And gods help her, he might've been right.

Her collapse at the market had sent a ripple through town. She'd heard Missy whispering to Junie. How magic like that didn't belong in one girl's chest. How maybe the bond wasn't just saving her—it was draining her.

And Rollo?

He'd carried her out of that crowd like she was made of petals, not muscle. Held her too carefully, like if he squeezed too hard, she'd turn to dust.

But she wasn't afraid for herself .

She was afraid of herself.

Of what she might have to do to stop Garrick. Of how far her power might pull her from the people she loved.

Of the ancient whispers that still echoed at the edge of her thoughts.

It's almost time.

Delilah stopped in a clearing where the moonvine grew in lazy curls up an old stone altar. She sank to her knees and let her basket fall beside her.

Her fingers curled into the moss.

“I didn’t ask for this,” she whispered, voice breaking. “I didn’t ask to be the one who had to hold this together.”

The wind answered only with silence.

A stillness that wasn’t peace. A pause before a storm.

She blinked hard, willing the tears away. They burned anyway.

“I love him,” she said aloud, the words tasting like salt and iron. “But if I stay... he’ll bleed for me. And I can’t ask him to do that. Not again.”

The guilt clawed deep.

Rollo had nearly died because she wasn’t fast enough.

Wren was fading because her magic wasn’t strong enough.

The land was sickening because her bond made it easier for Garrick’s corruption to reach her.

And now Rollo thought he had to protect her.

From Garrick.

From the forest.

From himself.

Delilah buried her face in her hands. Her breath came out in jagged stutters.

“I thought the bond meant we were stronger,” she whispered. “But maybe it’s just making us easier to break.”

She stayed there a long while, letting the stillness swallow her.

Then she stood.

Steady. Quiet. Resolute.

She didn’t need saving.

And she couldn’t let herself become the reason he was always one step from the edge. Garrick had told Rollo that the bond was his weakness, and while Delilah had refused to believe it at first, the ache in her chest now whispered something she couldn’t ignore.

Maybe it wasn’t the bond itself—but what it asked of them. What it demanded.

If she had to meet Garrick herself—if she had to become something more than she’d ever dared to be to protect Wren, protect this town, protect Rollo —then she would.

But not as his mate.

Not if being bound to her meant Rollo walked toward every fire just to shield her from the heat. Not if it kept costing him pieces of himself because she knew she had no more of herself to give to save him.

She rose from the mossy altar with her heart breaking open inside her chest. But her spine stayed straight.

There was one more thing she had to do before she disappeared into the woods to save everything she loved.

Rollo was at the sanctuary, feeding the phoenix pup with one hand and rubbing his side absently with the other. His movements were slower now, that same haunted weariness back in his shoulders—more weight than he'd carried since she'd returned.

When he turned and saw her, his whole face shifted—softened, opened.

He set the feed bowl down. “Hey?—”

“We need to talk,” she said, voice too even.

Delilah stepped in slowly, carefully, like she already knew he'd break from whatever she was about to say.

“Something's changing,” she said quietly. “In the forest. In me. You can feel it too, I know you can.”

“I do,” he said, gaze steady. “But we can face it together.”

She shook her head. “That's just it. We can't.”

He moved closer. “Delilah, no. Don't do this.”

“I have to,” she whispered. “I'm not doing this because I don't love you. I'm doing it because I do. Because if I stay—if we stay like this—you'll keep trying to carry me. Shield me. And one day, I won't be fast enough to stop the blow meant for me.”

He reached out, fingers just brushing hers. “Don’t ask me to stand still while you walk into something alone.”

Tears threatened, but she held firm.

“I need to do this,” she said, voice thick. “Not just for Wren. Or for the town. But for me. I have to know what I am without the bond telling me. And you have to live without breaking every time I stumble.”

A beat of silence passed. A long, painful beat.

“I love you, Rollo Steele,” she said, finally letting the tears fall. “But we need to end this. For now.”

He didn’t fight her. Just looked at her like the ground had slipped out beneath his feet.

She kissed his cheek, slow and lingering.

“Stay safe, bear,” she murmured. Then she turned and walked into the forest, alone.

ROLLO

R ollo hadn't moved.

Not when the sanctuary door clicked shut behind her. Not when her scent had faded into the woods. Not when the pain cracked something ancient and unmended inside his chest.

He stood there, dumbstruck, one hand still lifted like he might catch the ghost of her goodbye.

"She really went," he said aloud, though no one answered.

The phoenix pup chirped once from the straw basket, and that somehow made it worse.

He dropped to the bench like a felled tree, elbows on his knees, chest heaving.

"I let her walk away."

But even as the words left his mouth, his bear stirred.

No. She walked because she thought it was the only way to protect him. To protect everything.

But she was wrong.



Love wasn't his weakness. It was his anchor .

He stood fast, his ribs screaming in protest—but his will stronger.

“I'm not lettin' her fight this alone.”

Rollo snatched his jacket, grabbed the bundle of salt wards from the cabinet, and pressed his palm against the old map carved into the wall of the sanctuary's storage room. His fingers found the grove marker—the place where moonvine twisted wild and the spirits whispered louder than reason.

He already knew that's where she'd gone.

The bond between them wasn't gone. Just... quieter. Dimmed like candlelight behind thick glass. He could still feel her—like a heartbeat not his own.

He headed into the woods.

The Whispering Woods were not kind tonight.

Every step was met with resistance.

The underbrush didn't just tangle—it fought , coiling like serpents around his boots, tugging at his ankles, testing his balance.

Brambles snatched at the hem of his shirt, tearing threads as though demanding a toll for passage.

The roots beneath the soil seemed to swell with every footfall, shifting like waves under his weight, making solid ground feel like a lie.

The trees themselves leaned inward, their limbs creaking with old suspicion. Bark peeled like watchful eyes. Leaves rustled without wind, murmuring secrets Rollo couldn't catch, and wasn't sure he wanted to.

It was like walking into a trial. And still, he pressed forward.

"She's mine," he growled low, voice barely more than a breath but steeped in steel. "You can test me, warn me, twist the paths—I don't care. I'm not leaving her out here to bleed alone."

The wind stirred, but not gently. It surged up in a sudden cyclone, spiraling with pine needles and dust, slapping him hard across the face. The scent of earth and ash filled his lungs.

Then the whisper came, not from one voice, but many. Woven through the wind, the moss, the bones of the trees:

She chose the path. You were not invited.

It wasn't cruel. It was final. Guarded.

Rollo stopped only for a moment, bracing a hand on the gnarled trunk of an elder oak. His heart hammered in his chest, not from fear, but from fury. Grief. Love.

"She didn't mean to walk it alone," he said, teeth gritted. "She just thought she had to."

The vines around him stilled. The air shifted again—less hostile now. Quieter. Listening.

"I made her think she was safer without me," he admitted, softer now. "But I won't

let her carry that weight. Not when it's mine too."

Silence fell. And the path opened.

The brambles curled back just slightly. The roots stilled. The trees—those old, judgmental sentinels—stood aside.

The spirits didn't answer. But they let him pass. Because even the forest, in its own ancient way, knew a heart like his didn't break—it fought .

And that kind of love? It didn't need permission. It only needed purpose.

He found her in the moonvine grove.

She sat cross-legged in the center of the clearing, magic pulsing around her in quiet waves. The vines had curled near her body like lovers seeking warmth. Her eyes were closed, lips moving in a chant he barely heard—one meant to shield, maybe, or to bind.

But she paused the moment he stepped into the light.

Her eyes opened slowly. Wide. Brimming.

"You weren't supposed to come," she whispered.

He didn't stop moving.

"Then you should've made that more clear."

"Would it have mattered?"

“Nope.”

Delilah stood, her shoulders squared, but her chin trembled.

“I told you—this isn’t your battle. Not anymore.”

His steps were slow, deliberate, and full of everything he couldn’t say. “You don’t get to make that call for me.”

“I’m trying to protect you?—”

“And I’m trying to love you,” he snapped, voice shaking. “That’s what this is. That’s what this means. ”

He stepped into the edge of the grove’s pulse and felt it—magic sharp like pine needles, warning him off. He didn’t flinch.

She looked away. “If Garrick finds me, he’ll use me against you.”

“Then I’ll stop him.”

“What if you can’t?”

He took her hands—rough, calloused, warm. Still trembling.

“I almost died without you,” he whispered. “And not just from the poison. But from being too afraid to let you in. I’m done hiding. Done treating this bond like it’s a burden.”

She blinked up at him, eyes shimmering.

“It’s not a curse,” he said. “It’s our strength. And you know it.”

Delilah’s breath caught.

“You still love me?” she asked, voice breaking on the last word.

He laughed rough, raw, aching.

“Of course I do. You walking away doesn’t change that.”

Her lips parted, and she reached for him.

Their kiss was fire and roots and breaking open—two halves locking together the way only soul-deep things could.

The forest hushed. And for a breathless moment, the corruption stilled.

Love wasn’t a weakness.

It was the strongest thing they had.

### DELILAH

The moment their lips met, the weight she'd been carrying—layer by layer, spell by spell—lifted.

Delilah melted into him, into the warmth of his mouth, the rough steadiness of his hands cupping her cheeks like she was something precious. His kiss wasn't desperate. It wasn't rushed.

It was home.

And it shattered every wall she'd spent days building.

When she finally pulled back, her breath came in soft little gasps, forehead pressed to his.

“You stubborn, wonderful idiot,” she whispered.

His smile was crooked. “Takes one to love one.”

They stayed like that for a beat. The wind weaving through the trees in gentle sighs. The moon hung high above them now, casting silver across his lashes, catching in her hair like stardust. The clearing was quiet. The vines hummed but didn't reach. The spirits, for once, were still.

She lifted her fingers to his face, traced the edge of his jaw.

“I thought I had to do this alone,” she said, her voice a little cracked around the edges.

“You don’t,” he murmured. “You never did.”

Delilah swallowed the knot in her throat. “You were right. About the bond. About what it is. It doesn’t make us weak.”

He kissed the back of her hand. “No.”

She stepped back and turned slowly, taking in the grove—once wild, now pulsing with calm. Her magic felt... different. Like the roots ran deeper, richer, more balanced.

Like him .

She turned back. “When I tied myself to the forest, I thought I was sacrificing love for duty. But now I think... I think the forest didn’t just accept me because I was strong.”

He raised a brow.

“I think it accepted me because we’re strong. Together.”

Rollo stepped forward, hands settling at her waist.

“Well, damn. That’s almost poetic.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing softly. “Shut up.”

He grinned. “Can’t help it. I just got my girl back.”

She leaned into his chest, letting the rhythm of his heartbeat anchor her. It was steady, sure—like the rhythm of the forest when it was healthy. And for the first time in what felt like ages, it didn't feel like something was slipping out from under her feet.

It felt grounded.

Rooted.

Like maybe, they were ready.

To fight and win.

“We have to end it,” she said softly, the words laced with quiet resolve.

“Garrick?” Rollo asked, even though they both knew the answer.

She nodded, her cheek brushing his collarbone. “No more hiding. No more second-guessing. We take it to him. We make the town safe again. For Wren. For the forest. For us. ”

Rollo exhaled against her temple, the weight of everything they had been carrying softening, if only slightly. “Then we do it together.”

She pulled back just enough to look up at him. “We'll need more than bravery.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, curious.

Delilah turned and reached into her satchel, retrieving a round wooden bowl, no wider than her palm. It wasn't much to look at at first glance—just carved walnut, stained with herbs and age—but it pulsed faintly with magic. Ancient. Waiting.



“I started it before you found me,” she said, brushing her thumb across its rim. “Something the spirits showed me. It’s not just a bowl—it’s a vessel. For focus. For bonding.”

Rollo took it carefully in his hands. “You made this?”

She nodded. “Part of the old rites. But unfinished.”

Her voice dipped lower. “It’s meant to hold the intention of two bonded forces. To unify them into one magic.”

Rollo stared at it for a long beat. Then he sank to the moss beside her and pulled out the bone-handled blade he always kept tucked in his belt.

He offered it to her.

“Let’s finish it,” he said.

She took the blade and carefully etched the first rune—an anchor, for steadiness—into the bowl’s edge. Then passed it back.

He added the next—a bear claw, symbol of protection.

Back and forth they went. Fire. Earth. Moonlight. Vine. Until a ring of runes circled the bowl’s rim like a crown.

Last, they carved their initials at the base. A mark not of ownership—but of promise.

When they were done, Delilah pressed both hands to the bowl. It flared warm beneath her palms, accepting the joint magic like breath into lungs.

Rollo placed his hand over hers.

The pulse between them wasn't just love—it was purpose.

Power.

The kind only possible when two hearts beat as one.

And together, they stood.

Their path clear. Their bond unbreakable.

But just as she looked up, a ripple split the clearing. The temperature dropped— just enough to be felt. A low vibration rolled through the soil beneath their feet, the magic coiling taut in her chest.

Then the scent hit her.

Cinders. Charred bark. Something sour underneath. Her spine went rigid.

“Rollo,” she whispered.

He stiffened. Turned.

From the shadows, a figure emerged. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Eyes gleaming with corruption and delight.

“Well, well,” Garrick drawled, stepping into the moonlight. His grin was slow and serpentine. “I thought I smelt my future queen.”

Delilah's stomach flipped.

Rollo stepped forward, low and growling, arm instinctively shielding her.

Garrick cocked his head. “Didn’t expect the little flower to have so many thorns.” His gaze slid to her. “But you always were full of surprises, weren’t you, Delilah?”

She didn’t flinch. But her hand found Rollo’s, fingers threading tight.

Because this time, she wasn’t facing the dark alone.

### ROLLO

The moment Garrick stepped out of the shadows, the grove dimmed.

The moon still hung above them, silver and full, but its light dulled as if the trees themselves recoiled from the weight of the darkness clinging to his frame. Garrick moved like oil over stone—slick, slow, and so sure of his place in this poisoned world.

Rollo could feel Delilah tense beside him, her fingers woven through his, her breath catching as Garrick's smirk curled.

"Still blooming, I see. Even after all that damage."

Rollo stepped forward before Delilah could, placing himself between her and the threat.

"You're not touching her," he said, each word thick with promise.

Garrick's eyes glinted. "You're a fool, Rollo. Always were. You think love will save you from what's coming?"

"No," Rollo said, cracking his neck. "I think it already has."

The ground pulsed beneath them. The roots groaned.

Rollo could feel the forest's pain—the tension between old magic and new rot

stretching too thin.

He didn't need to look to know Delilah felt it too.

She moved beside him, hand slipping free only to reach into her satchel.

The whisper of spell-thread and dried leaves followed.

Garrick raised a hand. Shadows rose behind him—shifting like wolves at the edge of a flame.

“You can't save her,” he said. “You bound her. You made her part of this dying thing. She'll break long before the trees do.”

Delilah's voice cut through the air. “That's where you're wrong.”

She stepped forward then, just a few paces, and laid the carved bowl Rollo had seen in her hands when he had found her moments ago. She set it on the moss. Her eyes never left Garrick's.

“I chose this,” she said. “I chose the forest. And I chose him. You twisted your bond into a weapon. We made ours a sanctuary.”

Garrick snarled.

That did it.

The shadows lunged, and Rollo shifted without hesitation.

Bones cracked, fur tore through flesh, and in seconds, his bear stood where the man had been. Massive, gold-flecked, furious. Delilah didn't flinch. She knelt behind him,

pressing her palms to the soil. Her voice rose in chant—low, melodic, ancient.

Rollo charged.

The shadows met him with claws like razors, but he batted them aside. He focused on Garrick—his once-brother now veiled in malice. They collided with the force of history. Claw met claw. Blood hit bark.

Delilah's voice wove through the clearing like music no one had heard in centuries—pulling power from the roots beneath their feet, drawing strength from the stars burning cold and watchful above.

The carved bowl in front of her pulsed brighter with each word, the green and gold light flickering like breath—alive, building, becoming.

It wasn't just magic anymore.

It was theirs.

Bound through carved runes, sealed with ash, blood, and belief. A union of spirit, soil, and soul.

Rollo's growls echoed behind her, animal and raw. She didn't have to look to know he was locked in a brutal dance with Garrick—two beasts forged from the same earth, now tearing at each other with everything they had left.

But this magic wasn't about tearing down.

It was about restoring.

Delilah laid the final ingredients into the bowl with reverence: a tangle of moonvine,

a single phoenix feather glimmering like fire-caught dawn, and the sharp drop of her own blood.

It hissed as it hit the mixture, the light flaring—no longer green and gold, but something deeper. Older. Forest-dark and starborn.

She whispered the name that bound them.

“Rollo.”

The forest gasped.

A great wind surged, bending trees, rattling leaves like bones in a cup. The ground beneath her shivered as the grove itself awakened.

And Garrick?

He screamed .

A scream not of pain, but of rage.

“No!” he bellowed, tearing free of the roots that had tried to anchor him. His face twisted into something monstrous as he surged toward her, dark tendrils of magic licking the air behind him like flame.

“You don’t get to rewrite fate!”

But Rollo was faster.

He launched out of the shadows, mid-shift—half man, half bear, all fury—and slammed into Garrick just inches from Delilah. They crashed into a cluster of trees,

and the impact cracked like thunder. Bark exploded. Air warped with power.

Delilah's hands flew over the bowl, chanting faster now, anchoring every line, every word, with heart.

The grove ignited.

Light burst from the ground like an eruption of life itself—roots spiraling up, vines unfurling with purpose. They didn't just wrap Garrick.

They recognized him.

And they wept.

The vines coiled tighter, not with rage—but with mourning. The spirits of the forest knew him once. Knew what he could've been. What he had chosen to throw away.

"You did this to yourself," Delilah said, rising to her feet. Her voice rose over the wind, the light, the wailing song of the forest breaking its silence. "You chose destruction. We chose each other."

Rollo, bruised and bloodied, still held Garrick down.

"You could've come home," he rasped, sweat and magic dripping from his brow. "You could've been something."

Garrick gave a bitter, broken laugh. "Home? Home died when they cast me out. And you? You'll lose her. Just wait. Tie your soul to hers and when it shatters?—"

"It won't," Rollo growled. "Because this time, I protect it. Not from fear. But from faith. "



Delilah stepped beside him, her palm pressing over Rollo's heart.

"I chose this," she said softly, but clearly. "I chose you. "

The ritual surged.

The bowl cracked once. Then again. A jagged fissure split its side, and light poured out like molten dawn.

The grove howled.

The vines went taut.

And then Garrick screamed—not with rage, but with fear.

"No. No—don't?—"

Ash.

It started at his fingertips, crumbling to the wind like scorched leaves. Then his arms, his chest, his snarling face. The shadows he wielded flailed once, then shrank back, banished by the tide of ancient light.

One final breath—and he was gone.

Carried off on a wind thick with pine and the cleansing scent of rain that hadn't fallen yet.

Silence.

Total, blessed silence.

Suddenly, birdsong.

One. Then two. Then the whole grove burst with life, as if the trees themselves exhaled relief.

Rollo collapsed to his knees, breath ragged, chest rising and falling like waves in a storm just broken.

Delilah dropped beside him, arms around his shoulders, forehead against his temple.

“You did it,” he whispered, voice shredded.

She shook her head gently. “ We did.”

The grove sighed again.

No longer heavy with corruption.

But full. Whole. Alive.

The forest had been healed.

And so had they.

### DELILAH

The wind kissed her cheeks like an old friend.

Delilah stood at the edge of the forest, fingers laced tightly with Rollo's as they crossed the threshold back into Celestial Pines. The scent of pine and earth was cleaner now, sweeter, as though the land itself had taken a breath and finally let it go.

Behind them, the Whispering Woods shimmered—not with menace, but with a quiet magic. Life thrumming beneath moss and root. Peace hard-earned.

The town stood waiting.

Not with banners or streamers or song—but with eyes wide, breaths held, and hearts lifted by something they hadn't felt in a long time.

Relief.

As Rollo and Delilah stepped from the edge of the Whispering Woods, hand in hand and smeared with dirt and magic and exhaustion, the breeze shifted. It swept through the green, soft and clean, and every head turned their way.

A single cheer rose up from somewhere near the bakery.

Then Junie Bell's unmistakable whoop echoing over the roofs like thunder cracking through a quiet storm.

And then the sound grew, rolled, gathered—applause not of spectacle, but of thanks.

Delilah blinked, caught off guard as the people began to approach—not rushing, but moving with quiet reverence. They didn’t look at her like a stranger anymore. Not like the girl who left, or the one who came back angry and unsure.

They looked at her like someone who had saved them.

Because she had.

She had stood between them and rot. Between light and ruin. And they knew.

“You felt it,” she whispered under her breath, stunned.

Rollo nodded, his grip on her hand steady and sure. “They felt everything. The Veil, the Pact—the forest breathing again.”

A young girl pressed a sprig of blooming sweetgrass into Delilah’s hand, her small fingers brushing Delilah’s palm.

“Thank you,” she whispered before darting back behind her mother’s skirts.

More followed. Little touches. Quiet words. Heads bowed in gratitude.

There were no garlands. No fanfare.

But there didn’t need to be.

The magic she had restored lived in their eyes.

Delilah swallowed hard, her voice catching. “I wasn’t gone long...”

“You didn’t need to be,” Rollo said gently, looking at her like she held the moon in her hands. “You came back changed. And so did they.”

From the crowd, Wren stepped forward—no cane, no shawl, no sluggish haze in her eyes. Just Wren, tall and fierce in her way, a crown of blooming herbs twined through her hair.

Delilah gasped.

“Gran?”

Wren smiled. Not weakly— triumphantly.

“Did you think I was going to miss the celebration after all that hollering you did in the woods?”

Delilah launched forward and threw her arms around her.

“I thought?—”

“I know,” Wren murmured, hugging her tightly. “But I told you, child. You’re the bloom. All I had to do was hold on long enough for you to realize your roots were deeper than you thought.”

Delilah’s heart swelled, tears catching at the corners of her eyes as Rollo joined them, looping an arm around her waist and bowing slightly to Wren.

“Glad to see you upright,” he said with a smirk.

“Glad to be upright,” Wren replied, nudging him. “Though I hear you’re partially to blame for my sore ribs. That boy you fought had shadows deeper than a cave troll’s

butt.”

“Colorful,” Rollo said, laughing.

They walked slowly through the square, hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, as if returning from a pilgrimage.

Because in a way—they had.

Hazel met them at the steps of the council hall with the other council members behind her. Her hair was woven with violet strands and tiny white buds bloomed along her collarbone, sprouting from skin like she was half soil herself.

She studied Delilah a long moment, then gave a small nod.

“You did what I hoped,” she said. “Not just healing the land, but yourself.”

Delilah looked away, emotions too raw.

Hazel stepped forward, gently brushing a knuckle down Delilah’s cheek.

“You were always meant to be more than what you were told,” Hazel murmured. “More than the girl who left. More than the one who came back angry. You’re the bridge now. Between root and bloom. Past and future.”

Delilah nodded, throat tight.

Hazel reached into her robe and handed her a scroll, tied with pale green thread.

“Consider this official,” she said. “The council voted this morning. The role of Permanent Healer, Forest Liaison, and Guardian of the Grove is yours—should you

want it.”

Delilah froze.

Permanent.

Not a visitor. Not someone temporarily called home by duty or guilt.

This was a place. A purpose.

A life.

She looked at Rollo, who was already smiling. Not pushing. Just waiting.

For her choice.

“I’d be honored,” Delilah said, voice strong now. “So long as I don’t have to do it alone.”

Hazel’s eyes twinkled. “Never.”

The sun crested above the trees then, golden and high, casting warm light over everything—over townsfolk gathering in the green, over ribbons fluttering from eaves, over laughter and celebration and years of shadow finally lifting.

Delilah turned to Rollo, both hands cupping his face.

“You made me stronger,” she whispered.

“No,” he said, brushing his lips across her forehead. “You were strong already.”

She leaned in, pressed her lips to his—and it wasn't desperate this time. It wasn't fierce with fear or stitched together by old pain.

It was soft. Hopeful. Whole.

The kiss of a woman who had come home to herself.

And to the man who waited with her every step of the way.



### ROLLO

A week had passed since the forest sighed back to life, and Celestial Pines finally felt like itself again.

The air didn't taste like copper and ash anymore. Birds sang more often than they didn't. And the townsfolk? They smiled like they meant it now—like the weight that had pressed down on their shoulders for months had finally slipped free.

Even the Whispering Woods had gone soft around the edges, humming instead of groaning, offering gentle breezes instead of warnings.

But Rollo hadn't relaxed in days. Because today—hell, maybe this moment —was the one he'd been turning over in his mind since the night Delilah saved his life... again.

He stood outside The Spellbound Sip, one hand fiddling with the edge of his flannel sleeve, the other holding the smallest box he'd ever carried that somehow weighed more than a bear trap.

The ring inside wasn't flashy. Gods knew Delilah would've handed it back if it sparkled too hard. No, it was simple. Gold kissed with forest iron, forged by hand, with a single crescent rune carved on the inside. The one she'd drawn on the ritual bowl to represent them in the forest.

He tucked it back in his pocket and took a breath.

The little bell above the door chimed when he pushed inside.

It smelled like lemon mist and roasted almonds. A cozy mix of sweetness and something tart—just like her.

Delilah sat near the back window, sunlight catching in her chestnut hair. She wore her usual—soft cotton sleeves pushed to her elbows, a smudge of something herb-stained on her cheek. She looked like home.

Rollo didn't smile. Not yet. He couldn't. His jaw was tight, his palms sweating. And he hated how his heart kept trying to knock its way out of his chest like it had something to prove.

"Hey, bear," she said, without looking up from her tea. "You're late."

He scratched the back of his neck. "I was... uh. Thinkin'."

She raised an eyebrow, teasing. "Dangerous habit."

He crossed to her slowly, boots silent on the old wooden floor, and took the seat across from her. "Got a minute?"

"For you? Always."

Nerissa, the siren-barista, passed by with a wink and a fresh pot of tea. Rollo murmured a thank you, then held up a hand when she reached for their cups.

"I got this part," he said, his voice gruff but soft.

Delilah blinked. "You're making the tea?"

He nodded.

“Since when do you?—”

He didn’t answer. Just reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small bundle of herbs tied in twine. Cinnamon bark, dried lemon balm, and one perfect lemon mist blossom. Carefully, he dropped them into her cup, letting them steep. The air shifted, warm and citrusy.

She leaned in, eyes narrowing. “What are you up to?”

He looked at her hands wrapped around the mug, and then up into her hazel eyes.

“I ain’t good with speeches,” he started, voice low. “Words never came easy. But you... you always made ‘em feel worth sayin’.”

She didn’t interrupt.

“I spent most of my life thinkin’ I had to be hard. That protectin’ folks meant standin’ between them and hurt, even if it meant lettin’ it hit me instead. Even if it meant pushin’ people away.”

He swallowed hard.

“But then you came back. And I remembered that protection isn’t just fighting.”

Her hand twitched around the cup.

“It’s holdin’. Standing beside. Taking the weight with someone, not from them.”

He reached into his coat again, pulled out the cinnamon bark she hadn’t noticed

before—cracked down the center.

Inside, nestled in the curl of spice, was the ring.

Delilah gasped, hand flying to her mouth.

Rollo's fingers were trembling when he picked it up, but he dropped to one knee anyway. Right there in The Spellbound Sip. Next to the table where they'd shared arguments, kisses, awkward silences, and that very first cinnamon-laced truce.

"I love you," he said, raw and ragged. "Not just because we're fated. Not because the forest says so. But because you see me—even the parts I still try to hide. You see them, and you stay."

Delilah's eyes brimmed, tears tracking slowly down her cheeks.

"So," Rollo said, clearing his throat. "What do you say? Would you be willing to marry an old bear like me?"

She didn't say anything.

Not at first. She laughed.

Bright and sudden and beautiful. Her whole body leaned back as it bubbled out of her, light and full of every good thing in the world.

Rollo blinked, stunned. "Is that a—bad reaction?"

She grabbed his shirt, hauled him up into a kiss so fierce it nearly knocked his balance. Then she whispered against his lips, "That's a yes, you stubborn bear."

Cheers erupted from somewhere behind them. Apparently, Nerissa had lingered just long enough to eavesdrop.

Rollo didn't care.

He pressed his forehead to Delilah's, both of them breathless and grinning like fools.

"You're mine now," he murmured.

Delilah snorted. "I've been yours since the moment you growled at me in that moonvine garden."

He slipped the ring onto her finger, slow and sure.

It fit.

The tea sat untouched, the lemon mist curling like a blessing into the air.

And outside, the sun burned gold over a town that had been broken and healed—just like them.

### DELILAH

The stars were kind tonight.

They blinked down over Celestial Pines like a string of lanterns hung just for them, suspended above the clearing behind the sanctuary where soft moss covered the earth like nature's altar.

Moonlight spilled silver between the trees, quiet and clean, like a blessing only the forest could give.

Delilah stood still, heart thudding like a drum in her chest, one hand pressed flat over her ribs.

She wasn't nervous.

Not exactly.

She just... felt everything. All at once.

The breeze whispering through her hair. The scent of lavender and moss from the garlands woven into her crown. The subtle shimmer of magic woven into her soft gray gown—courtesy of Missy and Junie, who had insisted a forest bride deserved a little sparkle.

And Rollo.

Standing at the end of the aisle. Looking at her like she was the moon come down from the sky.

His shirt was linen, simple, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His beard trimmed, his eyes warm. A circlet of pine rested atop his tousled hair, tucked with a single sprig of moonvine. He looked every bit the protector he'd always been—only now, the shadows were gone from his shoulders.

Delilah took one step forward.

Then another.

Hazel waited beneath the arch, flowers blooming from her shoulders like part of the earth itself. Wren stood beside her, healthy and glowing, her hand resting over her chest where life pulsed steady and strong.

The town had gathered, quiet but brimming. No fanfare. No spectacle.

Just love.

Dax offered her a thumbs-up and a cheeky grin. “About time you two stopped making us all dizzy.”

Delilah laughed.

But when she stepped beneath the arch, everything else faded.

Rollo took her hands, big and warm, scarred and sure.

Hazel's voice floated above them, soft and grounding. “Tonight, under the moon and in the presence of root and wing, you bind not just fates—but choices.”

Delilah looked up at Rollo.

And he, at her.

Hazel continued, “This bond is not forged by prophecy or spell. It is strengthened by effort. By trust. By choosing each other again and again. ”

Rollo’s voice was low, trembling with emotion as he spoke his vow. “I spent too long thinking I had to stand alone. But you showed me strength isn’t being alone—it’s knowing who you’d walk through fire for. And I’d walk through anything, Delilah. So long as it brings me to you.”

Delilah blinked fast, lips trembling as she whispered, “You’ve been my roots when mine were gone. My compass when I lost the stars. You’re my anchor, Rollo. My home. And I choose you. Always.”

Hazel lifted her hands.

Magic shimmered between their palms—subtle but strong. A golden thread of light looping between them, twining around their fingers, their wrists, their hearts.

Wren stepped forward, her voice like wind through leaves.

“I bless this union with the forest’s breath. May it guide you, guard you, and grow with you. Together.”

The thread sank into their skin, disappearing—but the bond pulsed warm and real beneath it.

Hazel smiled, eyes soft. “You may seal your vows.”



Rollo didn't wait.

He bent, catching Delilah's lips with his, the kiss sure and sweet and entirely too long if not for the delighted cheer that rose from the town.

Delilah melted into him, laughter tumbling between them as he wrapped his arms around her and spun her once, boots kicking up soft moss.

They were met with embraces, cheers, flowers pressed into their hands—wild blossoms tied in ribbon, single sprigs of mint and rosemary tucked into buttonholes and curls. Laughter sparkled like sunlight off a stream.

Jace, the hardened and usually grumpy alpha of the shifter wolf pack, strode through the small crowd like a mountain wrapped in muscle.

He stopped before Rollo, studying him with a gaze sharp enough to slice bark.

Then, with a grunt, he clapped a heavy hand on Rollo's shoulder. "You did good, Steele."

Rollo smirked, one arm wrapped tight around Delilah's waist. "You have no idea."

Jace's features softened just enough to reveal something like approval. His other arm curved around Lyra, who leaned in with the graceful ease of someone who could level a beast with a whisper or charm a storm into stillness.

Jace's gaze landed on Delilah. He nodded once. "Glad you stayed."

Delilah tilted her head, the weight of years behind her smile. "Me too."

Lyra stepped forward, brushing Delilah's arm with a friendly touch. "It's nice having

another woman here who knows how to balance fire and finesse,” she said, eyes twinkling. “Witch to witch, I look forward to sharing spells, tea, and maybe a little gossip.”

“Oh, especially the gossip,” Delilah whispered with a grin. “Rollo still thinks I don’t know he talks to the moon when he thinks I’m asleep.”

“I do not, ” Rollo muttered behind her, to a chorus of knowing laughter.

Dax, his long coat dusted in dried flower petals and what might’ve been flour, swaggered over and shoved a flask into Rollo’s chest with zero ceremony. “To not screwin’ it up.”

Delilah raised an eyebrow. “That’s the toast?”

“That’s the best toast,” Dax corrected with a wink.

She took a sip and immediately winced. “Burns.”

“Means it’s working,” Dax replied with a rumble of a laugh, tipping the flask back himself.

Behind him, Missy and Junie danced barefoot through the moss with string-lanterns hovering behind them, their dresses glowing faintly under a charm that made the colors shift with the music. They waved exaggeratedly when they caught Delilah’s eye.

“She cried, you know,” Junie mouthed dramatically, pointing at Missy.

“I did not! ” Missy yelled back across the field.

“You absolutely did,” Junie giggled, before spinning into a twirl that sent petals scattering.

Nerissa from The Spellbound Sip handed Delilah a small pouch of tea herbs. “For the honeymoon,” she said with a sly smile. “Helps with stamina. And other things.”

Delilah laughed so hard she had to lean on Rollo for balance. “We don’t need help.”

“Speak for yourself,” Rollo muttered, cheeks slightly red.

They moved through the crowd, stopping to hug elders, trade grins with kids, and soak in the kind of love that wrapped around their bones like old quilts—mended, warm, and full of memory.

When they finally reached the edge of the clearing, the music softening behind them, Delilah turned to face Rollo beneath the halo of moonlight. His eyes locked on hers like he could still hardly believe she was real.

“You keep lookin’ at me like that,” she teased, “and I’m gonna think you’re tryin’ to memorize me.”

“I already have,” he murmured. “But I like the view.”

She blushed, fingers twining with his. “I love you.”

His thumb brushed the back of her hand. “I know. I love you too. More than the woods, more than fate, more than breath.”

They stood there, quiet for a long beat, the forest behind them humming with life, the town before them full of joy.

And in that perfect in-between moment, Delilah finally understood what it meant to not be waiting anymore.

She was already where she belonged.

With him.

He slipped his arms around her waist from behind.

She leaned back into his chest. And sighed. Not from weariness. But from peace.

She had all of it.

Here.

With him.

Home.

### ROLLO

The moon was higher now, pearled against the sky like it had climbed there just to witness this moment.

The forest had quieted. The town had dimmed. Lanterns flickered low at the sanctuary's edge, casting golden trails of light across the wild grass. The last laughter had faded with the guests as they'd meandered home with warm hearts and full bellies, leaving the night to its rightful keepers.

Delilah stood barefoot on the sanctuary porch, gown loose around her frame, curls falling soft around her shoulders. Her back was to him, but she felt him there—he knew it by the way her shoulders eased, her breath slowed.

“You’re quiet,” she said softly, not turning.

He stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, pressing a kiss to the curve of her neck. “Just takin’ a moment.”

“To breathe?”

“To remember,” he murmured. “To etch this in my head. You, here. Ours.”

She turned in his arms, hazel eyes glowing in the moonlight. “We’re already etched.”

He let out a quiet breath, full of reverence and ache. “Not yet.”

Her brows lifted. Not with confusion. But knowing.

Anticipating.

“Rollo...”

He took her hand, large and calloused, the one that had fought battles and rebuilt enclosures, that had carried her through fire and fury. And he led her inside.

The sanctuary was still, scented with the herbs she'd gathered earlier in the week—cedar, rosemary, a little starflower.

They didn't need candles.

Moonlight spilled through the high windows, catching on the dust motes like stardust. It shimmered against the blankets they'd laid together across the floor days ago, talking of dreams and plans and which way to hang curtains.

Now, it was holy ground.

Rollo turned to her slowly, his breath caught somewhere between his ribs and his throat.

“You sure?” he asked, voice gruff with the weight of it all.

Delilah stepped close, sliding her hands beneath the open edges of his shirt, palms warm against his skin, fingers brushing across the firm plane of his stomach and the thick line of hair that trailed downward.

“I've been yours since the moment you left that moonvine garden to follow me,” she whispered. “And I'll keep bein' yours. Mark or no mark.”

His fingers trembled as they brushed her cheek, rough knuckles trailing the soft slope of her jaw. “But I need to. Not for a claim. Not to cage you. Just... to show you. To bind you to me in the way my soul’s already done.”

She smiled then, slow and sure. “Then do it, Rollo. Mark me. I want it. I want us.”

The air shifted. Not with magic. But with meaning.

He kissed her slow, hands in her hair, chest pressed to hers like he couldn’t bear another inch of space.

Her dark chestnut curls slipped free from their ribbon as his fingers threaded through them, releasing the scent of clove and lavender.

She moaned softly against his mouth, her body pliant and warm as she pressed into him, her breasts soft against his chest, her nipples pebbling beneath the thin fabric of her gown.

“I love how you smell,” he muttered against her lips. “Like rosemary and firewood and sin.”

She laughed quietly, but it caught when he lowered his mouth to her neck and kissed a line from her ear to her collarbone. “And you,” she breathed, “you smell like moss and musk and something untamed. My wild bear.”

He growled low, the sound vibrating between them, primal and thick with need.

They moved together, unhurried. Her gown slipped from her shoulders with a whisper, revealing the soft curve of her dark olive skin to the moonlight. He knelt to kiss the rise of her breasts, then lower, his calloused hands reverent as they smoothed over her hips, her thighs.

Rollo's shirt was next, peeled away and dropped at her feet, revealing the broad, scarred expanse of his chest, the thick dark hair trailing down between his abs, catching the light.

His boots were kicked aside, his pants soon after, until he stood bare and unashamed, cock already thick and heavy with need, jutting upward between them.

Delilah's eyes dipped, then lifted back to his, hazel darkening with hunger, golden sparks flaring in their depths.

"Let me touch you," she whispered, fingers brushing his length, wrapping around him. His breath hitched, and he leaned into her touch, hips twitching.

"Fuck," he rasped, eyes fluttering shut as she stroked him slowly, her palm slick with his arousal. "That mouth, that hand—you're gonna be the end of me, witch."

She smiled wickedly and dropped to her knees, but he caught her face in his hands and pulled her back up gently.

"Not tonight," he said, voice thick. "Tonight's not for worship. It's for us."

She nodded, and he swept her into his arms like she weighed nothing, laying her gently onto the blankets spread across the sanctuary floor. Moonlight poured through the windows like blessing, catching the sheen of sweat already beginning to rise on their skin.

He hovered over her, kissing down the valley between her breasts, his tongue tracing circles around one nipple before sucking it into his mouth. Delilah arched with a gasp, threading her fingers into his hair.

"I need you, Rollo," she panted. "Please."



He shifted lower, settling between her thighs. She spread for him without shame, glistening and ready, the folds of her pussy already flushed and wet.

“You’re perfect,” he growled, voice barely human. “So wet for me already.”

He dipped his head and licked her—slow and deliberate, savoring her. She cried out, hips jerking, thighs clamping around his head. But he was strong, relentless. His tongue traced every contour, tasting her like a meal he’d been starving for, growling as her slick coated his mouth.

“Fuck, Rollo—don’t stop—don’t—” she gasped, clutching the blankets as her body bucked. When his lips sealed around her clit and sucked, her whole body tensed—and then broke, a trembling cry leaving her throat as her climax washed through her.

He kissed the inside of her thigh and crawled up her body, his cock dragging against her slick folds. “That’s one,” he rasped. “We’re not done.”

Her lips curved, still breathless. “Good. I want more.”

Rollo lined himself up, gripping the base of his cock and dragging the tip through her wetness, teasing her entrance until she whimpered.

“Look at me, Delilah,” he said. “I wanna see your eyes when I’m inside you.”

She did—and it nearly undid him. All that love. All that trust.

He pushed in slowly, and her eyes fluttered, lips parting on a moan.

“Gods,” she whispered. “You’re so big—fuck—yes, right there?—”

He groaned, sinking deeper. Her heat gripped him like a velvet vise, tight and pulsing around his cock.

“You feel like fucking heaven,” he choked out, bracing himself above her, one hand beside her head, the other gripping her hip.

They moved together, a rhythm forged from instinct and bond. Her legs wrapped around his waist, anchoring him, and he fucked her slow and deep, each stroke a vow.

“Say it,” he rasped, lips against her throat. “Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she moaned. “Yours, Rollo. Always.”

The world narrowed to this—heat and breath, moans and murmurs, the soft slap of skin, the scent of sex and rosemary in the moonlit air.

When her cries grew higher, sharper, he let the bear rise—not fully, just enough. His claws lengthened, eyes glowing faintly gold. The shift trembled just beneath the surface, held back by love and need.

With a groan, he leaned down and pressed his mouth to her shoulder, then lower... just above the swell of her hip.

She cupped his face, nodding. “Now,” she whispered. “I’m ready.”

His claw traced the rune over her skin—a mark of bond, not pain.

Then he sank the tip in, swift and sure.

Blood welled, a faint ruby against her golden-brown skin. Magic surged.

Delilah gasped, eyes wide, spine arching as the bond locked into place—not just soul and spirit, but blood and body.

Her pussy clenched around him, orgasm crashing into her a second time, and he

growled, deep and wild, as he spilled inside her, his cock pulsing, his heart laid bare.

Rollo kissed the mark, lips gentle against her skin.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, voice cracking. “I’ll always have you.”

She stroked his cheek, tears glittering in her eyes. “And I’ve got you.”

They lay tangled together, sweat-slicked and shaking, the bond humming between them.

No words were needed.

The sanctuary held its breath.