



Feline the Spark (Celestial Pines Romances #4)

Author: *Kala Aster, Milly Taiden*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Sylvie Sage had one rule: never mix love with magic.

But when a love-warding candle misfires and binds her to Nicholas Whitmore—the town's flirtiest tiger shifter—Sylvie finds herself stuck in a magical bond she never wanted... and can't break.

He's chaos in a leather jacket. She's order in a maxi skirt. And the universe? Apparently determined to tangle their fates like an overgrown vine spell.

Sylvie is desperate to undo the connection before her magic combusts—or worse, before her heart starts to trust the one man she swore she'd never fall for.

But the bond won't budge.

And the more time they spend together, the more the sparks start to feel suspiciously like something real.

Now all Sylvie has to do is keep her candles from exploding, her tiger shifter from looking too good in flannel, and her heart from making the same mistake twice.

Because the magic might not care what she wants...

But it absolutely knows who she needs.

Total Pages (Source): 40

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

Sylvie Sage inhaled the comforting blend of clove and cedar that always hung in the air at Moonshadow Apothecary.

The morning sun filtered through the shop's tall, narrow windows, warming the wooden floors and catching on dust motes dancing lazily overhead.

The space looked deceptively calm—rows of neat shelves lined with glass jars, little vials of powdered ingredients, and an entire wall devoted to stacks of handcrafted candles. Sylvie had made every single one.

Outside, Celestial Pines was just waking up.

She heard a bicycle bell ring, followed by the soft chatter of neighbors exchanging greetings on the sidewalk.

Each morning, the town came alive with subtle magic: birds sometimes sang in harmonized chords, and breezes carried faint glimmers of enchantment.

Sylvie loved Celestial Pines for that intangible sense of wonder, tucked away from ordinary eyes.

Unfortunately, the day's responsibilities left her no time for starry-eyed appreciation. She had a special order to finish.

In the center of the shop, an antique wooden table was covered in her newest project:

a single candle, half-poured in a metal mold, the wax swirling with flecks of purple.

The candle was supposed to repel love, some heartbreak remedy for a customer who insisted she was done with romance after a nasty breakup.

Sylvie didn't love the idea of anti-love spells, but who was she to judge? The request had come with a hefty tip, and her store's bills wouldn't pay themselves.

She carefully measured dried yarrow and heart's ease petals, sprinkling them into the still-warm wax.

"Reduce unwanted attachments," she murmured, reciting the incantation she'd prepared.

She pressed her palm on the table and closed her eyes to concentrate.

Being a witch meant harnessing emotion, but she knew her own feelings could tamper with the final product.

She needed this candle to be neat, tidy, and ironically, devoid of sentiment.

Nothing fancy—just a straightforward ward against longing.

Yet her thoughts strayed to Missy Sage, her wild-haired aunt, who had teased Sylvie for even attempting such a thing. "Suppressing love is risky business," Aunt Missy had warned last night. "It'll backfire if you're not careful."

Sylvie exhaled, trying to ignore the memory.

She'd done plenty of spells before, and everything usually turned out fine.

She was confident in her craft—mostly. But a small part of her wondered if Aunt Missy might be onto something.

Love magic had a will of its own. That was what every Sage witch learned sooner or later.

Biting back her doubts, she carefully tapped a pinch of ground quartz into the wax.

A faint lavender glow pulsed in response.

Normally, a delicate shimmer meant the candle was on the right track.

Still, Sylvie felt a disquieting buzz in the pit of her stomach.

The magic vibrated strangely between her fingertips, and she had the odd sensation that it recognized something in her... or maybe it was the other way around.

She shook her head and continued working. “Focus, Sylvie,” she reminded herself. One final ingredient remained: black salt to seal the spell. She reached for the little porcelain jar when the door to the apothecary jingled.

“Morning, ma’am!” The bright greeting belonged to Junie Bell, the chipper barista-in-training from The Spellbound Sip.

She only got Sundays off, so it was unusual to see her midweek.

With wide eyes and an even wider grin, Junie lifted a small box of pastries in both hands like a peace offering.

“Brought you some muffins! Was hoping you might trade them for one of your insomnia teas?”

Sylvie paused mid-incantation, giving Junie a polite smile.

“Uh, sure. You can set them on the counter.” She didn’t mind a visitor but was acutely aware that she was in the middle of an active enchantment.

If she left the wax cooling too long, the ingredients might set incorrectly.

“I’ve got a fresh blend that should help you catch some sleep. Gimme just a minute.”

“Take your time!” Junie chirped. She ambled around the shop, admiring the newly stocked shelves. “Gosh, it smells amazing in here today. Is that a new candle?”

Sylvie forced a laugh. “Yes, but it’s not for general sale.

” She saw Junie’s expectant eyes and decided not to elaborate on the purpose.

The last thing she needed was to explain she was brewing a candle specifically to ward off love.

Or mention that she had a creeping feeling it wasn’t cooperating with her plan.

“Why don’t you check out the skincare shelf while I finish up? ”

Junie wandered off, leaving Sylvie to deal with the magic swirling in front of her.

She touched the edge of the metal mold again.

“Alright, you stubborn thing, let’s try this.

” She raised her palm, letting her innate witchcraft flow through her hand.

The candle's surface rippled like a pond, and the subtle lavender shimmer grew brighter.

She could sense something was... off. The subtle hum had turned into a faint buzz in her ears, and an undercurrent of warmth crawled up her arm.

Her brow knitted. "No, no, no. Don't start that," she muttered. She placed a second hand over the mold and breathed deeply, forcing her will into the wax. "We're preventing romance, not?—"

At that moment, the bell above her door chimed again. She didn't have to look up to know who had entered; the air crackled with a different energy, one that set her heart pounding before she even got a glimpse of him.

Nicholas Whitmore strolled in, all sunshine grin and easy swagger. "Hey there, Sylvie." His voice brushed over her like a warm breeze. He smelled faintly of pine and something else—like a hint of musky spice. She hated that she noticed.

She clenched her jaw. Nicholas had a reputation around town for being a flirt, and he'd lived up to it every time he set foot in her shop. "Nicholas," she replied curtly, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "What are you doing here so early?"

He tilted his head, those amber eyes lingering too long on the half-finished candle.

"I'm picking up supplies for the sanctuary.

We need some of your insect-repelling sachets.

And maybe something for stress relief." He chuckled low.

"Got a cranky puma shifter from out of state who can't settle in.

Thought some of your herbal blends might help. ”

It was a reasonable request, but Sylvie’s shoulders went tense. “Fine. They’re over on the far right shelf with the rest of my specialty pouches. Pick the ones labeled with the purple thread.”

He nodded but didn’t move. Instead, he leaned forward, crossing his arms on the wooden table where her candle was cooling. “And what’s this little project?” His gaze flicked from the swirling wax to her face, an impish curiosity lighting his expression.

She swallowed. “None of your business, Whitmore.” The last thing she needed was his chaos messing with her precarious spell. She tried to shoo him away with a wave of her hand. “Let me finish this, and I’ll get to your order.”

An ironic glint sparked in his eyes. “Relax, I’m not planning on sabotaging your potions. I’m just... interested.” His voice dipped quieter. “You’ve got magic in the air, and it’s pulsing strong.”

“Like I said: none of your business,” Sylvie repeated, turning back to her work.

She refused to let him distract her. With a slow exhale, she resumed the incantation under her breath, hoping to wrap up the enchantment before any slip-ups happened.

The presence of a distractingly handsome tiger shifter was the last thing a highly-charged love-banishing candle needed.

But fate—or perhaps the candle itself—had other ideas.

Nicholas reached to brush a stray sprig of rosemary off the table.

The moment his fingers touched the herb, a surge of lavender light flared out of the mold, arcing like lightning between Sylvie's hand and his.

It crackled in the air, hot and sudden. Junie let out a startled squeak from across the shop.

“What the—” Nicholas started, but his words died in a flash of bright purple radiance that momentarily blinded them all.

Time slowed. Sylvie felt her heart hammer in her chest, a fierce thrumming that echoed in her ears.

Magic coiled around her wrist like a serpent, winding outward.

She saw Nicholas's stunned face across from her, eyes wide, mouth parted in surprise.

The candle, or what was left of it, glowed fiercely, as if it had discovered a secret well of power.

Her vision blurred, and she felt an odd, burning tug deep in her core. She heard the sound of wind chimes, even though there were none in the shop. A rush of heat, both exhilarating and terrifying, poured through her veins, leaving her dizzy.

As suddenly as it began, the glow retreated back into the wax, leaving the shop in heavy silence.

Sylvie's hand trembled. She looked at Nicholas.

An identical band of violet light shimmered faintly around his left wrist, then faded to an almost invisible trace.

Her pulse fluttered at the realization that an identical ring now adorned her own wrist. She tried to will it away, but a searing jolt shot up her arm instead. The enchantment was stubbornly settled.

Junie took a hesitant step forward. “Sylvie? Is everything okay?” She sounded equal parts fascinated and frightened.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

Sylvie tried to answer, but words clogged her throat.

She turned to Nicholas, meeting his gaze.

A thousand questions seemed to pass between them, none that made sense.

The candle was supposed to repel love, not...

bond people together. But the swirling purple ring around both their wrists was impossible to deny.

“What did you do?” Nicholas asked, voice hushed. He pressed a hand to his chest as though trying to calm his breathing. Even though he was known for his laid-back charm, he looked distinctly rattled.

Sylvie didn’t have an immediate explanation, which chafed at her.

Her magical training had begun at a young age, and she prided herself on her thorough knowledge of enchantments.

Yet here she was, fumbling for an answer.

“I—I was making a warding candle,” she finally managed, her breath hitching.

“Something to banish... romantic feelings. But it looks like it backfired.”

He stared at her, eyes narrowed in confusion. “Are you telling me we’re stuck

together by some sort of love-repelling candle?”

Her cheeks burned at the absurdity of his statement.

“I don’t know if it’s a love spell or a bond spell or something else entirely.

” She touched the faint glow around her wrist, only to flinch when the ring flared and sent a warm tingle up her arm.

It felt intimate, almost like a pulse that matched her own.

Junie stepped closer to examine Sylvie’s wrist, though she kept a cautious distance. “That’s wild,” she whispered, biting her lip. “Maybe it’s best if I... slip out? This looks a little above my pay grade.”

Sylvie nodded stiffly, not wanting an audience for what was sure to be a messy unraveling. “Yeah, Junie, that might be for the best.” She shot the younger woman an apologetic half-smile. “Don’t worry about the tea. I’ll drop it by the café later.”

Junie set the muffin box on the counter with trembling hands. “Okay. I—I’ll see you around. Good luck.” With that, she hurried out the door, the bell jingling behind her as she practically sprinted onto the sidewalk.

Silence stretched between Sylvie and Nicholas, thick with tension and confusion. She wanted to swear, to demand that Nicholas back up, to do anything that might restore her sense of control. Instead, her emotions fizzled in her throat. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Nicholas was the first to break the stillness. “Well, that was... unexpected.” His usual cockiness had dulled, replaced by a genuine unease. He rubbed a hand over his face. “What exactly happens now?”

Sylvie shook her head. “I need to do some research. Figure out what went wrong.” She started collecting scattered bits of herbs and placing them back in jars, trying to keep her hands busy.

The ritual of tidying soothed the swirling anxiety in her chest. “I can’t say for sure, but this definitely feels like a binding. ”

He let out a low whistle. “A binding. As in... tying us together magically?”

She nodded. “Pretty much.” She didn’t trust herself to say more than that.

Her entire body felt jittery, like she’d drunk too much strong coffee.

She chanced another look at Nicholas, only to find him watching her intently, eyes still bright with that tiger alertness.

The air between them crackled like an unspoken admission.

She swallowed, hastily shifting her gaze.

A thought crashed through her mind. “That means... if it’s truly binding, we might not be able to separate until we break it.” Her heart pounded heavier.

“And do you know how to break it?” Nicholas asked carefully.

She closed her eyes, exhaustion already creeping in.

“Not off the top of my head.” Her magic knowledge spanned a wide range of spells, but this particular mishap?

It was new territory. “I’ll have to consult some older grimoires.

I might have to ask Aunt Missy.” She winced at the idea.

Missy would undoubtedly gloat that she’d been right about meddling with love-based spells. “But I’ll figure it out.”

Nicholas let out a breath that was almost a sigh. “Well, that’s good. Because as much as I enjoy your company”—he shot her a tentative grin that didn’t quite reach the mischievous heights she was used to—“this is... intense. My tiger is going crazy inside me.”

Sylvie’s eyebrows shot up. She had limited experience with shifters, but she knew from living in Celestial Pines that their animals had strong instincts, especially around matters of the heart or territory. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly, not sure what else to offer.

He ran a hand through his dark hair, eyes flickering with fleeting sparks of amber. “It’s not your fault. Well”—his lips curved in a half-smile—“it kind of is, but I doubt you did it on purpose.”

Sylvie’s cheeks heated again. “Trust me, I had no intention of roping you into anything. I was just trying to help a paying customer keep love at bay.”

Nicholas snorted softly. “Irony at its finest.” He stepped closer, and Sylvie felt the faint pulse around her wrist grow stronger. It was as if the enchantment recognized the lessening distance between them, fueling an odd, magnetic pull. “But I guess we’ll figure it out together, yeah?”

She exhaled shakily. “I guess so.” Her gaze snagged on the faint ring of violet light on his wrist. As much as she disliked the chaos Nicholas brought into her life, she couldn’t deny a spike of fascination at the magic trembling between them.

It felt... alive. And she hated how a part of her tingled at the thought of being bonded to him, no matter how accidental.

Outside, footsteps passed, and the door's bell tinkled again—someone pressed their face to the glass, curious.

Sylvie quickly turned away, not wanting the entire town to realize what had happened just yet.

Gossip spread like wildfire in Celestial Pines.

She wanted a plan before Missy or anyone else caught wind of the fiasco.

She cleared her throat, determined to salvage some sense of professionalism. “Look, we can’t solve this right this second, but we should at least compare notes. If you notice anything strange—like changes to your shifter abilities—tell me. I’ll do the same.”

Nicholas nodded. “Sure. I’ll come by later?”

Sylvie pressed her lips together. She liked her solitude, but it seemed that was a luxury she wouldn’t have until this bond was broken. “Alright. I’ll do some research now, see if I can find a quick fix in the shop’s reference books. We can... regroup this evening.”

He grabbed the sachets he’d originally come for, tucking them under one arm. “Sure thing.” After a moment’s hesitation, he brushed his fingertips over her wrist, where the violet ring shimmered. Heat burst up her arm so suddenly that she gasped. He jerked away, wide-eyed.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, voice low. “Guess we gotta be careful.”

She nodded, throat tight. “Yeah. Very careful.” Her mind buzzed with a thousand half-formed questions she didn’t dare speak aloud.

Nicholas gave her a final searching look before walking to the door. He turned the knob, paused for half a heartbeat, and then slipped out into the bright morning. The door’s bell chimed behind him, and for the second time that day, the apothecary sank into silence.

Sylvie sank into a chair, hands still shaking as she clutched the table’s edge. The lingering hint of pine and warm spice hung in the air, dangerously comforting. A wry laugh escaped her lips as she stared at the flickering remains of the so-called “love-repelling” candle.

She’d wanted a neat, tidy morning spent enchanting a single candle to keep romance far, far away. Instead, magic had other plans—and now she was bound to Nicholas Whitmore, the flirtiest tiger shifter in Celestial Pines.

Perfect, she thought, resting her forehead in her palms with a groan. Just perfect.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

N icholas pushed through the apothecary's door and stepped onto the sun-drenched boardwalk of Main Street, wearing the grin he kept handy for emergencies.

Behind his teeth, his heart jack-hammered.

A violet ribbon of light, a whisper now, barely visible, circled his wrist like an inked promise he hadn't meant to sign.

Laugh it off, Whitmore. Easy.

"Morning, Nick!" Old Mrs. Callahan waved from the post office stoop, her terrier trotting at her heels.

He flashed her his best lake-smooth smile. "Hey there, Mrs. C. Pup behaving?"

"Not a chance." She chuckled and shuffled inside. The moment she vanished, Nicholas let the smile drop. His tiger—normally restless, playful, always pacing behind his ribs—had gone stone-still. The silence in his own head was deafening.

Mate.

It had become something he couldn't ignore the moment he had become tethered to Sylvie.

Not because of the spell, but because he had always made sure to keep his distance

from her due to her undying loathing of him.

The word thudded across his thoughts, final as a gavel.

Every shifter learned the sensation—an instant recognition that sank claws into bone.

Most spent years hoping for it. Nicholas had spent years outrunning it.

He rubbed the inside of his wrist, half expecting heat to bloom again. Instead, an answering pulse shimmered through the bond, subtle as a second heartbeat. Somewhere in town, Sylvie Sage felt it too and was probably cursing his name in that low, smoky voice of hers.

Great start to a Tuesday.

He jogged down the steps, the sachets he'd bought tucked under his arm.

Wind carried the smells of honeysuckle and fresh bread.

Celestial Pines wasn't big, but every corner vibrated with quiet enchantment.

Chalk-white spells along shop doors, mossy sigils carved into gutters, fairy lights that refused to extinguish in daylight.

It all usually made Nicholas feel alive.

Right now it felt oppressively watchful, like the whole town was waiting for him to mess up.

Again.

His pickup—faded green, perpetually dusty—waited in the gravel lot behind The Spellbound Sip.

He swung into the driver's seat and held the key at the ignition.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. The tiger didn't want to leave.

It wanted to turn back, stalk into Moonshadow, and plunge into whatever alchemy had lassoed them to Sylvie.

“Not happening, big guy,” he muttered, jamming the key home. The engine coughed to life, protesting as much as the animal inside him.

He headed north, tires humming along the forest road toward Shifter's Rest Wildlife Sanctuary.

Sunlight flickered through towering pines, and every mile he put between himself and the apothecary only twisted the bond tighter.

By the time he rolled past the sanctuary gate, sweat slicked his spine though the cab was cool.

“This is ridiculous,” he hissed.

The tiger purred. Mate is near? The question hummed at the back of his mind.

“Near enough,” he answered aloud. The bond had no distance rulebook as of now; it simply existed, thrumming like an invisible tether. And he had asked for none of it.

Shifter's Rest sprawled across a mossy ridge, half rehab center, half private shifter hangout, all mayhem.

Nicholas parked beside the feed shed, hopped out, and nearly collided with Millie Grace.

The mute empath's big brown eyes widened as she lifted a clipboard and pointed to the words she'd scrawled:

YOU'RE BUZZING

Nicholas forced a chuckle. "Just too much coffee, kiddo."

Millie's gaze dropped to his wrist; her brows rose. She tapped her own pulse point, then made a heart with her hands. Typical. Nothing escaped her.

"Not a word to Rollo," he whispered. She sealed imaginary lips. He tousled her hair earning a dramatic eye roll then strode toward the main paddock.

Rollo Steele, six-and-a-half feet of bear shifter, waited by a temporary pen, wrestling a crate the size of a small car. A disgruntled mountain puma yowled inside.

"Took you long enough," Rollo rumbled. "Cat's crankier than a porcupine in a balloon shop." He sniffed the air. "And you smell... weird."

Nicholas tossed him one of Sylvie's lavender-stitched sachets. "Got your miracle herbs. Sprinkle that around the fence line; should calm him."

Rollo caught the pouch, but his gaze stuck on Nicholas's wrist. "What in Luna's name is that?"

"Fashion statement."

"Fashion my ass. It's glowing."

Nicholas shrugged, turning away to unlatch the crate. “Long story.”

The bear stepped in front of him, massive arms folded. “Fine. I’ll tell mine first. Last night I dreamed you showed up mated, and by the look on your face, I’m thinking it wasn’t a dream.”

Nicholas barked a laugh, louder than necessary. “Mate? Me?” He jerked a thumb at his chest. “You’re delirious, big guy.”

The tiger inside snarled— Stop lying. It shoved against his ribs, furious at the denial. His knees nearly buckled.

Rollo’s eyes narrowed. “Want to try that again?”

Nicholas straightened, jaw locked. “Something... happened this morning. A spell misfired.”

“That yours?” The bear gestured toward the violet band.

“No. Sylvie Sage’s candle went haywire.” Saying her name flicked embers inside his chest. “Things got... messy.”

Rollo whistled. “Witch bond?”

“Looks that way.” Nicholas pushed past him, heading for the crate’s latch. “And before your matchmaking heart gets excited, she can’t stand me.”

“Yet you reek of pine sap and courtship pheromones.” Rollo ambled after him, grin widening. “Proud of you, Nick. Didn’t think you had it in you to settle.”

He shot the bear a withering look. “I’m not settling. I’m solving a problem.”

Rollo raised both hands in surrender. “Just remember—fated stuff doesn’t break easy. Deny it too long, your tiger’ll make life hell.”

“Noted,” Nicholas muttered.

He crouched by the crate, crooning low tigerish sounds to the puma. Usually his own cat helped soothe rescues. Today the tiger seemed distracted, ears pinned toward town. The crate door slid open an inch—and Nicholas’s vision spun. A lance of heat shot from wrist to spine, dropping him on one knee.

The puma lunged. Rollo yanked Nicholas back by the collar and slammed the crate shut, cursing under his breath. “You okay?”

Nicholas sucked in air. “Tiger’s off balance,” he said through clenched teeth. “Feels like half of me’s missing.”

Rollo knelt beside him. “Because your other half is two miles south making candles, maybe?”

“Don’t start.”

“Nick,” the bear said gently, “I’ve been where you are. Delilah nearly broke me before we worked our junk out. The longer you pretend it’s not real, the uglier it gets.”

Nicholas pressed a trembling hand to his forehead. He remembered Delilah’s return last year—how Rollo acted like a lovesick grizzly for weeks. And how he, Nicholas, had teased the hell out of him. It was a wonder he ever let him come work for him. Karma, apparently, was punctual.

“Even if... even if she is—” The word caught in his throat. Mate. He tried again.

“—She deserves better than someone who can’t commit. I’m not exactly reliable in the romance department.”

Rollo’s laugh boomed across the paddock. “Understatement of the century.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “Thanks, bud.”

“Look, figure out how to lift the spell if that’s what you need. But don’t run because you’re scared. Tigers don’t run.”

“Tell my tiger that.” Nicholas hauled himself upright, dusting off jeans. “Right now he’d sprint back and camp on her doorstep.”

“Then maybe give him what he needs. Swing by, talk to her, bring food.” Rollo’s grin turned sly. “I hear witches like chocolate croissants.”

“She likes clove candy and—why do I know that?”

Rollo chuckled. “Bond’s already teaching you her favorites. Convenient, huh?”

Nicholas stalked to the feed shed, ignoring his friend’s laughter.

Inside, he pretended the mundane tasks—logging feed levels, refilling water barrels—could drown the bond’s tug.

They couldn’t. Every breath carried Sylvie’s scent memory: cedar smoke curling around a sweet clove.

The tiger rubbed against his ribs, restless.

He relived that moment in the apothecary—the flash of light, the look of stunned

shock in her storm-gray eyes, the faint tremble in her lips. Even scared, she'd squared her shoulders like a warrior, ready to face consequences head-on. Not his type—and yet exactly his type.

“Damn.”

He slammed the ledger shut and went back outside.

Clouds piled over the mountains, grazing the blue in lazy masses.

Afternoon sun cast golden stripes across the meadow—patterns that would camouflage a tiger perfectly.

His skin itched with the urge to shift, to run under that dappled light, but the animal still refused.

“All right,” he growled to no one. Plan.

First: make sure the sanctuary didn't fall apart.

Second: talk to Hazel Fairweather maybe—seer knew binding lore.

Third: figure out how to keep Sylvie from hating him long enough to solve this.

But a quieter voice whispered: Do you truly want it solved?

He shoved the thought aside and headed for the main office cabin. Halfway there, Millie intercepted him again, notebook held up.

WANT ME TO brING HER HERE? she'd scrawled, and below it, a doodle of a stick tiger hugging a stick witch.

Nicholas barked an incredulous laugh. “Absolutely not. And burn that drawing, Gremlin.”

Millie grinned, tore off the page, and tucked it into her overalls pocket, clearly intending to keep it forever. Then she pointed at his wrist and mimed a heartbeat, eyebrows raised in question.

“It’s... steady,” he admitted. “But weird steady. Like it’s listening for hers.”

She signed something quick— Happy steady —then blew him a kiss and skipped away. The kid had faith in the universe; must be nice.

Evening sidled in by the time Nicholas wrapped the sanctuary chores.

The puma finally settled, thanks to Sylvie’s sachets, and the rest of the rescues were fed.

But every hour amplified the emptiness inside his chest, like the bond’s radius grew tighter with the setting sun.

By twilight, it tugged so hard he could swear he tasted candle smoke on the breeze.

“Fine,” he muttered, climbing into the truck. “Round two.”

As he rolled back toward town, streetlamps flicked on, their globes imbued with will-o’-wisp magic that turned glass to soft moonlight. Crickets chirped under the hush of trees. The tiger inside perked up, ears pricked forward. Home, it insisted. Her.

Downtown, shops were closing. Spellbound Sip’s patio fairy lights flicked to life, scattering soft colors onto cobblestones. Nicholas parked outside Moonshadow Apothecary and stared at the dark windows. A warm amber glow flickered inside.

Sylvie burning late-night candles.

He exhaled, palms sweaty against the steering wheel. For once, charm wouldn't cut it. He needed honesty, an unfamiliar tool.

He stepped out, boots scuffing gravel, and the bond flared warm, encouraging. He raised a hand to knock, hesitated, caught in a moment where every choice ahead could rewrite his future. His tiger growled softly, impatient.

Nicholas lowered his hand, took a breath, and knocked twice.

Inside, footsteps approached. The door opened, revealing Sylvie in candlelight, blonde hair swept into a messy knot, smudges of ash on her cheek. Stormy eyes met his, wary but curious, and that violet ring brightened on both their wrists like a greeting.

He managed a crooked, earnest smile. "Thought you might want company while you research."

A beat of silence, then she stepped aside. "Don't touch anything that glows," she said, voice dry as sagebrush.

"No promises," he murmured, crossing the threshold.

The door clicked shut behind him, sealing them into a world of wax and spice and something new—something that felt suspiciously like hope.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

Sylvie pulled her long cardigan tighter around herself as Nicholas stepped over the threshold.

His presence filled the small space of her shop instantly—not just physically, but something else, an energy that made the violet band around her wrist pulse.

The little bell above the door jingled as it closed behind him.

"Don't touch anything that glows," she warned, watching him carefully.

"No promises," he replied, that infuriating half-smile playing at his lips.

Sylvie's workstation was covered with open books, scattered herbs, and half a dozen candles—most burned down to stumps. The one still flickering tall was black as midnight with runes etched in silver. A breaking candle. So far, utterly useless.

"I see you've been busy." Nicholas gestured toward the mess.

"Waste of perfectly good beeswax," Sylvie muttered, moving behind the counter. Having him here made her fingers tingle. The sensation crawled up her arms, not unpleasant but definitely unwelcome. "I've tried three different severance spells."

"Any luck?" He leaned against the counter opposite her, close enough that she caught his scent—pine and something wild.

"Does it look like I've had any luck?" She held up her wrist where the violet light still circled, matching his own. "It's getting stronger, not weaker."

Nicholas kept his distance, but his eyes tracked her movements as she flipped another page in the grimoire. "Maybe we're approaching this wrong."

"We?" She glanced up, one eyebrow arched. "I wasn't aware there was a we in this situation."

"There's definitely a we." He pointed between their wrists. "Unless you've got another explanation for why I couldn't concentrate all day, or why my tiger is currently purring like a house cat."

Sylvie paused. "Your tiger is...what?"

"Purring." Nicholas scratched the back of his neck, looking almost embarrassed. "He's never done that before. Usually he paces, or sleeps, or hunts in my head. But since this morning—" He gestured to the violet band. "—nonstop purring."

Something about his admission made her pause. Nicholas Whitmore, Celestial Pines' most notorious flirt, looked genuinely rattled. His usual easy confidence had cracks in it.

"That's...interesting." She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "My magic feels different too. Like it's...I don't know, reaching for something."

"For me?" His amber eyes flashed.

"Don't flatter yourself," she retorted, though something in her chest fluttered when he stepped closer.

She slammed the grimoire shut, dust motes dancing in the candle's glow.

"Look, I have a theory. The spell was supposed to be a love-warding candle.

Its whole purpose was to repel unwanted attraction. "

"And instead it did what? The opposite?"

"Not exactly." Sylvie drummed her fingers on the ancient leather book cover. "I think it recognized something and... amplified it."

Nicholas's brows furrowed. "Recognized what?"

The question hung between them. Sylvie felt heat rise to her cheeks and turned away, shuffling papers needlessly. "I don't know yet. That's why I need to break it."

"You're lying," he said softly.

She whirled around. "Excuse me?"

"Your pulse quickened. I can hear it." He tapped his ear. "Tiger senses."

"That's invasive," she snapped.

"That's biology." He shrugged. "Can we at least agree to be honest while we figure this out? Because something tells me dishonesty will only make the magic tighten its grip."

Sylvie sighed, shoulders sagging slightly. He wasn't wrong. "Fine. My aunt might know more. I'm seeing her tomorrow morning."

"Missy Sage?" Nicholas's eyes lit up. "The one who keeps peacocks and once crashed the mayor's dinner party on a borrowed hippogriff?"

Despite herself, Sylvie smiled. "That's the one."

"I like her style."

"You would." But there was no bite in her voice.

An awkward silence fell between them, filled only by the soft crackle of the candle's flame. Nicholas shifted his weight, looking uncharacteristically unsure.

"Do you want me to go with you? To see your aunt?" he asked eventually.

Sylvie considered it, feeling the strange new awareness between them. When he'd been gone all day, she'd felt hollow, distracted. Now that he was here, that sensation had eased, replaced by a different kind of discomfort—a hyper awareness of his every movement.

"No," she said finally. "I think it's better if I go alone. Aunt Missy can be... a lot."

"Fair enough." He nodded, then glanced around the shop. "Need help cleaning up before you close?"

The offer surprised her. "You don't strike me as the tidying type, Whitmore."

He grinned, and for once it seemed genuine rather than practiced. "I'm full of surprises, Sage."

For a brief moment, Sylvie let herself really look at him.

The way his dark hair fell across his forehead, how his amber eyes caught the candlelight, the strong lines of his jaw.

She'd always dismissed him as just another pretty face with too much charm and too little substance.

Now she wondered if there was more beneath the surface.

The violet band on her wrist pulsed, and Nicholas's did the same. Their eyes met, acknowledging the connection neither of them had asked for.

"Tomorrow, then," she said quietly. "I'll let you know what Aunt Missy says."

Sylvie's vintage Volkswagen Beetle pattered along the winding road that led to her aunt's cottage on the outskirts of town.

The morning air smelled of pine and wet earth—a storm had passed through overnight, leaving everything glistening.

She should have felt refreshed, but a dull ache had settled behind her ribs the moment she'd left the apothecary last night.

Away from Nicholas.

The thought made her grip the steering wheel tighter. "Ridiculous," she muttered to herself. "Absolutely ridiculous."

The road curved sharply, and Aunt Missy's cottage appeared—a ramshackle Victorian structure painted in shades that shouldn't work together but somehow did: lavender walls, teal trim, and a bright yellow door.

Wind chimes made of everything from crystal to silverware dangled from the porch rafters, creating a discordant symphony that somehow managed to be melodious.

Sylvie parked beside a garden overrun with herbs and flowers, many of which weren't native to this hemisphere—or this dimension. A peacock strutted across the lawn, its iridescent feathers catching the morning light.

"Good morning, Ferdinand," Sylvie called to the bird. It regarded her with what could only be described as judgment before continuing its royal procession across the yard.

The yellow front door swung open before Sylvie reached it.

"You're late, darling!" Aunt Missy stood in the doorway, her wild gray curls adorned with what appeared to be tiny silver bells and butterfly clips.

She wore a flowing emerald caftan over striped leggings and at least five different scarves.

"The tea leaves told me you'd be here twenty minutes ago. "

"The tea leaves need a watch," Sylvie replied, accepting her aunt's encompassing hug. Missy smelled of incense, vanilla, and something faintly metallic—probably whatever experimental potion she was brewing. "And I'm exactly on time."

"Details." Missy waved a dismissive hand, the dozens of bangles on her wrist clinking together. "Come in, come in. I've made moon cakes."

Sylvie followed her aunt into the cottage, which was even more chaotic inside than out. Books stacked precariously on every surface, plants grew from hanging macramé planters, and various crystals caught the light streaming through stained glass windows.

"So," Missy said, pouring tea from a pot shaped like a dragon into mismatched cups. "You've gone and bound yourself to a tiger shifter."

Sylvie nearly spilled her tea. "How did you?—"

"Please." Missy rolled her eyes, which today were lined with electric blue. "I felt the magic surge from here. Besides, your aura's all," she wiggled her fingers, "sparkly violet now. Very becoming, actually. Brings out your eyes."

"It was an accident," Sylvie insisted, pushing up the sleeve of her cardigan to reveal the band. "A love-warding candle gone wrong."

"Hmmm." Missy examined the violet light with keen interest. "Gone wrong, or gone right?"

"Wrong. Definitely wrong." Sylvie pulled her sleeve back down. "I need to break it."

"And why is that?" Missy perched on a velvet ottoman, her head tilted like an inquisitive bird.

"Because I didn't consent to being magically tethered to Nicholas Whitmore, of all people!"

"Ah, Nicholas." A knowing smile curved Missy's lips. "The handsome tiger who helps at that wildlife sanctuary. The one you've been deliberately avoiding at every town function for the past two years."

Heat crept up Sylvie's neck. "I haven't been avoiding him."

"Your nose twitches when you lie, dear. Just like your mother's did."

Sylvie sighed, absently touching the bridge of her nose. "Fine. Maybe I've been avoiding him a little. He's... distracting."

"Distracting." Missy's eyes twinkled. "Is that what the kids call it these days?"

"Aunt Missy, please. I need your help. I've tried every breaking spell I know."

"And nothing worked?" Missy sipped her tea, looking completely unsurprised.

"Nothing. In fact, it's getting stronger." Sylvie hesitated, then admitted, "I feel... strange when he's near. Like sparks under my skin. And when he's not around, there's this ache, like something's missing."

"Fascinating." Missy leaned forward, suddenly all business. "And how far apart have you been since the binding?"

"Just across town. Why?"

Missy hummed thoughtfully. "The discomfort will likely increase with distance. Magic has its own gravity, darling. Especially love magic."

"This isn't love magic," Sylvie protested.

"Isn't it? You were creating a love-warding candle. What's a ward but the inverse of what it's meant to repel? Magic is balance, Sylvie. Light and dark. Push and pull."

"So what you're saying is..."

"The candle recognized something between you and this tiger—something you've both been denying—and decided to... nudge things along." Missy punctuated this with a wink.

Sylvie groaned, burying her face in her hands. "There has to be a way to break it."

"Oh, I'm sure there is." Missy's voice turned sly. "But love magic doesn't break by logic, my dear. It breaks by heart."

"What does that even mean?" Sylvie looked up, exasperated.

"It means," Missy reached over to pat Sylvie's knee, "that sometimes the universe has better plans for us than we have for ourselves. Your mother learned that lesson with your father, you know."

Sylvie softened at the mention of her parents. "You never told me how they met."

"Didn't I?" Missy's eyes gleamed with mischief.

"Well, let's just say it involved a misfired spell, a very confused wolverine shifter, and three days trapped in a cabin during the worst blizzard of '89.

" She chuckled at Sylvie's wide-eyed expression.

"The point is, magic doesn't make mistakes.

It reveals truths we're too stubborn to see. "

"Nicholas Whitmore is not my truth," Sylvie insisted, even as the violet band pulsed gently around her wrist. "He's dated half the town."

"And yet, here we are." Missy spread her hands. "The candle chose him, Sylvie. Or perhaps more accurately, your magic chose him."

"My magic needs therapy, then." Sylvie stood up, pacing the cluttered room. "There

has to be another way. A counter-spell, a ritual, something."

Missy watched her with thoughtful eyes. "The magic won't release until it's served its purpose. Whether that purpose is bringing you together or teaching you both some lesson remains to be seen." She paused. "Have you considered simply... exploring it? Seeing where it leads?"

"No," Sylvie said too quickly.

"Your mother was stubborn too," Missy sighed, rising from her seat in a swirl of scarves. "Come with me."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

Nicholas paced the length of his office at Shifter's Rest Wildlife Sanctuary, five long strides there, five long strides back. The morning sunlight streamed through the windows, highlighting the dust motes dancing in the air. He'd been at this for twenty minutes already.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered, rubbing at the violet band around his wrist.

His tiger rumbled in agreement—or disagreement, he couldn't tell anymore. The beast had been unusually vocal since the binding incident, alternating between that strange purring and impatient growls whenever Nicholas's thoughts strayed from Sylvie.

Which was approximately never.

A knock at his door interrupted his brooding.

"You're wearing a path in that floor." Delilah, the sanctuary's elderly receptionist, and Rollo's mate peered at him. "And you've been glaring at that light show on your wrist all morning."

Nicholas dropped his arm. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are." Delilah snorted. "That's why you jumped three feet when the coffee maker turned on earlier."

"It startled me."

"Nicholas Whitmore, startled by a coffee maker." She shook her head. "That witch really did a number on you."

His tiger bristled at the perceived slight toward Sylvie. "She didn't do anything," he said, more sharply than intended. "It was an accident."

Delilah raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Well, accident or not, you've got three messages from the Keller twins about their injured hawk, and Ranger Davis called about a bear sighting near the north trail.

" She handed him a stack of message slips.

"Also, you're supposed to be giving a tour to the elementary school in twenty minutes. "

Nicholas took the slips, grateful for the distraction. "Right. Thanks."

"And Nick?" Delilah paused in the doorway. "Maybe consider talking to Sylvie instead of avoiding her. Magical bonds have a way of tightening when you resist them."

"I'm not avoiding her," he lied.

Delilah's knowing look said she didn't believe him for a second. "The supply order from Moonshadow Apothecary came in yesterday. We need someone to pick it up."

Of course they did.

After she left, Nicholas dropped into his chair and ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. He'd spent the last twenty-four hours trying to keep his distance from Sylvie, convinced that space would help clear his head—and possibly weaken

whatever this magical connection was.

It had backfired spectacularly. The further he stayed, the worse the ache in his chest became. By midnight, he'd been restless enough that his tiger had nearly forced a shift, pacing just beneath his skin.

His phone buzzed with a text from Sylvie.

Need to talk. Are you free?

Nicholas stared at the message, his thumb hovering over the reply button. His tiger growled, impatient.

At the sanctuary. Busy day.

Three dots appeared immediately, then disappeared. Reappeared. Disappeared again. Finally:

Come by the shop after. Important.

He typed back: Will try.

The band around his wrist flashed, a sharp zap of energy shooting up his arm.

"Ow! What the—" He shook his hand, glaring at the violet light. "Fine! I'll go!"

I'll be there, he amended in a new text.

The band calmed immediately, returning to its gentle pulse.

Great. Now the magic was scolding him. He pocketed his phone and grabbed his

jacket, heading out to meet the school group.

By late afternoon, Nicholas had given the elementary school tour, sorted out the Kellers' hawk situation (just a sprained wing), and met with Ranger Davis about the bear. He'd done everything possible to stay busy, to keep his mind off Sylvie.

It hadn't worked.

The band had zapped him three more times throughout the day—once when he "accidentally" took the long route past Moonshadow Apothecary without stopping, and twice when his thoughts had drifted to previous dates with other women.

Message received, universe.

The bell above the apothecary door chimed as Nicholas entered. The shop was empty of customers, but filled with the now-familiar scent of herbs, candle wax, and something distinctly Sylvie, clove and cedar, mingled with the slight tang of magic.

His tiger immediately settled, that strange purring sensation rumbling through his chest.

"You're late," Sylvie emerged from behind a curtain separating the shop from her workroom. Her blonde hair was half-falling from its knot, and there was a smudge of what looked like ash across one cheek, per usual.

Despite his frustration, Nicholas felt a smile tug at his lips. "Traffic was murder. You know how busy the roads get between the sanctuary and here."

"A whole two-minute drive." She rolled her eyes, but he caught the slight quirk of her mouth.

"What was so important?" he asked, leaning against the counter.

Sylvie hesitated, fidgeting with the sleeve covering her wrist band. "I saw my Aunt Missy this morning."

"And? Did she know how to break this thing?" He lifted his wrist, the violet light pulsing gently now that they were near each other.

"Not exactly." Sylvie bit her lower lip, and Nicholas found his gaze drawn to the movement. "She said some things that... well, you might want to sit down."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all," Nicholas said, but he perched on the stool she indicated.

Sylvie moved to the other side of the counter, putting space between them. "Apparently, the magic won't release until it's 'served its purpose.'"

"Which is what, exactly?"

"That's the thing. She wasn't clear." Sylvie's fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on the countertop. "But she did mention that the discomfort will get worse the further apart we are."

Nicholas's tiger perked up with interest. "So we should stay close?"

"I didn't say that," Sylvie said quickly. "I'm just... reporting what she told me."

"Uh-huh." Nicholas studied her, noting the faint blush spreading across her cheeks. "And what else did Missy say?"

Sylvie cleared her throat. "That, um, the candle may have recognized something

between us that we've been... denying."

Nicholas felt his heart rate quicken. His tiger knew, had known from the moment the binding happened, that Sylvie was his mate. But he'd been fighting that knowledge, terrified of what it meant.

"Recognized what, exactly?" he asked, his voice low.

Sylvie's stormy gray eyes met his. "I don't know," she said, but the band around her wrist flared briefly.

"You're lying again," Nicholas observed quietly.

"I'm not—" She started, then sighed. "Fine. She suggested that maybe the love-warding candle detected... an attraction. And inverted its purpose."

Nicholas couldn't help the slow smile that spread across his face. "So instead of warding love away..."

"It's pushing us together," Sylvie finished, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Magically speaking."

"Interesting theory," Nicholas said, standing from the stool. His tiger urged him closer to her. "Though you don't need magic for me to be attracted to you, Sylvie."

The blush on her cheeks deepened. "That's not?—"

"It's the truth," he said simply. "I've wanted to ask you out for two years, but you made it pretty clear you weren't interested."

"I never said that," she protested.

"You literally hid behind a potted plant at the Founder's Day Festival last year when I walked by."

Sylvie winced. "You saw that?"

"Half the town saw that."

"I was just..." She waved a hand vaguely. "You make me nervous."

Nicholas took a step closer, unable to resist the pull between them. "I make Sylvie Sage nervous? The woman who faced down a rogue werewolf pack last spring?"

"That was different."

"How so?"

"The werewolves I understood," she said quietly. "You... you're something else entirely."

Nicholas blurted out the one thing he knew he shouldn't—the perfect diversion from his confession that would transform this serious moment into something lighter.

"Come on, you're one of the few women I've never managed to take out. Get to know. How could that not intrigue me?"

She fixed him with a look of such revulsion that the moment shattered completely.

"Ugh! That's precisely why I hid from you. And for the record, I'm a woman, not some girl toy for your amusement." She rose abruptly and seized a box to carry to the back.

Nicholas remained seated, his tiger displeased with him and the purple bracelet throbbing in irritation, while the other part—the one that feared commitment for numerous personal reasons—wasn't quite as bothered by his choice of words.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

Sylvie flipped the "OPEN" sign to "CLOSED" with unnecessary force, the little wooden plaque swinging wildly on its hook. The tether around her wrist pulsed in what felt suspiciously like disapproval.

"Oh, shut up," she muttered at it. "You don't get an opinion."

The magical binding had been insufferable all afternoon, ever since Nicholas had sauntered out of her shop with that infuriating smirk. One of the few women he hadn't managed to "take out." As if she were some conquest to be added to his collection.

Sylvie grabbed her canvas tote and locked the shop door behind her. The evening air was cool against her flushed skin as she marched down Main Street toward The Spellbound Sip. If there was ever a time she needed one of Nico's special brews, it was now.

The coffee shop's windows glowed with warm amber light, and the faint scent of cardamom and vanilla beckoned her inside. The bell jingled cheerfully as she entered.

"Well, well, well." Nico Voss leaned across the counter, their array of beaded bracelets clinking together as they propped their chin on their hands. "If it isn't my favorite candle witch, looking like she's about to set something—or someone—on fire."

Sylvie dropped onto a stool at the counter. "Is it that obvious?"

"Honey, you're practically smoking." Nico's kohl-rimmed eyes widened suddenly. "Wait, you're actually smoking."

Sylvie glanced down to find thin wisps of gray rising from her fingertips where they rested on the countertop. "Dang it." She shook her hands out, willing her magic to settle.

Nico reached across the counter and grasped her wrist, careful to avoid the violet band. Their eyebrows shot up toward their electric blue hair. "Oh my goddess. This is juicy."

"Don't start."

"Start? Sugar, I'm halfway through the book already." Nico turned toward the back. "Nerissa! I need a Tempest Tamer for our darling Sylvie, stat!"

The willowy siren behind the espresso machine nodded, her movements fluid as she selected a jar of loose tea.

"You don't need to make a production of it," Sylvie grumbled.

"When you walk in here practically combusting? Yes, I absolutely do." Nico tapped a lavender-painted nail against the counter. "So. Nicholas Whitmore, huh?"

Sylvie's head snapped up. "How did you?—"

"Please. The whole town's talking about how Dolores Weber's love-warding candle backfired and bound you two together." Nico's grin widened. "Plus, that magical accessory you're sporting? Not exactly subtle."

Sylvie slumped forward, resting her forehead on the cool countertop. "It's a

nightmare."

"A nightmare with excellent biceps and a smile that could melt butter."

"He's insufferable," Sylvie muttered into the counter. "He's arrogant, and flippant, and sees women as conquests."

"And yet..." Nico waited until Sylvie looked up. "That blush says differently."

Before Sylvie could retort, Nerissa glided over with a steaming mug that swirled with blues and purples. She set it down in front of Sylvie with a knowing smile.

"Thanks, Nerissa." Sylvie wrapped her hands around the mug, letting its heat seep into her palms.

"Drink up," Nico instructed. "Nerissa's Tempest Tamer will help settle that magic before you torch my establishment."

Sylvie took a sip. Lavender and mint bloomed across her tongue, followed by something deeper—black currant maybe, with a hint of honey. Almost immediately, the crackling energy beneath her skin began to calm.

"So," Nico continued, leaning forward conspiratorially. "What happened today that's got you literally fuming?"

"He said he's wanted to ask me out for two years, and then in the same breath made it clear I'm just another potential notch on his bedpost." Sylvie took another swig of tea. "One of the 'few women he hasn't managed to take out.'"

Nico winced. "Ouch."

"Exactly."

"Men and their mouths, always getting them into trouble." Nico shook their head, the tiny stars dangling from their earlobes catching the light. "But you know, sometimes when people are nervous, they say the dumbest things."

"Nicholas Whitmore, nervous? Around me?" Sylvie scoffed. "The man flirts with everything that moves."

"Maybe that's the point." Nico's voice softened. "Some people use charm as armor, sweetie."

The teacup in Sylvie's hands suddenly felt warmer, the liquid inside shifting from blue to a deep mauve. She stared down at it, confused.

"Interesting." Nico tilted their head, studying the cup. "That color usually indicates conflicted feelings."

"I'm not conflicted. I'm annoyed."

"Uh-huh." Nico didn't sound convinced. "Is that why Mrs. Harrington came in here babbling about how her meditation candle from Moonshadow started writing sonnets in flame when she lit it this morning?"

Sylvie groaned. "That was one candle."

"And the birthday candles for little Timmy Miller that spelled out 'tiger' instead of 'happy birthday'?"

"How do you know about that?"

"Honey, I know everything." Nico's smile was smug. "Including the fact that your magic has always been linked to your emotions. And right now? Your emotions are all over that tiger shifter."

"They are not." The band around Sylvie's wrist flashed, sending a mild shock up her arm. "Ow!"

"What was that?" Nico leaned forward, eyes wide with delight.

"Nothing." Sylvie rubbed her wrist. "The binding just... reacts sometimes. When I'm not being honest."

Nico cackled. "Oh, that's priceless! A magical lie detector?" They clapped their hands. "So if I asked if you found Nicholas attractive and you said no..."

"I'm not playing this game." Sylvie took another long sip of her tea, which had now turned a suspicious shade of pink.

"You don't have to say it. That tea speaks volumes." Nico nodded toward the mug. "Rose pink. Classic attraction."

"It's the lighting in here."

"Sure it is." Nico crossed their arms. "Look, you don't need my witchy intuition to see what's happening. Your magic is responding to feelings you won't admit, not even to yourself."

"I barely know him."

"Then maybe it's time you did." Nico shrugged. "The spell bound you for a reason, Sylvie. And it's not going away until that reason is fulfilled."

The bell chimed as a new customer entered. Junie, the human barista-in-training, bustled in from the back room to take their order, giving Sylvie a momentary reprieve from Nico's piercing insights.

"I've tried everything to break it," Sylvie said quietly once Junie was occupied. "Nothing works."

"Maybe you're trying to break the wrong thing." Nico reached out and tapped Sylvie's forehead gently. "Maybe what needs breaking is up here, all those walls you've built."

The tea in Sylvie's cup rippled, small waves lapping at the sides though she hadn't moved it. Another sign her magic was responding to her emotional state.

"What if he hurts me?" The question came out small and vulnerable.

Nico's expression softened. "What if he doesn't?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

Nicholas paced behind the tiger enclosure, muscles coiled with a tension he couldn't shake. The band pulsed with a steady rhythm, almost mocking him with its consistency while everything inside him felt scattered and wrong.

"You know, with all this pacing, you're wearing more trails than the animals." Rollo called from the feeding station.

Nicholas paused mid-stride. "Just restless."

Restless was an understatement. Ever since leaving Sylvie's shop yesterday, his tiger had been prowling beneath his skin, refusing to settle.

The midnight run that usually calmed him had been a disaster.

He'd barely made it half a mile before his partial shift collapsed, leaving him with nothing but a killer headache and wounded pride.

"Restless looks like pacing." Rollo set down the meat cleaver and wiped his hands on a towel. "You look like you're coming out of your damn skin."

Nicholas flexed his hands, willing the claws that kept threatening to emerge back into his fingertips. "Maybe I am."

Rollo, with his knowing eyes, crossed his massive arms. "This have anything to do with the magical jewelry you've been sporting?"

"It's nothing," Nicholas muttered, absently rubbing the binding band.

"Nothing's got you looking like you haven't slept in days."

Nicholas turned away, his gaze drifting to Rajah, the sanctuary's oldest tiger. The massive cat was sprawled in a patch of sunlight, watching Nicholas through half-lidded eyes that seemed to hold a judgment all their own.

"I need to shift," Nicholas admitted. "Thought I'd use the back trails after feeding time."

"Good idea. You're wound tighter than Harriet Peterson's girdle at the town festival." Rollo chuckled at his own joke before his expression turned serious. "But maybe check that magic first. Shifters and witch-work don't always mix well."

Nicholas glanced down at the band. "I'll be fine."

Rollo shrugged. "Your funeral."

Twenty minutes later, Nicholas stood in the secluded clearing behind the sanctuary's northern boundary, stripped down to his boxers with clothes folded neatly beside a fallen log.

The afternoon sun filtered through the pine branches overhead, dappling the ground with shifting patterns of light and shadow.

He rolled his shoulders, closed his eyes, and reached for the tiger within him—that primal, powerful part of himself that was as natural as breathing.

Nothing happened.

Nicholas frowned and tried again, focusing harder, calling to his beast with the mental connection that had never failed him before.

His skin prickled, muscles burning as they began to shift, and then stopped, locked in an excruciating half-state that was neither human nor animal.

"Damn it!" He dropped to one knee, panting through gritted teeth as his body snapped painfully back to human form. The violet band gleamed in the sunlight, seeming to pulse with amusement.

Nicholas staggered to his feet and tried again. And again. Each attempt ending worse than the last until he collapsed against a tree trunk, sweat-soaked and trembling.

His tiger prowled beneath his skin, restless and agitated, but refused to emerge completely. It was like some vital connection had been severed—or rather, redirected.

To Sylvie.

The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow. His tiger recognized what Nicholas had been trying to deny since the moment the spell bound them together: Sylvie was his mate. And his tiger side wouldn't fully emerge without her nearby while he denied it.

"Well, that's just perfect," he growled, pulling his jeans back on with jerky movements.

The walk back to the sanctuary felt longer than usual, his limbs heavy with fatigue and frustration. He found Rollo in the staff room, nursing a cup of coffee that smelled suspiciously spiked.

"That was quick," Rollo observed, not even trying to hide his knowing smirk.

Nicholas collapsed into a chair. "Couldn't shift."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rollo set his mug down and leaned forward. "Your tiger knows something you don't want to admit?"

Nicholas's jaw tightened. "My tiger needs to get with the program."

"Or maybe you do." Rollo's voice dropped, serious now. "That band binding you to the Sage girl—it's not just any spell, is it?"

The memory of Sylvie's wide, startled eyes when the magic had sparked between them flashed through Nicholas's mind. The way her scent of clove and cedar and something uniquely her had wrapped around him, settling his tiger even as it drove him crazy.

"She's not interested," Nicholas said flatly, avoiding the actual question.

"And you're too busy playing the field to notice what's right in front of you.

" Rollo shook his head. "I've known you since you were a cub, Nick.

Watched you charm half the women in three counties without ever letting one get close.

But this—" he gestured to the binding band, "—this isn't something you can smooth-talk your way out of. "

"It's just a spell gone wrong. We'll break it."

"If that's what you think, you're dumber than you look." Rollo drained his coffee. "Let me tell you something about mates, boy. Deny them too long, and it gets worse. That restlessness you're feeling? That inability to shift? That's just the beginning."

Nicholas stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your tiger's recognized its mate, and you're being too stubborn to listen." Rollo stood, his large frame casting a shadow over Nicholas. "Magic just made visible what was already there. And the longer you fight it, the worse that binding's effects are gonna get—for both of you."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

The winding path to Hazel Fairweather's cottage seemed longer than Sylvie remembered.

Or maybe it was just the weight of the violet band around her wrist dragging her steps.

Two days of failed counter-spells, ruined candles, and the occasional electric shock whenever Nicholas crossed her mind had pushed her to seek help from the one person in town who might understand what had happened.

Not that her aunt hadn't, Sylvie just was hoping that there were other answers than... romance.

Hazel's home looked like it had grown rather than been built. A structure of living wood and stone nestled into the hillside, with windows that caught the late afternoon sun like amber eyes. Sylvie hesitated at the vine-covered gate, then straightened her shoulders and pushed it open.

"I was wondering when you'd show up." Hazel's voice reached her before Sylvie had even knocked.

The dryad-seer stood in the doorway, her skin the warm brown of oak bark with subtle green undertones.

Flowering vines wound through her silver-streaked hair, tiny blue blossoms opening

and closing as if breathing.

"I need your help," Sylvie said, holding up her wrist with the binding band.

Hazel's eyes—deep as forest pools—fixed on the violet glow. "Yes, I imagine you do. Come in, child."

The inside of Hazel's cottage was a riot of living things: potted plants that turned to follow their movement, shelves of crystals that hummed with stored energy, and everywhere the smell of earth and growing things.

"Tea?" Hazel asked, already moving to the hearth where a copper kettle steamed.

"No thanks. I just need to know how to break this spell." Sylvie remained standing, too restless to sit. "I've tried everything—cleansing rituals, counter-spells, even a binding dissolvent that nearly ate through my skin."

"And yet it remains." Hazel poured herself a cup of something that smelled of moss and moonlight. "Because you're going about it all wrong."

"I didn't come here for riddles."

"No, you came for a quick solution to a complex problem." Hazel took a slow sip from her cup. "Show me your hands."

Reluctantly, Sylvie held them out. Hazel's fingers were cool and slightly rough as they closed around Sylvie's, like bark smoothed by years of rain and wind.

"Mmm. Just as I thought." The dryad-seer's eyes unfocused slightly, looking at something beyond the physical. "The spell hasn't bound you against your will, Sylvie Sage. It's revealed what was already there."

"That's impossible."

"Is it? Magic rarely creates what doesn't exist. It reveals, transforms, enhances—but create from nothing?" Hazel shook her head. "Beyond even the Originals' power."

Sylvie pulled her hands away. "You're saying that I'm somehow destined to be with Nicholas Whitmore? The man who's dated half the women in town and probably forgotten most of their names?"

"I'm saying the spell recognized a potential, a compatibility that runs deeper than your opinions about his dating history." Hazel set her cup down. "It's mimicked what we call a fated mate bond. The kind shifters sometimes experience."

"Then it's artificial. False." Relief flooded through Sylvie. "We just need to reverse engineer it."

"Not so simple." Hazel's smile turned knowing. "The bond wouldn't have formed if the potential wasn't there. And undoing it now will require the one thing you're most afraid to give."

"Which is?"

"Emotional truth."

Sylvie's hands clenched into fists. "That's not how magic works. Spells have components, methodologies, counterbalancing forces. They don't require—" she struggled for words, "—feelings."

"Don't they? Your spellwork is candle-based, responsive to emotions. When the shifter came into your shop, what were you feeling?"

The memory flashed unbidden: Nicholas leaning against her counter, amber eyes crinkling at the corners as he flashed that infuriating smile. The leap in her pulse she'd dismissed as annoyance.

"That doesn't mean anything," Sylvie insisted. "Magic shouldn't dictate love. It shouldn't force people together who have no business being together."

"Force? No." Hazel moved to a shelf and selected a small wooden box. "But magic can illuminate paths we're too stubborn to see. The band connects you now, but the potential was always there."

"This is ridiculous. I've barely spoken ten words to the man before this happened.

" Sylvie paced across the worn floorboards of Hazel's cottage, the scent of herbs and old magic thick in the air.

Her fingers trembled slightly, and she tucked them into the folds of her maxi skirt to hide the reaction.

Every nerve in her body felt raw, exposed, as though Nicholas had somehow peeled back her carefully constructed layers without even trying.

"Sometimes ten words are enough when souls recognize each other.

" Hazel opened the intricately carved wooden box with reverent hands, revealing a small, clear crystal that seemed to pulse with its own inner light.

Tiny facets caught the afternoon sunlight streaming through the window, sending prismatic rainbows dancing across the walls. "Hold this. Tell me what you feel."

Sylvie took the crystal between reluctant fingers, expecting nothing but cool stone

against her skin.

Instead, warmth flooded her palm like liquid sunshine, radiating up her arm and into her chest. With the heat came flashes of sensation so vivid they stole her breath—Nicholas's deep, rich laugh that seemed to rumble from somewhere primal, the intoxicating scent of pine and musk that clung to his skin, the surprising way his amber eyes softened when he thought no one was looking at the sanctuary, gentleness replacing his usual cocky demeanor as he tended to an injured fox kit.

She dropped the crystal like it had burned her, backing away until her spine hit the bookshelf behind her. Dried herbs swayed above her head from the impact. "What was that?" Her voice came out hoarse, almost unrecognizable to her own ears.

"Truth," Hazel said simply, her bark-textured hand darting out with surprising speed to catch the crystal before it hit the floor.

She cradled it like something precious, the flowering vines in her hair seeming to bend toward it.

"The bond shows you what could be, not what must be.

The potential for connection, for understanding.

It's up to you both to decide what to do with that knowledge, whether to nurture it or let it wither. "

"I didn't ask for this." Anger rose in Sylvie's chest, hot and fierce as the flames of her most powerful spells.

She could feel the candles throughout Hazel's cottage flickering higher in response to her emotions, shadows dancing wildly across the walls.

Her fingertips tingled with unspent magic.

"I don't want magic deciding who I should love.

I've spent my entire life learning to control my power, not surrender to it. "

"Magic isn't deciding anything. It's merely reflecting what's already in your heart."
Hazel's voice softened to the gentle rustling of leaves. "The question is, are you brave enough to look?"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

The scent of damp earth and decaying leaves filled Nicholas's nostrils as he made his way through Echo Woods.

This weekly patrol was supposed to be routine—check the perimeter, look for signs of poachers or injured wildlife, report back.

Simple. Except nothing had been simple since that day in Sylvie's shop.

The band pulsed faintly, reminding him of her. Three days had passed, and his tiger remained agitated, pacing beneath his skin with growing impatience. Nicholas rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension that had settled there.

"Easy," he murmured to the beast within. "We're working."

His tiger rumbled in disagreement. Working wasn't what it wanted, and Nicholas knew it.

The animal recognized Sylvie as mate, even if Nicholas himself was trying desperately to maintain his distance.

Not that distance helped. The bond zapped him with tiny electrical shocks whenever his thoughts lingered too long on the witch, which was becoming embarrassingly frequent.

Just that morning, he'd nearly spilled coffee down his shirt when a particularly vivid

memory of her stormy eyes flashed through his mind.

He knew he had to see her more than he had, something told him the pain would ease then, but the stubborn part of him was resisting as long as he could.

The violet band seemed to tighten around his wrist in response to his thoughts, as if it could sense his reluctance.

His tiger clawed at his insides, frustrated by Nicholas's human hesitation.

The animal didn't understand complications or consequences, it only knew what it wanted. Who it wanted.

He didn't want another slip up like the other day where he had told her how long he had his eye on her.

That admission still burned in his memory—the way her expression had shifted from surprise to something softer, more dangerous.

Something that threatened the carefully constructed walls he'd built around himself.

Years of casual flirtations and keeping women at arm's length hadn't prepared him for Sylvie Sage and the way she effortlessly dismantled his defenses with just a raised eyebrow or the hint of a smile playing on her lips.

The path narrowed as he neared the eastern border of the sanctuary, an area few visitors explored. Old-growth trees towered overhead, their canopies blocking most of the midday sun. It was darker here, the air thick with age and secrets.

Nicholas paused, head tilting as his tiger's senses picked up something... off. A faint vibration in the air, like the aftermath of a thunderclap. His amber eyes glowed

slightly as he scanned the surrounding forest.

"What is it?" he asked his inner beast. "What do you smell?"

Following his instincts, Nicholas veered off the trail, pushing through a tangle of underbrush. The vibration grew stronger, a discordant hum that made his teeth ache. After a few minutes of tracking, he stepped into a small clearing he'd never seen before.

A perfect circle of ancient stones stood arranged in the center of the space, half-buried in moss and earth. Nicholas had heard whispers of old mating circles in these woods, places where shifters of the past had performed bonding ceremonies, but he'd never stumbled across one before.

"Well, hello there," he said, walking the perimeter of the stone circle. "Aren't you interesting?"

His tiger growled, low and warning. Something about this place set his hackles rising—not the circle itself, but something nearby. Nicholas crouched, enhanced senses searching for the source of his unease.

The ground seemed to shift slightly to his right, drawing his attention to a patch of disturbed earth. Nicholas dug his fingers into the soil, pushing aside layers of leaves and dirt until his nails clinked against something solid.

"What have we got here?" He brushed away more debris, revealing what appeared to be a small stone figurine, cracked down the middle.

It was roughly the shape of a big cat—a tiger perhaps—but unsettlingly distorted, its proportions all wrong.

The figurine's eyes were unusually large, made of some dark material that seemed to absorb rather than reflect light.

As Nicholas lifted it from its earthen bed, the shadows beneath the trees appeared to deepen, swirling in patterns that made no sense. His tiger snarled, the sound reverberating through his chest.

"Yeah, I feel it too." Nicholas turned the relic over in his hands. Despite its unsettling appearance, he felt strangely drawn to it. "But it's just a carved stone. Probably some old shifter artifact."

The violet band flared momentarily, as if reacting to the relic. Nicholas hesitated, then slipped the figurine into his pocket.

"The museum folks will want to see this," he justified to himself, ignoring his tiger's continued unease.

As he stepped away from the circle, a sudden wave of dizziness washed over him. For an instant, Sylvie's face flashed in his mind with her stormy eyes wide with something that looked like fear.

Nicholas shook his head to clear it. "Get a grip. The woman's turning you into a sentimental sap."

His phone buzzed in his pocket—Rollo checking in.

Nicholas took one last look at the stone circle before heading back toward the trail.

Whatever history this place held, whatever significance the broken relic might have, it could wait.

Right now, he needed to finish his patrol and figure out how to face Sylvie without his tiger taking control.

The relic felt heavier than it should as it bounced against his thigh with each step, but Nicholas pushed away any second thoughts. He'd always collected interesting trinkets from his excursions—this was no different. Just another curiosity to add to his collection.

Besides, what harm could one broken little statue possibly do?

SYLVIE

The candle burned itself out sometime after midnight, but the room still shimmered with violet light. Sylvie lay tangled in her quilt, neither awake nor fully asleep, drifting on the edge of a dream that felt too vivid to be only imagination.

She floated in Moonshadow Apothecary—yet not the real shop.

Shelves glowed like constellations, and melted wax ran upward instead of down.

In the center, a single black candle towered taller than the doorframe, flame leaping green-gold.

Nicholas stood on one side of it; a great striped tiger prowled on the other, each mirror-bright amber eye trained on her.

“Sylvie.” Nicholas’s voice reverberated like temple bells, low and thrumming. “Come here.”

“I’m not crossing that line,” she answered, though she couldn’t see any physical barrier, just a shimmer in the air, as thin as soap film.

The tiger huffed, breath steaming. Its tail lashed like a metronome. Somewhere high above, wind chimes clattered though no wind stirred.

Nicholas extended a hand. “Trust me.”

She wanted to. Saints help her, she wanted to. But something in the candle's flame twisted, reshaping into a snarling maw—her own spell gone feral. Heat rolled off it in suffocating waves.

“What if we burn?” she whispered.

“Then we burn together.”

The tiger let out a rumbling roar that rattled every jar on every shelf. Wax dripped upward faster. The black candle cracked down its center, bleeding violet light. Panic lunged for Sylvie's throat, but behind it—shamefully—thrummed wild excitement.

Nicholas's gaze captured hers: earnest, unguarded. Choose, that look said.

She took a single step. The shimmered barrier shattered like spun sugar. In the same breath the tiger leaped—not toward her, but through her, striping her vision with white-hot heat. The shop disappeared.

Sylvie snapped awake in her loft apartment above the apothecary, chest heaving. Night still clung to the windowpanes, yet a faint orange glow lit the room.

“Oh, no, no, no—” She flung off her quilt. Her cotton sheets smoldered in three neat claw-shaped streaks, smoke curling toward the ceiling. She hurried to her kitchenette sink, filled a bowl, and dashed water over the scorch marks. Steam hissed.

Hands braced on her knees, she forced slow breaths. The violet band at her wrist pulsed in frantic sync with her heartbeat.

Dreamwalking. She'd done it as a teen—tame little lucid strolls through memory. Never like this. “Great,” she muttered. “Now the binding is hijacking my REM cycle.”

A sharp rap echoed downstairs: the back service door. She grimaced; the clock read 3:14 a.m. Only one person knocked like he owned the night.

She clomped down the stairs barefoot, still in an oversized sleep shirt reading *Spells Before Coffee*. When she cracked the door, Nicholas stood under the security light, hair mussed, T-shirt damp with perspiration. He held out a thermos like a peace offering.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said. “Figured you couldn’t either.”

Sylvie considered slamming the door in his face. Instead she stepped aside. “Your timing is creepy.”

“Tiger senses.” He shrugged, sheepish. “They said you were awake...and maybe on fire?”

She pursed her lips but led him into the shop. The air still carried faint smoke; candles on a side shelf flicked to life unaided, responding to her mood. Nicholas’s gaze swept over them—worried, not judgmental—and something in her chest softened.

She folded arms across her chest. “Dreamwalk. You were in it.”

“That explains why I jolted up feeling like someone shoved me through a furnace,” he said, unscrewing the thermos lid. Coffee, and not the cheap stuff, perfumed the space. “Hazelnut latte. Least I could do for barging in.”

Sylvie wrapped her hands around the offered cup, savoring warmth. “Thanks.” She sipped, winced. “Too sweet.”

“I was guessing your order on the fly.” His grin flickered, quickly tempered by

seriousness. “Tell me about the dream.”

She relayed details about the black candle, the barrier, the tiger leaping through her. Nicholas listened, elbows propped on the worktable. As she spoke, the violet glow around their wrists glimmered in sympathetic rhythm.

He exhaled when she finished. “My tiger’s been unsettled since yesterday’s patrol. This...fits.”

“Patrol?” she echoed.

“Found something weird in Echo Woods.” He patted his jeans pocket, then paused, expression going wary. “It’s in my gear bag outside. A broken statue.”

Sylvie’s brows knitted. “You brought a random artifact home after we got curse-bonded?”

“Look, I collect field trinkets all the time. Didn’t feel cursed, just odd.” He lifted palms. “Fine, half my tiger wanted to bury it. I ignored him. Stupid, yeah.”

Sylvie set her coffee down with a thunk. “Rule one of woodland witchcraft: if your animal spirit growls at an object, leave it . Return it tomorrow.”

“I will,” he said quickly. “Promise.”

Silence settled thick but not unfriendly. From the street outside came the distant hum of a delivery van; otherwise, only their breathing and the pop of candle wicks.

Nicholas nudged a vial of chamomile with one fingertip. “You scorched your sheets,” he murmured. “That scare you?”

“Less than it should.” She threaded hair off her face. “I’m more rattled by wanting—” She bit her tongue.

“Wanting what?” he pressed, voice velvet-rough.

“Everything to stop feeling so...good when you’re here.” The confession slipped out, embarrassing and honest. Instantly the violet band glowed bright gold.

Nicholas’s exhale was shaky. “Same.” He moved a step closer. Heat rippled through the tether, erasing the memory of chill stone floors in Hazel’s cottage. “Look, I don’t know if this is fate or a cosmic prank. But fighting it is wrecking us.”

“You don’t even know me much,” she whispered.

“Then let me.” His hand hovered near hers—close enough to feel warmth, not quite touching. “We can figure out the spell and each other.”

A dozen misgivings clamored for attention. His playboy history, her fear of losing control, but the ache when they were apart still throbbed in memory. Standing here, the pain dimmed to a hum; sparks danced instead.

“Slow,” she echoed. “Starting with you not dropping bye at random hours.”

A grin tugged his mouth. “Still bossy. I like it.”

Nicholas tilted his head. “You smell like smoke and cinnamon.”

“Blame dream-arson.” She let out a sigh and stretched, afraid of how intimate this was suddenly becoming. “I need to try and get some things done if I’m awake.”

“At four a.m.?” he chuckled.

“Magic never sleeps, Whitmore. Now, if you don’t mind.”

He gave her that smug smile that made her want to slap and kiss him all at once. She hated that, but he didn’t complain and went for the door to let himself out.

“Hey,” she called before he disappeared into the oncoming dawn. “Thanks for the coffee.”

Nicholas gave her one of his prize-winning smirks and simply nodded before leaving her standing there wondering how the hell she was going to fix this before she ended up hurt. Or worse... falling for him.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

"Just get rid of it," he muttered, rotating the stone fragment. It depicted what might have been a fierce-eyed cat, though the damage made it impossible to be certain. The piece had an unsettling weight, cooler than it should be after hours in his palm.

Promises meant something. He'd told Sylvie he'd return it to Echo Woods, not bring it to the oldest vampire in Shadow Falls for appraisal.

But the memory of that dream still smoldered in his thoughts.

Of course he had the same one she had last night, that's how he knew her reaction.

That was dreamwalking at its finest. The way she'd looked at him across that candle flame.

The tiger leaping through her with raw hunger.

He pocketed the relic and stepped out of his truck.

The Gilded Fang's ornate facade stood empty at this hour, but the back entrance would be open. Cassian kept vampire hours, after all. Nicholas rapped his knuckles against the service door, three short taps.

"Punctuality," Cassian Drake called from inside. "How deliciously unexpected."

The door swung open on silent hinges. The vampire hadn't physically moved to open

it, it was just one of his little parlor tricks. Cassian lounged at a corner table counting receipts, hair artfully tousled despite the early hour, a brocade dressing gown draped over his lean frame.

"Nicholas Whitmore. To what do I owe the pleasure of disrupting my morning accounting?"

Nicholas straddled a chair across from him. "Need your expertise."

"Everyone does, eventually." Cassian smiled, teeth gleaming just a touch too white. "Though usually they buy me a drink first."

"It's eight in the morning."

"A criminal hour to be conscious." Cassian set his ledger aside and propped his chin on steepled fingers. "You look different. More... vibrant. Found your mate, perhaps?"

Nicholas tensed. "How?—"

"I've walked this earth for centuries. I recognize the glow." Cassian's gaze slid to the violet band at Nicholas's wrist. "Though I'll admit, that's new. Binding spells aren't usually so... obvious."

"It's temporary," Nicholas growled.

"Is it?" The vampire chuckled. "Show me what you've brought."

Nicholas hesitated, then placed the stone fragment on the table between them. The second it left his fingers, his tiger settled, like a weight lifting. How had he not noticed that pressure until it was gone?

Cassian went utterly still. He made no move to touch the object, but his eyes darkened to bottomless black.

"Where did you find this?" The vampire's voice had lost its playful lilt.

"Antique shop in Riverdale," Nicholas lied.

"Lie better, shifter." Cassian's fingertip hovered an inch above the stone. "This hasn't been in a shop. It still reeks of earth and anguish."

Nicholas tapped fingers against the table. "Found it buried. Does it matter where?"

"It might." Cassian's eyes narrowed. "This is a nasty piece of work. Sixteenth-century, if I'm not mistaken. From a cult that specialized in breaking mate bonds."

A chill crawled up Nicholas's spine. "Breaking bonds how?"

"Violently." Cassian wrinkled his nose. "The cult believed true mates were an abomination against natural order. This relic absorbed the... aftermath when they forced separations."

The word 'aftermath' hung between them, heavy with unspoken implications.

"Why would anyone keep this?" Nicholas's throat felt suddenly dry.

"Collectors of dark artifacts. Or those who want insurance against fate." Cassian tilted his head. "The question is, why did you dig it up? And why bring it to me rather than your witch?"

"She's not my witch."

"The band around your wrist suggests otherwise." Cassian sat back, expression bemused. "If you're afraid of commitment, there are less dramatic ways to sabotage yourself."

Nicholas stood abruptly. "I'm getting rid of it."

"Are you?"

The question pierced deeper than it should have. Nicholas snatched the relic, ignoring how his tiger bristled as contact resumed.

"Call me sentimental," Cassian said, "but I've rarely seen mate-bonds survive centuries. Yet I've witnessed firsthand what happens when they're broken by force rather than choice." A shadow crossed his face. "It's not worth whatever you're trying to prevent, Nicholas."

"Thanks for the history lesson."

Cassian laughed, the sound brittle. "Keep it, then. Though I'd suggest not mentioning this little chat to your charming witch. She strikes me as the type who'd be displeased by deception."

Nicholas stuffed the relic back into his pocket. "I'll toss it in the river on my way out."

"Of course you will." Cassian picked up his ledger. "Don't be a stranger, tiger. Next visit, I'll expect payment for my expertise. Perhaps a night with that ravishing red wolf from Crescent Valley?"

"She's seeing someone."

"Pity." Cassian waved dismissively. "The fox twins then."

Nicholas left without responding, sunlight hitting him with sudden harshness. The relic felt heavier than before.

He should drive straight to the bridge and drop the damn thing in the deepest part of Shadow River. His hand even turned the ignition with that intent. Yet when he reached the turnoff, he found himself continuing past it, the piece still nestled in his pocket.

Just until he understood it better, he told himself. Just until he was sure it had nothing to do with the binding spell connecting him to Sylvie.

The violet band at his wrist pulsed once, like a silent rebuke.

SYLVIE

The dream still burned in Sylvie's mind as she swept herb dust from the counter of Moonshadow Apothecary.

Three nights in a row now, the same vision had haunted her sleep—Nicholas, the candle, that damned tiger prowling through her consciousness.

Each morning she'd woken with sheets singed at the corners, the scent of smoke clinging to her hair.

She'd come early to the shop hoping work would clear her head, but her thoughts kept circling back to the binding spell, to Nicholas, to the strange twist in her stomach whenever the binding spell pulsed.

She heard the bell and glanced up to see her great-aunt Missy Sage glide into the shop, trailing scarves and the scent of lavender.

"Morning light finds the troubled witch at her sweeping." Missy's voice carried its usual musical lilt as she deposited a basket of fresh herbs on the counter. "Your magic feels restless today, little spark."

Sylvie shoved loose strands of hair back into her messy bun. "Just didn't sleep well."

"So I see." Missy reached out, thumb brushing beneath Sylvie's eye. "Those circles tell stories. As do your candles." She nodded toward the shelf where three new pillar candles had sprouted tiny blue flames without being lit.

"Damn it." Sylvie rushed over, waving her hands to extinguish them. The flames flickered out, but not before one left a scorch mark on the wooden shelf. "This keeps happening."

"I'd be more concerned if it wasn't." Missy settled onto a stool, arranging her flowing skirts around her. "Love magic never stays contained, especially not when it's fighting against stubborn hearts."

"It's not love magic," Sylvie countered automatically. "It's a warding spell gone wrong."

"Is there a difference?" Missy's eyes twinkled. "You remind me so much of your mother. She fought her feelings for your father just as fiercely. Nearly burned down half the orchard before she admitted what was already there."

Sylvie paused her sweeping. "Mom never told me that."

"She wouldn't. Sages don't like admitting when magic outsmarts them." Missy plucked a sprig of rosemary from her basket, rolling it between her fingers. "Your candles aren't misfiring, darling. They're amplifying."

"Amplifying what?"

"What's already there. Magic doesn't create feelings—it reveals them." Missy's smile turned knowing. "Remember Petra Willowbrook?"

Sylvie groaned. "Not this story again."

"Insisted on a potion to make Tim Fletcher notice her. I warned her, but she was determined." Missy leaned forward conspiratorially. "Three drops in his coffee, and suddenly he couldn't stop proposing. Five times in one day! Problem was?—"

"He'd actually been in love with her for years," Sylvie finished, having heard the cautionary tale countless times. "But that's different. Nicholas Whitmore doesn't have hidden feelings for me. He flirts with everything that breathes. You know that."

"And yet, the binding took." Missy raised an eyebrow. "Your candle could have exploded when anyone walked in. But it chose him."

"Candles don't choose anything. They're wax and wick."

Missy laughed. "For someone surrounded by magic her whole life, you certainly work hard to deny its intelligence."

"She stood, moving toward the shelf of specialty candles near the window."

"Love magic gone wrong looks very different, little spark."

Remember Gloria Chen? Tried to enchant roses for her ex-husband and ended up with man-eating petunias. "

"Or Finn O'Riley," Sylvie contributed reluctantly, "who tried a devotion spell and made his girlfriend allergic to his presence."

"Precisely!" Missy clapped her hands. "Magic backfires spectacularly when it's forced against nature. But you and your tiger? The spell reversed and strengthened. It's holding. That tells its own tale."

The band warmed, as if agreeing. She twisted it absently, remembering how Nicholas had looked in that dream—amber eyes blazing, reaching for her across impossible distance.

"He's not my tiger," she muttered.

"The magic seems to disagree." Missy moved back to her herbs, sorting them with practiced hands. "When was the last time you spoke with him?"

"The other day after I had my—" She stopped herself before she gave her aunt more ammunition by telling her about the dreamwalking. "We've been avoiding each other for the most part."

"And how's that working out for both of you?"

Sylvie frowned. The truth was, she'd felt increasingly off-kilter since Nicholas had stopped coming by the shop. Like something was missing, a constant itch she couldn't scratch. She'd blamed the binding spell, but what if...

"You think I actually have feelings for Nicholas?" She couldn't keep the disbelief from her voice. "The man who goes through dates like I go through candle wicks?"

"I think," Missy said carefully, "that sometimes we build walls against the very things we need most. And that magic has a way of finding cracks in those walls."

The image from her dream flashed again—Nicholas standing in a circle of candlelight, looking at her with an intensity that made her breath catch even in memory.

"But he's so..." Sylvie waved her hand vaguely.

"Handsome? Charming? Desperately trying to keep everyone at arm's length despite clearly yearning for connection?" Missy suggested innocently.

Sylvie narrowed her eyes. "Has anyone ever told you that you're insufferable when you're right?"

"Only every Sage woman for six generations." Missy patted her niece's cheek. "Emotional truth, Sylvie. That's what will untangle this magic. One way or another."

The violet band pulsed again, more insistent this time. Sylvie stared down at it, her resistance crumbling. What if the candle hadn't malfunctioned? What if it had simply seen past her carefully constructed barriers to something she'd been denying for longer than she cared to admit?

Every interaction with Nicholas replayed in her mind like a film reel spinning too fast—the nervous flutter that rippled through her stomach when he entered her shop, the electric awareness that prickled across her skin whenever he stood near her sorting through herbs.

She recalled with startling clarity how she tracked his movements without meaning to, how her magic seemed to hum in response to his presence.

That irritation she'd always felt at his easy, flirtatious manner might, possibly—no, probably—have been something else entirely.

Something she'd been desperately labeling as annoyance because the alternative was too complicated, too vulnerable.

She remembered how he'd leaned across her counter last month, amber eyes catching the light as he'd asked about a remedy for one of the sanctuary's injured foxes.

How her fingers had trembled slightly when passing him the tincture, and how she'd attributed it to the morning chill rather than the brief brush of his warm hand against hers.

"I need to see him," she said suddenly, rising from her chair with such force that it scraped loudly against the wooden floor.

The decision crystallized in her mind with the same clarity as perfectly formed ice.

Her heart raced with a mixture of terror and exhilaration.

"I need to talk to Nicholas before I lose my nerve. "

Her wrist pulsed with approval, as if it had been waiting all along for this moment of surrender.

Her aunt simply smiled and nodded, that knowing look in her eyes that had irritated Sylvie since childhood, the one that said Missy had anticipated this exact outcome hours or perhaps days ago.

"Let me know if I can be of any further assistance, dear," she said, casually adjusting one of her many colorful scarves.

"Though I suspect the magic has things well in hand now that you've stopped fighting it. "

NICHOLAS

Nicholas stared at the cursed relic on his desk, its obsidian surface catching the late morning light as he turned it over in his hands.

The carved tiger along its edge seemed to mock him, a reminder of what slept beneath his skin.

The tether around his wrist pulsed, a constant reminder of the witch he couldn't have.

After his conversation with Cassian at The Gilded Fang yesterday, sleep had been impossible. The bartender's warning echoed: "This thing's tied to broken mate bonds, Nick. Bad juju. Where'd you find it?"

He'd lied, but Cassian's narrowed eyes said he hadn't bought the story. Nicholas could hardly explain that he'd found it buried at the edge of an ancient mating circle in Echo Woods right before the binding spell with Sylvie had kicked into overdrive with dreamwalking.

His tiger paced restlessly beneath his skin. The separation from Sylvie was making his control slip. Twice this morning he'd found his nails extending into claws while filling out sanctuary paperwork.

A knock at his office door snapped him from his thoughts. He shoved the relic into his desk drawer.

"It's open," he called, leaning back in his chair and adopting the easy smile that had

become second nature.

The door swung open, and his carefully constructed facade cracked. Sylvie stood in the doorway, blonde hair windswept and cheeks flushed. The scent of clove and cedar washed over him, and his tiger surged forward with such force that Nicholas had to grip the edge of his desk.

"Sylvie." Her name escaped his lips with a hint of excited anticipation. "What are you doing here?"

She stepped inside, closing the door behind her. Her stormy eyes fixed on him with unnerving intensity. "We need to talk."

"About?" He raised an eyebrow, fighting for nonchalance while his pulse hammered.

"You know exactly what about." She raised her wrist, displaying the violet band that matched his own. "This thing is messing with my magic. I can't keep setting candles on fire every time you cross my mind."

The confession hung between them. Every time you cross my mind. His tiger practically purred.

"Sorry to hear that." He stood, moving around the desk to put distance between them. "But I don't think there's anything I can do to help."

Sylvie frowned. "Missy thinks the spell isn't malfunctioning. She thinks it's amplifying something that was already there, like I've said before. And apparently, there's no getting around it."

Nicholas had known from the first moment the binding took hold that she was his mate.

His tiger had recognized her instantly. But the relic in his drawer that he had kept hidden from her on top of the stories of the curse that had plagued his own bloodline for generations.

.. He couldn't pull her into that darkness.

"Your aunt's a romantic." He shrugged, leaning against the wall with practiced casualness. "Sometimes a spell gone wrong is just that."

"Is it?" She stepped closer, and the band on his wrist warmed in response. "Because every witch I've talked to says the same thing. This spell mimics a mate bond."

The words hung in the air between them. Nicholas's tiger clawed at his insides, desperate to claim what was theirs. He forced it down.

"Look, Sylvie." His voice came out harsher than intended. "I'm not looking for a mate. I don't do relationships. Ask anyone in town, Nicholas Whitmore is good for a night, not a lifetime."

The hurt that flashed across her face cut him deeper than a knife, but he pressed on.

"Whatever this is," he gestured between them, "it's not real. It's magic gone haywire, and the sooner we break it, the better for both of us."

She stepped closer still, eyes flashing. "You're lying. I can feel it through the bond."

"Can you?" He arched an eyebrow. "Or is that what you want to feel?"

Sylvie's jaw tightened. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small candle. "I'm going to try something. If I'm wrong, I'll leave you alone. Deal?"

Before he could respond, she placed the candle on his desk and reached for the matches in her pocket. Nicholas watched, transfixed, as she struck the match. The flame caught, dancing at her fingertips.

"What are you?—"

The flame suddenly leapt, growing far too large for a simple match. Sylvie gasped, dropping it as the fire licked across her palm.

"Shit!" Nicholas lunged forward, reaching for her hand.

The moment his fingers touched her skin, his control snapped. Pain lanced through him as bones cracked and shifted. His tiger, denied too long, surged forward with unstoppable force.

"Nicholas!" Sylvie's voice seemed distant through the roar of shifting.

The change ripped through him, faster and more violent than any shift he'd experienced before. In moments, where Nicholas had stood, a massive Bengal tiger crouched, orange and black fur gleaming in the office light.

Sylvie stood frozen, eyes wide, her burned hand forgotten. The tiger—Nicholas—moved forward cautiously, amber eyes locked on her face.

"Oh," she breathed, not backing away. "You're beautiful."

Nicholas's tiger ears flicked forward at her words. His instincts screamed to examine her hand, to protect his mate from harm. He padded forward, lowering his massive head to gently nudge her palm.

"It's okay," she whispered, kneeling to meet his gaze level. "It's just a small burn."

The tiger rumbled, displeased, and carefully licked her palm. Sylvie gasped at the contact, but didn't pull away.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Her voice was soft as she tentatively reached out with her uninjured hand, hovering above his head. "This isn't just a spell gone wrong."

Nicholas couldn't speak in this form, but he pressed his head into her palm, allowing the touch he'd been denying them both. His tiger practically melted under her gentle fingers as she stroked between his ears.

"Why are you fighting this so hard? Even harder than I am." Sylvie asked, her fingers trailing through his fur, feeling the silky-rough texture against her skin. Her voice dropped to a whisper that only a predator's ears could catch. "What are you so afraid of, Nicholas?"

He closed his eyes, unable to answer but achingly vulnerable before her.

For the first time in years, Nicholas couldn't hide behind his charming smile or flirtatious quips.

There was no casual wink to deflect her questions, no teasing remark to change the subject.

In tiger form, all his carefully constructed walls lay in ruins at Sylvie's feet, leaving his soul as exposed as his striped hide.

The violet bands around both their wrists glowed brightly, pulsing in perfect unison with their heartbeats.

As Sylvie continued to stroke his massive head, the bands flared with sudden intensity, sending a cascade of warmth through their bodies.

Nicholas's tiger rumbled deep in his chest, a sound somewhere between contentment and fear.

The tiger's amber eyes opened, meeting hers with an intelligence and emotion that transcended his animal form. In that moment, something shifted between them—something neither magic nor reason could explain away.

SYLVIE

Sylvie's fingers sank into the tiger's thick fur, marveling at the contrast between the coarse guard hairs and the silky softness beneath.

The connection between them hummed through the violet bands on their wrists, and something inside her chest unfurled that felt warm, dangerous, and intoxicating.

A sudden tremor rippled through the massive cat's body. Nicholas's tiger form shuddered, and he backed away from her, amber eyes wide with alarm.

"Nicholas?" Sylvie reached for him as another violent tremor wracked his frame.

The shift back to human happened with none of the fluid grace she'd heard characterized shifter transformations.

This was jagged, painful, bones cracking and reforming with sounds that made her stomach clench.

Nicholas's tiger form contorted, fur receding into skin that appeared to split and heal simultaneously.

When it was over, Nicholas knelt naked on the office floor, his breath coming in ragged pants. Angry red welts crisscrossed his golden skin where the hasty transformation had torn through him.

"That's not supposed to happen like that," he managed through gritted teeth, one hand

braced against the floor.

Sylvie snapped into action, shrugging off her outer cardigan and draping it around his shoulders. "Are you okay? What do you need?"

Nicholas tried for his trademark smirk, but it faltered into a grimace. "First aid kit under the sink in the bathroom through that door. And maybe some pants."

She hurried to retrieve both, finding the kit exactly where he'd said and grabbing a pair of sweatpants hung on a hook behind the door. When she returned, Nicholas had managed to sit up against his desk, her cardigan pulled around his waist for modesty.

"I've got it," he said, reaching for the first aid kit.

Sylvie held it back. "Let me. You can't see half of these." She nodded to the welts across his shoulders and back. "Why did it hurt you like that?"

Nicholas's jaw tightened. "Shifting should be smooth, controlled. That wasn't. My tiger... he took over." He wouldn't meet her eyes. "It happens when—" He cut himself off.

"When what?" She opened the kit, pulling out antiseptic wipes.

"When a shifter fights the mate bond too long," he said quietly. "It's a warning."

The admission hung between them as Sylvie gently cleaned the first welt across his shoulder. He hissed at the contact.

"Sorry," she murmured, lightening her touch.

"Not your fault."

"Isn't it?" Her fingers brushed a particularly angry mark at the base of his neck. "This all started with my spell."

Nicholas turned his head slightly, amber eyes meeting hers. "The spell only amplified what was already there."

"That's what Missy said." Sylvie applied salve to the cleaned wounds, hyper-aware of the heat radiating from his skin. "Why didn't you tell me? About... this. Us."

His laugh held no humor. "What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, witch who hates me, guess what? My tiger thinks we're destined mates'?"

"I don't hate you." The words slipped out before she could stop them.

"Could've fooled me." His shoulders relaxed slightly under her ministrations. "You glare daggers every time I walk into your shop."

Sylvie's hands paused on his back. "That's because you flirt with anything that breathes, then forget they exist a week later."

"Not anything," he corrected softly. "And I never forgot you."

The admission sent warmth flooding through her. Sylvie resumed treating his wounds, moving to kneel in front of him to reach the welts on his chest. Their faces were inches apart.

"You're good at this," Nicholas murmured.

"Witches know their way around healing." She worked methodically, but each touch felt increasingly intimate. "Why were you fighting it so hard? The bond, I mean."

His eyes darkened. "Because you deserve better."

"Shouldn't that be my decision?" Her fingers traced an old scar along his collarbone, one that predated today's wounds.

Nicholas caught her hand, his thumb brushing over her pulse point. "There are things you don't know about me. About my family."

"So tell me." She didn't pull her hand away.

"It's not that simple."

"It never is." Sylvie finished dressing the last of his wounds and sat back on her heels. "But keeping secrets is what got you into this painful state."

The violet bands on their wrists pulsed in unison, a reminder of what connected them. Nicholas stared at them, conflict etched on his face.

"I don't know how to do this, Sylvie." The vulnerability in his voice caught her off guard. "The real thing, without the games."

"And you think I do?" She laughed softly. "I've spent years making candles to ward off love magic. Maybe because I was afraid of what would happen if I let myself feel it."

As the words left her mouth, realization dawned. Her fear of love spells, her insistence on controlling every aspect of her magic—it had never been about the spells at all. It had been about her.

She inhaled deeply and made herself truly examine him.

"So, can we at least acknowledge that it appears less agonizing when we're around each other more?

We could use that time not just to work out how to undo the spell but to understand one another better.

.. That is, if you're interested," she hastily appended.

Asking made her feel exposed, yet she was exhausted by the spell's ache and yearning and truthfully, perhaps if she became acquainted with Nicholas, he might actually be the man her aunt described, simply concealing himself behind defenses.

Nicholas winced as she continued to clean him up but his eyes didn't leave hers. He seemed calm and almost poetic in the vulnerable light just then as he quietly nodded with a sincere smile. "Yeah, I think we could do that."

NICHOLAS

Nicholas stared at the ancient relic nestled in the palm of his hand, its weathered surface cool against his skin despite having been in his pocket all day. In the three days since he'd agreed to spend more time with Sylvie, this damned piece of carved stone had developed a disturbing new habit.

He traced the etched symbols with his thumb, remembering the first time it had happened.

They'd been in her shop after hours, discussing containment spells for problematic shifter energy.

The conversation had veered into an argument about boundary magic—something about her insistence that his tiger needed tighter constraints.

The moment her voice had risen and his jaw had clenched, a faint amber glow had emanated from his pocket.

It happened again yesterday when they disagreed about dinner plans at The Gilded Fang. And just now, barely twenty minutes ago, as they'd bickered over proper handling of her ceremonial herbs at the counter of Moonshadow Apothecary.

"You're looking mighty suspicious there, tiger boy."

Nicholas closed his fist around the relic and whipped around to find Rollo leaning against the fence post at Shifter's Rest. The older bear shifter's streaked beard couldn't

hide his knowing smile.

"Just checking the time." Nicholas slipped the stone back into his pocket.

"On a rock?" Rollo arched a bushy eyebrow. "That why you've been walking around like you've got fire ants in your drawers?"

Nicholas shouldered past him toward the red wolf enclosure. "Don't you have a sanctuary to manage?"

"Already did my rounds." Rollo fell into step beside him. "So, how's that mate bond treating you? Still pretending it doesn't exist?"

The mention of the bond made Nicholas's tiger stir beneath his skin. Ever since that painful shift in Sylvie's presence, his animal had been more insistent, more volatile.

"We're... working on it." Nicholas checked the feeding schedule on the clipboard hanging outside the enclosure.

"Working on it?" Rollo snorted. "That why I saw you two arguing on Main Street yesterday like an old married couple? The witch looked ready to set your pants on fire—and not in the fun way."

Nicholas's lips quirked despite himself. "She doesn't pull punches."

"And you like that about her."

It wasn't a question. Nicholas didn't answer, but the warmth spreading through his chest was answer enough.

He'd spent the past few days discovering layers to Sylvie Sage that he'd never

anticipated.

Her biting sarcasm masked a fierce loyalty to her customers.

Behind her practicality lay a reverence for old traditions that surprised him.

And beneath her prickly exterior was a woman who sang softly to her plants when she thought no one was listening.

"She's..." Nicholas searched for words that wouldn't give too much away.

"Your mate," Rollo finished for him. "No matter how much you try to deny it."

"It's complicated."

"Only because you're making it that way." Rollo nodded toward Nicholas's pocket.

"That thing you're carrying around—it affecting the bond?"

Nicholas's head snapped up. "How did you?—"

"Been around a long time, boy. I recognize trouble when I smell it." The older shifter's eyes narrowed. "You planning on telling her about it?"

The relic seemed to grow heavier in Nicholas's pocket. "When the time is right. Plus I have no idea if it's this thing or not. We may just like to argue."

Rollo shook his head. "Secrets and mates don't mix well. Take it from someone who learned the hard way."

The advice hung in the air as Nicholas completed his evening rounds. By the time he finished, dusk had fallen, and he found himself driving not toward his cabin but to the

outskirts of town, where a small cottage stood amid a riot of wildflowers and herb gardens.

Hazel Fairweather answered his knock before his hand left the door, as if she'd been expecting him. The elderly dryad's silver hair was pulled into a messy bun, and her bright blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Well now, the tiger comes calling." She ushered him inside. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

Nicholas ducked under the doorframe of the cottage. "Sylvie mentioned she talked to you about the..." He gestured to the violet band on his wrist.

"The mate bond?" Hazel chuckled. "Yes, your little witch was quite distressed about it. Tea?"

Before he could answer, she placed a steaming mug in his hands. The scent of chamomile and something earthy filled his nostrils.

"I need your help with something else." Nicholas reached into his pocket and placed the relic on her cluttered kitchen table.

Hazel's expression sobered immediately. She didn't touch the stone, merely leaned over to examine it, her wrinkled face illuminated by the kitchen's warm light.

"Where did you find this?" Her voice had lost its earlier warmth. He was beginning to notice a pattern.

"Buried near an old mating circle in Echo Woods."

"And you thought it wise to dig it up and carry it around?" She clicked her tongue.

"You shifters and your impulsivity."

Nicholas bristled. "I didn't know what it was."

"And now?"

"Now it glows whenever Sylvie and I argue." He leaned forward. "What is it, Hazel?"

The witch's fingers hovered over the stone, not quite touching it. "It's a bond stone. Ancient magic, from before the separation of the clans. They were used in mating rituals gone sour."

"Sour how?"

"When fated mates rejected their bond, these stones were sometimes used to... encourage the connection." Her expression grew grim. "Not always with the happiest results."

Nicholas felt his tiger growl beneath his skin. "It's feeding off our arguments, isn't it? The tension between us."

Hazel nodded slowly. "Emotional energy is powerful magic, Nicholas.

Especially between mates." She finally touched the stone with one finger, and it pulsed with amber light.

"This relic wants what all bond stones want—completion.

It wants a bond to adhere to. And if it was corrupted by a broken one before, then this is nothing but bad news because whatever plagued that bond will plague yours and possibly... be your demise."

Nicholas swallowed hard. "It will take any bond?"

Hazel's penetrating gaze fixed on him, seeing far more than he was comfortable with.

"No, tiger. It wants yours." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And it will keep glowing brighter until it gets what it wants—or destroys what's in its way."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

Sylvie stood at her kitchen window, watching storm clouds gather over the mountains beyond Echo Woods. The wind whispered against the glass, carrying the scent of impending rain. She closed her eyes, feeling the static electricity prickle across her skin, a witch's natural barometer.

"Just what I need," she muttered, turning back to her work table where several half-finished candles waited. "Like my magic isn't unstable enough already."

Her fingers traced around her wrist where the purple bracelet laid. It had grown warmer over the past few days, pulsing whenever Nicholas was near. Which was happening with alarming frequency since the night he'd shifted in her shop.

Lightning flashed outside, followed by a low rumble of thunder. Sylvie jumped as every candle in her kitchen flared simultaneously, their flames reaching unnaturally high before settling.

"Get it together." She shook out her hands, trying to dispel the excess energy that seemed constantly at her fingertips lately.

The shop phone rang, startling her again. She grabbed it, tucking it between her ear and shoulder.

"Moonshadow Apothecary, we're closed but?—"

"Sylvie." Nicholas's voice came through, sounding strained. "Are you feeling it too?"

Her heart stuttered. "Feeling what?"

"The pull. It's... stronger tonight." In the background, she heard another crack of thunder. "I can't focus. My tiger's pacing like he's caged."

Sylvie swallowed, unwilling to admit that she'd been fighting the same restless energy all evening. "It's probably just the storm. Shifters get twitchy during atmospheric pressure changes, right?"

"This isn't weather sensitivity." His voice dropped lower, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "I keep seeing flashes of your shop. Your kitchen. You."

Sylvie glanced around nervously, half-expecting to see him materialize in her space. The violet band pulsed more intensely.

"What do you want me to do about it?" She winced at her defensive tone. "I've tried every counter-spell I know."

"I don't know." He sounded exhausted. "I just... needed to hear your voice."

The simple admission knocked the air from her lungs. He was becoming more open with her and every time, it threw her off.

She sank into a kitchen chair, suddenly aware of how much energy she'd been expending to keep her walls up around him.

"Nicholas, I?—"

A deafening thunderclap shook the cottage, and the phone went dead. Simultaneously, every candle in the room extinguished, plunging her into darkness.

"Perfect," Sylvie grumbled, fumbling for matches in the drawer. Her fingers closed around them just as exhaustion hit her like a physical wave. She barely made it to her sofa before her eyelids grew impossibly heavy.

The last thing she registered before sleep claimed her was the violet band glowing brightly in the dark room.

She knew she was dreamwalking the moment her bare feet touched dew-dampened grass. The landscape was familiar yet not. It was her cottage garden, but wilder, the plants more vibrant, the colors more intense. Above her, the storm raged, but the rain never seemed to fall on her.

"I thought I might find you here."

Sylvie turned to find Nicholas leaning against her garden gate. He wore a simple white t-shirt and jeans, his hair windswept. His eyes glowed faintly amber in the dreamscape.

"Are going to make this a habit of sharing dreams now?" She crossed her arms, pretending the sight of him didn't make her pulse quicken. "The spell's getting creative."

Nicholas pushed off from the gate and took a step toward her. "Is that what this is? A spell?"

"What else would it be?"

He moved closer, and Sylvie found herself rooted to the spot. "Maybe something that was waiting to happen."

The air between them seemed charged, crackling with the same energy as the storm

above. The violet bands on their wrists pulsed in synchronicity.

"We can't keep doing this." Sylvie's voice came out softer than intended. "Fighting it during the day, getting pulled together at night."

"Then stop fighting." His hand reached up, hesitating a breath away from her cheek. "Just for tonight. In this dream. It makes it so much easier than in the light of day, don't you think?"

Lightning illuminated the dreamscape, casting his face in sharp relief. Sylvie saw something raw and honest in his expression that stripped away her defenses.

"I'm afraid." The admission slipped out and she blamed the drug-like affect of the dream.

"Of what?" His fingers finally made contact, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Of wanting something I can't control." She leaned into his touch despite herself. "Magic should follow rules, Nicholas. This doesn't follow any rules I understand."

His smile was gentle, lacking its usual cockiness. "Not everything worth having comes with an instruction manual, Sage."

"Why are you so much more open in the dreams then when we are actually together?"

He shrugged. "This feels easier to say what I feel, to stop fighting and just be me... us. Doesn't it?"

Another roll of thunder, closer now, and Sylvie felt the dreamscape shift around them. The garden melted away, replaced by the interior of her cottage, but dreamlike with candles floating in the air, herbs growing from the floorboards.

Nicholas's arms encircled her waist, drawing her closer. "Tell me to stop," he whispered, his breath warm against her ear.

Sylvie's hands found their way to his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath her palms. Strong, steady, real despite the unreality of their surroundings.

"I don't want you to stop."

The confession hung between them for a suspended moment. Then Nicholas lowered his head, and Sylvie rose on her tiptoes to meet him.

Their lips touched as lightning split the dream sky.

Heat coursed through Sylvie's body, radiating from the violet band on her wrist to every extremity.

Nicholas's mouth tasted of wild things—honey and woodsmoke and something untamed.

His hands tangled in her hair as the kiss deepened, drawing a soft sound from her throat.

The dreamscape swirled around them, responding to their emotions. Candles flared brighter, herbs bloomed out of season, and somewhere in the distance, she heard the rumbling purr of a satisfied tiger.

Sylvie awoke with a gasp, bolt upright on her sofa. Outside, the storm had passed, leaving behind the clean scent of rain-washed air drifting through her open window.

Her fingers flew to her lips, still tingling with sensation. The taste lingered—honey and woodsmoke, just as in the dream. The violet band glowed softly in the pre-dawn

light, warm against her skin.

"Oh no," she whispered to the empty room. "This is getting way out of hand."

NICHOLAS

N icholas couldn't stop thinking about that dream. All day the taste of Sylvie's lips had haunted him through every waking moment. His tiger paced restlessly beneath his skin, demanding he seek her out again.

But he couldn't. Not until he understood what they were dealing with. Especially since he had already confessed more in that dream than he had allowed himself to in all the time they'd been spending together.

Nicholas had to duck his head when entering Pines and Needles.

The bookstore smelled of old paper, leather bindings, and the faint hint of cinnamon from the café section in the back.

Towering shelves created a labyrinth of knowledge, each section meticulously organized despite the shop's cozy chaos.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in." Markus appeared from behind a stack of new arrivals, his broad shoulders and rugged beard giving him the appearance of a lumberjack rather than a bookstore owner. "Or should I say, the cat who dragged himself in?"

Nicholas rolled his eyes. "Hilarious. Wolf jokes from a werewolf. Never gets old."

"Neither does your commitment issues," Markus countered with a knowing smirk. He tapped his nose. "You smell different. Less... available."

"I need the restricted section." Nicholas evaded the comment, though his wrist prickled at the mention. "Shifter histories. The old ones."

Markus raised an eyebrow. "Sounds serious. Let me get Rowan—he catalogs the older texts."

As Markus disappeared between the shelves, Nicholas wandered toward the mythology section, fingers skimming the spines.

His pocket felt heavy with the relic he'd been carrying since finding it in Echo Woods.

He hadn't told Sylvie that he still had it yet.

After that kiss—dream or not—he knew he should, but something held him back.

Fear, his tiger supplied unhelpfully. The same fear that's kept you running.

"Nicholas Whitmore browsing books instead of browsing the dating pool? The apocalypse must be nigh."

Nicholas turned to find Rowan approaching, his slender frame and kind eyes a perfect counterbalance to his mate's gruffness. Where Markus was all hard edges, Rowan was gentle curves—but Nicholas knew better than to mistake that softness for weakness.

"Hey, Ro. I need your help finding something specific."

"So Markus mentioned." Rowan studied him with surprising intensity. "Something about shifter histories? That's not exactly light reading."

Nicholas shifted his weight. "I'm researching mate bonds. Specifically... curses associated with them."

Rowan's eyes widened. "Oh. Oh. So the rumors are true? You and the Sage witch?"

"What rumors?" Nicholas's tiger stirred protectively.

Markus reappeared, leaning against a bookshelf. "Small town, big ears. Couple people saw your tiger form bolt across town toward her shop the other night. Plus, you've got that look."

"What look?"

"The 'I'm terrified but trying to play it cool' look." Markus crossed his arms. "I wore it for months before Rowan and I figured things out."

"There's nothing to figure out," Nicholas protested automatically. "It's just a magical mishap."

"Uh-huh." Rowan didn't bother hiding his disbelief. "And that's why you're here looking up mate bond curses. Because of a 'mishap.'"

Nicholas exhaled slowly. "It's complicated."

"Always is." Markus nodded toward the back of the store. "Come on. The books you want are in the locked cabinet."

Nicholas followed them through the maze of shelves to a small reading alcove with a leather armchair and a glass-fronted cabinet. Rowan produced an old-fashioned key and opened it, revealing rows of ancient-looking volumes.

"So what exactly are you looking for?" Rowan asked as he scanned the titles.

Nicholas hesitated. The relic in his pocket seemed to grow warmer. "My family has a... history. With mate bonds gone wrong."

Markus settled into a nearby chair. "The Whitmore Curse. I've heard whispers."

Nicholas's head snapped up. "You know about it?"

"Legends travel in shifter circles." Markus shrugged. "Tiger shifters who find their true mates but reject them, doomed to bring destruction to both."

The simplification made Nicholas wince. "It's more than that. My great-great-grandfather found his mate but refused her because he'd already married for political advantage. She was a witch who specialized in binding magic."

"Like Sylvie," Rowan murmured, pulling out a thick tome bound in faded red leather.

"Not exactly like Sylvie," Nicholas said sharply. "This witch tried to force the bond. When it failed, she cursed his bloodline—any Whitmore who denies their true mate would be plagued by disaster until they accepted the bond or..." He swallowed. "Or until one of them died."

Rowan handed him the book. "And you think this applies to you and Sylvie?"

"I don't know what to think." Nicholas's fingers traced the embossed title: Blood Bonds and Ancient Pacts .

"My father warned me about it from childhood.

Said it was why he never remarried after my mother died—she wasn't his true mate,

but he'd rather be alone than risk finding his actual mate and triggering the curse. "

"So you've spent your life..." Markus squinted at him.

"Dating casually. Never getting serious. Keeping relationships physical but shallow." Nicholas gave a humorless laugh. "It seemed safer."

The relic in his pocket pulsed again, harder this time, and Nicholas flinched. Before he could stop it, the object tumbled from his pocket and rolled across the wooden floor, coming to rest at Rowan's feet.

The slender werewolf stared at it, then slowly knelt to examine it without touching. "What is that?"

"Something I found buried near an old mating circle in Echo Woods." Nicholas kept his voice neutral. "Cassian says it's cursed."

"And you're carrying it around in your pocket?" Markus looked incredulous. "What are you, new? You don't pocket cursed artifacts!"

"I was going to research it."

"By randomly carrying it around town?" Rowan asked, voice rising in pitch.

The relic pulsed again, emitting a faint violet glow that matched the band around Nicholas's wrist.

Markus's eyes narrowed. "You're already bonded to her, aren't you? That's a claiming band."

Nicholas unconsciously covered the band with his other hand. "It was an accident.

Her spell backfired."

"Spells that powerful don't just 'backfire,' Nick." Rowan gestured toward the book. "They reveal what's already there."

"That's what Missy said," Nicholas muttered.

"Smart woman." Markus leaned forward. "Let me get this straight. You found your mate—accidentally got magically bonded to her—and now you're carrying around a cursed artifact tied to broken mate bonds while researching your family's mate-rejecting curse?"

When put like that, it sounded worse than Nicholas had allowed himself to admit.

"It's not like I planned this." His tiger stirred restlessly. "And it doesn't matter anyway. Sylvie doesn't want this. She's fighting the bond as hard as I am."

Rowan and Markus exchanged a look that spoke volumes.

"What?"

"Nothing." Rowan handed him another book. "Just wondering which of you is more stubborn."

"You should bring her to couples night," Markus suggested, a mischievous glint in his eye. "We're having one tonight."

Nicholas snorted. "Right, because that wouldn't be awkward at all."

"Could be enlightening." Markus stood and stretched. "We've had plenty of couples who started off hating each other."

"We don't hate each other," Nicholas defended automatically. The memory of their dream kiss flashed through his mind, and he felt heat rising to his face.

Rowan's eyes widened. "Oh. Something's happened."

"Nothing's happened," Nicholas insisted, though his tiger rumbled in disagreement.

"Your eyes just flashed," Markus pointed out. "And you're blushing."

"I am not—" Nicholas cut himself off when the relic on the floor pulsed again, stronger this time. He sighed and bent to pick it up, wrapping it in a handkerchief before pocketing it again. "I just need to understand what we're dealing with."

"What you're dealing with, Nicholas," Rowan said gently, "is the universe smacking you over the head with what you've been running from your whole life."

Nicholas clutched the books tighter. "I should go."

"Couples night. Seven o'clock," Markus called after him as Nicholas headed for the checkout. "Bring the witch!"

"Not a chance," Nicholas muttered, though a treacherous part of him wondered what Sylvie would think of such an invitation.

As he paid for the books, his phone chimed with a text. His heart raced when he saw Sylvie's name on the screen.

We need to talk about last night , it read. Dream or not, something's changing.

Nicholas stared at the message, his tiger practically purring with satisfaction despite his human side's apprehension.

"Trouble in paradise already?" Rowan teased, bagging the books.

"There is no paradise," Nicholas said, though the denial felt hollow even to his own ears. "Just a mess I need to clean up before anyone gets hurt."

Or worse, his mind supplied. Before the curse takes hold and destroys us both.

SYLVIE

The morning light filtered through the stained glass above Sylvie's workbench, casting prisms of color across the unbinding candles she'd been working on since dawn.

This was her fifth attempt, each one more elaborate than the last, yet none had taken properly.

She squinted at the latest failure, a salt-infused violet candle that should have melted the magical bond tying her to Nicholas.

"Why won't you cooperate?" she muttered, pushing back a strand of hair that had escaped her loose knot.

The dream from last night still lingered, clinging to her like morning dew. She could still feel Nicholas's hands tangled in her hair, the press of his lips against hers, the rumble in his chest when she'd—

The candle suddenly flared, the flame shooting up six inches before settling back down. Sylvie stepped back, knocking a jar of dried lavender to the floor.

"Great," she grumbled, bending to sweep the crushed flowers into her palm. "Even my magic's gone lovesick."

She dumped the ruined herbs into her compost bin and returned to her workstation. The plain white unbinding candle waited, a fresh canvas for her intentions. She

centered herself, breathing deeply of the clove and cedar that perfumed the air, and began carving symbols into the wax.

Focus was essential in candle magic. Discipline. Control. All things she prided herself on before a certain tiger shifter had sauntered into her shop with his too-tight t-shirts and knowing smiles.

Sylvie blinked, looking down at what she'd etched into the wax. Not the unbinding symbols she'd intended, but two distinct letters: "N.W."

Nicholas Whitmore.

"Oh, for—" Sylvie shoved the candle away. This was getting ridiculous. Her magic had never betrayed her like this, reflecting her subconscious desires over her conscious intentions.

"Maybe that's it," she whispered to herself. "What if my intentions aren't aligned?"

The shop bell chimed, and Sylvie glanced up to see Mrs. Fitzwilliam shuffling in with her reusable tote bag.

"Morning, dear," the elderly woman called. "Just needing my weekly arthritis balm."

"Of course." Sylvie wiped her hands on her apron and moved to the shelves where she kept her pre-made remedies. "How's it working for you?"

"Like magic." Mrs. Fitzwilliam winked. "Though I suspect that's because it is magic."

Sylvie managed a smile as she retrieved the small green jar. "Just herbs and science, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. The magic's all in believing it works."

"And that tiger shifter of yours? Is he working out too?" The older woman's eyes twinkled mischievously.

Heat rushed to Sylvie's face. "He's not my?—"

"Everyone's talking about how he sprinted across town in tiger form straight to your shop the other day." Mrs. Fitzwilliam counted out exact change from her coin purse. "That's not nothing in shifter circles."

"It's hard to explain." Sylvie bagged the balm, carefully avoiding eye contact.

"The best things usually are." The old woman patted her hand. "Just remember, dear—sometimes we fight hardest against what we want most."

With that pearl of unsolicited wisdom, Mrs. Fitzwilliam departed, leaving Sylvie alone with her thoughts and five failed unbinding candles.

She returned to her workbench and stared at the candle bearing Nicholas's initials. On impulse, she reached for another plain candle and carved her own initials beside it: "S.S." She lit both candles and watched as the flames danced toward each other, nearly touching.

Her phone was in her hand before she'd fully made the decision, typing a message to Nicholas: We need to talk about last night. Dream or not, something's changing.

She set the phone down, her heart pounding against her ribs like a trapped bird. What was she doing? This spell was supposed to be about unbinding them, not... whatever this was.

The bell chimed again an hour later. She didn't need to look up to know who it was; her skin prickled with awareness.

"You wanted to talk?" Nicholas stood in the doorway, backlit by afternoon sun. His wild hair looked like he'd been running his hands through it, and he clutched a bag from Pines & Needles Bookstore.

Sylvie swallowed hard. "I think we need to address what happened last night."

"It was just a dream." His voice was flat, nothing like the tender warmth it had held in their shared dreamwalk.

"Was it?" She gestured to the workshop area. "Because my magic seems to think differently. I've been trying unbinding spells all morning, and nothing's working. My emotions keep bleeding into the wax."

Nicholas stepped further into the shop, his movements cautious. "Magic doesn't always know best."

"And what do you know about it?" The words came out sharper than she intended.

His amber eyes flickered, tiger-bright for a moment. "More than you'd think."

He set the bookstore bag on the counter. One of the books slid partially out— Blood Bonds and Ancient Pacts . Something cold settled in her stomach.

"You're researching how to break this." It wasn't a question.

"I'm researching what we're dealing with." Nicholas wouldn't meet her eyes. "This isn't just about a backfired spell, Sylvie. There's history here. My history."

She thought of the dream, of how he'd held her face between his hands and told her he'd been running his whole life until her. How different he seemed now—closed off, wary.

"Look, maybe this was a mistake." She stepped back, suddenly feeling foolish.
"Forget I texted. We'll figure out the unbinding separately."

"Sylvie—"

"No, it's fine. Really." She gestured to his books. "You clearly want to be free of this as much as I do. I shouldn't have read more into a stupid dream."

The candles with their initials flickered violently, then steadied, burning brighter than before.

Nicholas glanced at the flame for a moment as if he was going to say something, then decided better of it before turning around, grabbing his sack and walking out.

NICHOLAS

N icholas prowled the perimeter of his cabin, unable to settle. His tiger pushed against his skin, claws trying to extend, fur rippling just beneath the surface. Three hours since he'd walked out of Sylvie's shop, and he felt like someone had hollowed out his insides with a dull spoon.

"Get a grip," he muttered to himself, running his hands through his already out of place hair.

The image of Sylvie's face when he'd shut down—disappointment washing over those stormy gray eyes—had embedded itself into his memory. He'd fled with the books, his tiger raging at him the entire way home. Even now, his beast was furious.

Coward. Going back on your word. She is OURS.

"She's not a possession," Nicholas argued aloud to his empty living room. "And she deserves better than..." He trailed off, gesturing vaguely at himself.

He flopped onto his couch, staring at the ceiling.

The ancient book from Pines it only knew its mate was hurting, and they were the cause.

"She deserves a choice," he whispered into the empty room, his voice cracking.

The memory of her scent—clove and cedar with undertones of something uniquely

Sylvie—still clung to his clothes, tormenting him.

"Not some magical chain binding her to a man who's never managed to keep anyone around for longer than a few months. "

A peculiar crackle of energy made him look up. The relic he'd brought home sat on his bedroom dresser, visible through the open door. To his horror, tendrils of inky black mist curled from its surface, twisting like living shadows into the air.

"What the?—"

Nicholas lunged toward it, but the moment his hands came within inches of the artifact, pain lanced through his skull. His tiger roared, a sound that tore from his human throat in a strangled cry. The mist coiled around his wrists, ice-cold and burning at once.

Give in, something whispered that wasn't his tiger. Fight the bond and feed me instead.

He stumbled backward, crashing into his doorframe as the shadows pursued him.

His tiger fought for control—not to escape, but to protect them both.

The partial shift ripped through him, bones cracking as his body caught between forms. Fur sprouted in patches, claws tore through his fingertips, but he couldn't complete the transformation.

The black tendrils were binding him, freezing him in this agonizing halfway state.

A sharp rap on his door barely registered through the pain.

Then the knob turned, he'd forgotten to lock it, and small sneakers appeared in his vision.

Millie Grace. The sanctuary's young empath stood in his living room, her wide eyes taking in the scene: Nicholas half-transformed, the relic spewing darkness.

She didn't run. Instead, the mute girl moved forward with purpose, her small hands extended palm-up in a gesture of peace. Nicholas tried to warn her back, but all that came out was a tiger's chuff.

Millie knelt beside him, her expression serene despite the chaos. She placed one hand on his forearm where fur had erupted and the other on his chest, right above his heart.

A wave of calm flowed from her touch, soothing his frantic heart. His tiger responded instantly, recognizing the empathic magic that so often helped distressed animals at the sanctuary. The beast stilled, purring under her influence.

The black mist recoiled, curling back toward the relic like smoke caught in a draft. Nicholas felt his bones resettle, the fur receding beneath his skin. His breathing steadied as Millie's quiet magic worked through his system.

He managed a hoarse "Thank you," as his body returned fully to human form.

Millie smiled and patted his hand. Using the notepad she always carried, she wrote: Your heart is fighting your head. That relic seems to feed on that.

Before he could ask what she meant, his phone rang. Sylvie's name flashed on the screen. With a shaking hand, he answered.

"Nicholas?" Sylvie's voice sounded strained. "Are you okay? I had a vision just now—I felt like you were in danger, and I couldn't breathe, and there was this

pull?—"

"I'm fine," he lied, meeting Millie's disapproving stare. The girl crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Actually, that's not true. I'm not fine, Sylvie. I shouldn't have walked out like that."

A pause. "What happened?"

Nicholas took a deep breath, watching as Millie discretely moved to his bedroom to examine the now-dormant relic.

"I need to see you," he admitted, his voice dropping lower, the natural charm he usually wielded like a shield nowhere to be found. Just raw honesty. "I need to explain why I acted that way. There are things about me, about my family, that you need to know."

The silence on the other end stretched so long he thought she might have hung up.

She spoke. "My place. One hour." Then, softer, "Be careful, Nicholas."

SYLVIE

Sylvie paced her apartment above the apothecary, fingers twisting anxiously through the ends of her hair.

The sunflower candle she'd lit to calm her nerves sparked and flickered unnaturally, responding to her tumultuous emotions.

She'd felt Nicholas's pain from across town — actual physical pain that had doubled her over at her workbench, knocking a tray of cooling wax to the floor.

That had never happened before. Whatever bond existed between them was growing stronger, becoming tangible.

When the knock at her door finally came, she had to press a hand to her chest to contain the erratic pounding.

Nicholas stood on her threshold, looking like he'd been through hell. His usually perfect hair was disheveled, dark circles hung beneath his amber eyes, and there was something fragile in his expression she'd never seen before.

"You look terrible," she said, stepping back to let him in. It wasn't what she'd meant to say at all.

Nicholas attempted his signature smile, but it faltered. "You should see the other guy."

Sylvie's apartment was small but cozy, filled with plants that climbed the walls and clustered on every available surface.

Books piled in teetering stacks on the floor, and handmade candles illuminated every corner with warm, golden light.

It was nothing like the sleek, bachelor-pad vibe she imagined Nicholas lived in.

"I made tea," she said, gesturing to the two steaming mugs on her coffee table. She'd pulled out her special blend of chamomile and lavender with a touch of valerian root, perfect for steadying nerves.

Nicholas sank onto her couch, his large frame making her furniture appear suddenly miniature. He wrapped his hands around the mug, staring into its depths as if searching for courage.

"So," Sylvie settled across from him, tucking one leg beneath her. "You said you needed to tell me something."

Nicholas took a deep breath. "My family has a... history." He looked up, meeting her eyes. "More specifically, the Whitmore tigers have a pattern that goes back generations."

"A pattern?"

"A curse." He set the mug down, leaning forward. "When a Whitmore tiger finds their mate—their true mate—something always goes wrong. Tragedy follows. Every single time."

Sylvie frowned. "What kind of tragedy?"

"Death, usually." Nicholas's voice had gone flat. "Or worse. My great-grandfather supposedly drove his mate to madness. My grandfather's mate died in childbirth. My father's..." He swallowed hard. "My mother disappeared when I was ten. Just... vanished one night. They never found her body."

Sylvie's chest tightened. "And you think this is because of some curse?"

"I know how it sounds." His fingers clenched and unclenched. "But you're a witch. You understand there are forces at work beyond what most people recognize."

"Nicholas—"

"I've never let myself get close enough to anyone to worry about it," he continued. "I never wanted to risk..." His eyes found hers, raw with emotion. "Then this bond happened with you, and my tiger recognized you immediately. As ours."

"So you're saying," Sylvie began cautiously, "that we're actually ...mates? Not just magically bound by my spell? And you believe it now? You were just so skeptical?—"

"I didn't want to believe it but my tiger is about to destroy me if I keep denying it.

The spell didn't create the bond—it amplified what was already there, just like your aunt said.

" Nicholas absentmindedly started to thread his fingers through his hair.

"I felt it the moment I walked into your shop that day.

My tiger went completely still. That never happens, Sylvie. "

One of the candles in the room flared unexpectedly, the flame stretching toward the ceiling before settling. Sylvie's magic responding to her emotions again.

"And you've been pushing me away and saying it was just a lie because you're afraid of this curse."

"I was trying to protect you," he said, his voice cracking slightly. "I still am."

Something soft and warm unfurled in Sylvie's chest. She leaned forward, close enough that she could smell the pine and spice scent of him.

"Has it occurred to you that maybe I don't need protecting?" Her voice was gentle but firm. "I'm a Sage witch, Nicholas. My family has been breaking curses since before your great-grandfather was born."

A flicker of hope passed over his face. "I can't risk you."

"It's not your risk to take," she countered. "It's mine."

Nicholas opened his mouth to respond when his phone buzzed. He glanced at it and grimaced. "It's Rollo. There's a situation at the sanctuary. I need to—" He stood abruptly. "Can I use your bathroom before I go?"

"Down the hall on the left."

As Nicholas disappeared, Sylvie let out a breath. The raw vulnerability he'd shown touched something inside her she'd been keeping carefully guarded. For all his playboy reputation, he had depths she hadn't imagined.

Her gaze fell on his jacket, draped over the arm of her couch. Something was making her magic tingle, a faint vibration that emanated from the garment. Sylvie hesitated,

then reached for the pocket where the sensation seemed strongest.

Her fingers closed around something cold and ancient, a small object that sent shockwaves up her arm the moment she touched it. Pulling it out, she found herself staring at a small, carved stone relic, its surface etched with symbols she recognized from her studies of binding magic.

Recognition flooded through her. This was an artifact of dark magic, designed to siphon energy from emotional bonds. And not just any artifact—this was the type used in ancient times to trap unwilling mates in bonds they couldn't escape.

The relic pulsed in her hand, resonating with the magical connection between her and Nicholas.

"What are you doing with this?" she whispered, turning it over. Black residue stained her fingertips where she touched it. The same relic that had been feeding on their bond, growing stronger with every interaction.

The bathroom door opened, and Nicholas stepped back into the living room, freezing when he saw what she held.

"Sylvie—"

"You want to explain why you're carrying around a mate-binding relic?" The candles around the room all flared in unison, responding to the surge of emotions. "This is dark magic, Nicholas. The kind specifically designed to trap and feed off unwilling bonds."

His face drained of color. "I can explain?—"

"Did you plant this thing? Is this why my spell went wrong that day?" Her voice rose,

the relic growing warmer in her palm. "Have you been manipulating this whole thing from the start?"

"What? No!" Nicholas took a step toward her, but she backed away. "I found it buried in Echo Woods, near one of the old mating circles. I was going to put it back?—"

"This was what you found?! And you didn't?" Anger and hurt bubbled up inside her. "You kept it. You've been carrying it around while pretending you wanted to break our bond."

"That's not true. I was trying to understand it?—"

"Get out." Sylvie's voice was ice. "Just get out, Nicholas."

"Sylvie, please?—"

"No." The candle flames shot higher, one nearly igniting a curtain. "All this time, I thought my magic had created this mess. But you've been carrying the source of it in your pocket, lying to me." Her voice cracked on the last word.

Nicholas stood frozen, devastation written across his features. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Intentions don't matter when the result is the same." She held the relic up. "Take this monstrosity and get it out of here along with you. And I'd prefer if you stayed away from my shop."

For a moment, she thought he might argue. Instead, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I—"

"I don't want to hear it, just get out."

As the door closed behind him, Sylvie sank to the floor as the candles around her burned fast and hot then turned to trembling flames to match her shaking anger and grief.

NICHOLAS

N icholas stumbled down the stairs from Sylvie's apartment, the relic burning like a coal in his palm. Outside, the evening air did nothing to cool the flush of shame heating his face. He'd screwed up massively and the tiger inside him was yowling with loss.

His boots scuffed against the cobblestones as he made his way through town. Main Street's quaint storefronts, normally charming, seemed to mock him with their warm, inviting windows. Couples walked hand in hand, laughing, sharing ice cream cones from Frosty's. Nicholas averted his gaze.

The relic pulsed against his skin, almost gleefully.

"Shut up," he muttered, shoving it deeper into his pocket.

When he reached his truck, he slammed the door hard enough to rattle the windows. The engine roared to life, a pathetic substitute for the tiger's frustrated growl building in his chest.

"She looked at me like I was poison," he told his reflection in the rearview mirror. His eyes flashed amber, his tiger closer to the surface than usual. "Like I was something to scrape off her shoe."

He thought that had been what he wanted before, but when it happened, the way it had happened... well, it made him more miserable than he thought possible.

He finally had decided to tell her, face facts, and the one damn secret he'd kept had ruined it all. Of course Sylvie had known what the relic was. He should have shown her first, before anyone else.

The drive to Echo Woods took barely fifteen minutes, but each second stretched painfully. The relic grew warmer in his pocket, as if anticipating its return home. Nicholas cranked up the radio, but even Blake Shelton couldn't drown out the memory of Sylvie's voice— Get out. Just get out.

Echo Woods loomed ahead, ancient trees reaching toward a darkening sky.

Nicholas parked at the ranger station, empty this time of night, and grabbed a shovel from the back of his truck.

The setting sun cast long shadows through the trees as he hiked toward the old mating circle where he'd found the cursed thing.

"Should've just left you in the ground," he growled, marching down the trail. "Should've told her the moment I found you."

The path grew narrower, wilder. Echo Woods had been a sacred space for shifters since before the town was founded. Ancestors had performed mating ceremonies here, binding themselves to their chosen partners beneath the full moon. Nicholas's parents had mated here. Look how that turned out.

The clearing appeared ahead, a perfect circle of stone markers surrounding a central fire pit, now long cold. Moonlight filtered through the canopy above, illuminating the ancient space with silvery light.

Nicholas pulled the relic from his pocket. It looked innocuous enough—a small stone tablet etched with symbols of binding and connection. Yet darkness seemed to seep

from its surface, tendrils of shadow that writhed against his skin.

"Back to hell with you." He dropped to his knees and began digging, the shovel cutting into soft earth. The physical exertion felt good, channeling the frustration coursing through him.

The hole grew deeper. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool night air. When it seemed deep enough, Nicholas held the relic over the pit.

"Good riddance."

But his fingers wouldn't release it. The stone had grown scorching hot, yet he couldn't drop it. The relic's surface began to glow with an eerie black light, pulsating in rhythm with his heartbeat.

"What the?—"

The world around him shifted. The clearing transformed, edges blurring until Nicholas found himself standing in Sylvie's shop.

But not as it was—as it could be. Flames licked up the walls, consuming shelves of herbs and bottles.

And in the center, Sylvie herself, surrounded by fire, eyes wide with terror as she reached for him.

"Nicholas!" Her voice echoed, distorted and distant. "Help me!"

Nicholas lunged forward, but the vision shifted. Now he stood in a hospital room. Sylvie lay pale and still on a bed, machines beeping ominously beside her. A nurse shook her head sadly.

"Too late," the nurse said, her face morphing into his mother's. "Just like all the others. The Whitmore curse claims another."

"No!" Nicholas shouted, the sound tearing from his throat. The visions melted away, leaving him on his knees in the clearing, the relic still clutched in his trembling hand.

"I won't let it happen," he gasped, staring at the hateful object. "I won't let you take her too."

The relic pulsed again, shadows swirling across its surface. Nicholas raised his arm to throw it into the pit, but pain shot through him, doubling him over. His tiger clawed beneath his skin, demanding release, fighting for control.

"Not happening," he growled through clenched teeth.

A voice—not quite sound, not quite thought—whispered from the stone. You cannot escape what is written in blood. The bond will complete, or it will destroy.

Nicholas forced himself to his feet, fighting against the pain. "Then I'll break the curse. I'll find a way."

Laughter echoed in his head. Many have tried. All have failed.

"Yeah, well." Nicholas steadied himself against a tree, drawing deep breaths. "They weren't in love with Sylvie Sage."

The admission shocked him even as it left his lips.

But there it was—the truth he'd been dancing around since the moment he'd walked into her shop and his tiger had recognized her.

He loved her. He had known it even a few years ago when she had started working at the sanctuary and seeing her more in the shop.

He had been pulled to her and thought it was just for fun, but now he knew.

It was more. And he'd royally screwed it up.

The relic's grip on him seemed to loosen slightly, surprised by his declaration. Nicholas tried to use the moment to throw it in the hole, but to no avail. It was like it was glued into his hand. The harder he tried, the more pain he was in.

The night air was suddenly still, the forest quiet except for the distant call of an owl. Nicholas leaned on his shovel, processing what had just happened—and what he'd admitted to himself.

He loved Sylvie Sage. And he had to find a way to break this curse before it destroyed them both.

And to start, he had to get rid of this cursed thing. Now.

SYLVIE

Sylvie swept up the fragments of the third shattered candle, the broom scraping against the wooden floorboards with far more force than necessary. The shards of wax winked in the scattered light of her shop, mocking her with their refusal to cooperate.

"Stupid, stubborn magic," she muttered, dumping the remains into a growing pile of discarded wax.

Three hours had passed since she'd ordered Nicholas out of her apartment. Three hours of attempting to regain control over her own craft. Three hours of spectacular, fiery failure.

She grabbed another one of her pre-made protection candles—one Nicholas had picked up during his last visit—and placed it on her work table. The moment her fingers left the wick, the candle split down the middle with a grating crack, wax spilling across the polished wood.

"Oh, come on!" Sylvie slammed her palms against the table, rattling jars of dried herbs. "I've been making candles since I was six years old!"

She stormed to her supply shelves, running her fingers along jars of ingredients. Lavender for peace. Sage for cleansing. Rosemary for protection. All the elements that had once bent so willingly to her will now seemed as foreign as quantum physics.

The moment she'd seen the relic in Nicholas's pocket, cold dread had flooded her

veins. She recognized it instantly from her grandmother's grimoire—the Mate's Bane. An ancient cursed artifact said to feed on broken bonds and unfulfilled potential.

"The audacity," she spat, aggressively measuring beeswax pellets into a double boiler. "Bringing that... that thing into my home and saying nothing."

Steam rose as she switched on the heat, watching the wax begin to melt.

The Mate's Bane was no ordinary relic—it was specifically created to exploit weakness in pairing magic.

It targeted those with potential mate bonds, amplifying their connection while simultaneously corrupting it.

The fact that Nicholas had kept it secret from her felt like the final confirmation of his character.

"Always playing games," she mumbled, adding dried chamomile to the melting wax. "Everyone in town knows Nicholas Whitmore doesn't do serious."

But even as the words left her mouth, something twisted in her chest. The look in his eyes when she'd confronted him, there had been genuine hurt there, not the casual dismissal she'd expected. And beneath that hurt, something that looked suspiciously like shame.

The wax began to bubble unnaturally, dark smoke curling upward despite the gentle heat. Sylvie quickly switched off the burner and stepped back.

"This is ridiculous."

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, centering herself the way Grandmother

Missy had taught her. Focus. Intention. Will. The three pillars of witchcraft. Yet when she reached for that familiar well of power within herself, she found only echoes.

The shop felt too quiet without his presence.

Without his teasing remarks about her "mystical mumbo jumbo." Without the subtle shift in energy whenever he entered a room. Sure, he hadn't been around much, but lately, she'd been afraid to admit just how much she looked forward to his visits. And now...

"Okay, fine," she growled, stalking to the row of candles she'd set aside—every single one Nicholas had touched during his visits to the shop. "You want to make this difficult?"

She gathered them in her arms and carried them to the iron cauldron in the center of the room. One by one, she tossed them in, watching as they clattered against the metal.

"You don't get to keep having power over me," she told the pile of candles, striking a match. "You don't get to keep tainting my craft."

The flame touched the first candle, catching quickly.

But instead of the cleansing fire she'd expected, the flames turned a deep, unnatural purple.

The heat intensified within seconds, forcing Sylvie to step back.

The fire consumed the candles much too quickly, burning far too hot for simple wax and cotton.

"What the?—"

The flames leaped higher, licking at the ceiling. Smoke billowed out, smelling not of herbs and wax but of pine and musk and warm spice—of Nicholas.

Panic fluttered in her chest as the fire grew. She grabbed a jar of salt, flinging it into the cauldron while chanting a smothering spell. Nothing happened.

The flames continued their frenzied dance, casting wild shadows across the walls. A face seemed to form in the fire with amber eyes staring back at her, wounded and confused.

"Stop it," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Just stop it!"

As suddenly as it had erupted, the fire died, leaving nothing but ash and the lingering scent of tiger shifter in her shop.

Sylvie sank to the floor, drawing her knees to her chest. The realization hit with the force of a physical blow: her magic wasn't fighting against Nicholas's influence—it was fighting for it. Every candle, every spell, every intention... all of it was tied to him now.

"This can't be happening."

But even as denial formed on her lips, the truth settled in her bones. Her power wasn't broken, it had simply changed. And the change had everything to do with the walls she'd constructed around her heart.

For years, Sylvie had prided herself on her control. Emotions were messy, unpredictable things that had no place in careful spellwork. She measured, she planned, she executed with precision. Never allowing the chaotic nature of feelings to

interfere.

Yet her strongest magic had always come in moments of vulnerability—when she'd let her guard down, when she'd connected with others. The protection charm she'd made for her first real friend in elementary school. The healing candle she'd crafted while crying over her father's hospital bed.

Her grandmother's words echoed suddenly in her mind: Magic flows best through an open heart, little witch.

And if there was one thing Nicholas Whitmore had done, it was crack open that carefully sealed heart of hers.

"But he lied to me," she whispered to the empty shop. "He hid that relic."

Another truth settled alongside the first: she hadn't given him a chance to explain. The moment she'd seen the Mate's Bane, fear had overridden everything else—fear of being controlled, of being bound without consent. Fear of falling for someone whose reputation preceded him.

Fear of admitting how much she'd already begun to care.

She stared at the burned-out cauldron, ash settling like snow inside its iron belly. Her power was tied to her vulnerability—and her feelings for Nicholas were stronger than she'd been willing to admit.

NICHOLAS

The relic pulsed in Nicholas's hand, black tendrils of mist curling around his fingers like living shadows. Each heartbeat sent burning pain shooting up his arm, but his grip only tightened. The cursed thing had cost him Sylvie—he'd be damned if he'd let it escape now.

"Just stay... buried," he growled through gritted teeth, clawing at the earth with his free hand.

The hole he'd managed to dig in Echo Woods was deep enough, but his fingers had started shifting uncontrollably ten minutes ago, human nails elongating into lethal tiger claws, then retracting, over and over.

The forest floor around him was torn to shreds, pine needles and dirt scattered in his frenzy.

The relic—Mate's Bane, as Cassian and Sylvie had called it—seemed to fight against being contained. Every time Nicholas tried to drop it into the hole, an electric shock would jolt through his system, his tiger roaring inside his mind.

A wave of pain crashed over him, bringing Nicholas to his knees.

The shift was coming whether he wanted it or not, his bones already creaking with the need to change.

But something was wrong. Instead of the smooth transition he'd mastered decades

ago, his body seemed caught between forms with fur sprouting in patches, teeth sharpening then dulling, muscles rippling under skin that couldn't decide which shape to take.

"Damn it," he panted, feeling his control slipping. "Not... here."

The relic glowed brighter, feeding off his distress. Visions flashed before his eyes: Sylvie laughing with another man, Sylvie walking away forever, Sylvie hurt because of him. Each mental image stoked the painful half-shift further, his tiger clawing to break free and find her.

A familiar scent cut through the pine and earth, musk and leather, with hints of tobacco. Rollo.

"Kid? Are you making a ruckus out here? Every critter for a mile is—" The older shifter's voice stopped abruptly. "Sweet mercy."

Nicholas couldn't lift his head, muscles spasming as the failed shift left him contorted on the ground. The relic pulsed again, black mist now enveloping his entire arm.

"What the hell is that thing?" Rollo dropped to his knees beside Nicholas, reaching for the artifact.

"Don't—" Nicholas managed, but too late.

The moment Rollo's fingers touched the relic, he yanked his hand back with a hiss. "Dark magic. How long have you had this poison?"

Nicholas tried to answer, but speech failed him as another wave of half-shift rocked through his body. His jaw elongated, then snapped back, a pained growl escaping.

Rollo pulled off his leather jacket, wrapping it carefully around his hand before knocking the relic from Nicholas's grip. It rolled a few feet away, its glow dimming but not disappearing.

"Breathe, kid," Rollo gripped Nicholas's shoulders. "Focus on my voice. Your tiger's confused. Find your center."

The absence of direct contact with the relic provided slight relief, but Nicholas's body remained caught in the painful limbo between forms. His vision blurred, amber tiger eyes trying to focus through human pupils.

"Can't," he choked out. "She hates me."

"Who? The witch?" Rollo kept one firm hand on Nicholas's shoulder while retrieving a worn flask from his pocket. He poured clear liquid onto a bandana and pressed it to Nicholas's nose. "Breathe this. Calming herbs. Millie makes it."

The sharp scent of lavender and something else Nicholas couldn't identify cut through the pain haze. Three deep breaths later, the violent shifting began to slow.

"That's it," Rollo encouraged. "Find your anchor."

Nicholas's thoughts cleared enough to form words. "She found the relic. Kicked me out."

"And your response was to come out here and what—have a one-man pity party that trashed half the woods?" Rollo cuffed him lightly on the back of the head, an oddly comforting gesture. "Dumber than I thought, and that's saying something."

Rollo eyed the still-glowing relic. "We need to get that contained and you to the sanctuary. Can you stand?"

Nicholas managed to rise on shaking legs, his body finally settling mostly back to human form, though patches of orange-black fur still rippled across his forearms. Rollo kept a firm grip on his elbow.

"Why'd you hide it from her?" Rollo asked as they stumbled through the trees, the relic now wrapped in his jacket and tucked under his arm.

"I was..." Nicholas swallowed thickly. "Protecting her."

Rollo snorted. "From what? The truth?"

"From me," Nicholas admitted, the words burning his throat. "From this mess. From the curse."

They reached Rollo's weathered pickup truck, and the older shifter practically shoved Nicholas into the passenger seat before carefully placing the wrapped relic in the truck bed.

"Drive," Nicholas mumbled as Rollo slid behind the wheel. "Just drive."

The sanctuary was quiet when they arrived.

Nicholas let Rollo lead him past the main buildings toward the small cabin that served as the shifter's private quarters.

The relic, still wrapped in leather, had been locked in a metal box from Rollo's truck, though Nicholas could still feel its pull like an itch under his skin.

"Sit," Rollo ordered, pointing to a worn leather sofa. "And start talking."

Nicholas sank into the cushions, utterly drained. The tiger inside him whined, a sound

he'd never heard his inner beast make before. Longing, pain, and loss rolled through him in waves.

"I've been running," he admitted, staring at the floor. "My whole life. From commitment. From... possibilities."

"No shit," Rollo grunted, placing a glass of amber liquid in Nicholas's hand. "That's not news to anyone with eyes."

Nicholas took a swallow, the whiskey burning a path down his throat. "I knew she was different from the start. Something about her scent, her energy. I stayed away, mostly. Safer that way."

"For who?"

"For her," Nicholas looked up, meeting Rollo's knowing gaze. "My bloodline is cursed, Rollo. You know the stories."

"I know the legends," the older shifter corrected. "And I know you've used them as an excuse to keep everyone at arm's length since you were eighteen."

Nicholas's fingers tightened around the glass. "Three generations of Whitmore males whose mates suffered. My father, even my mother?—"

"Your mother loved your father," Rollo said softly. "What happened wasn't the curse."

"She got sick because of him," Nicholas insisted. "The bond weakened her. Everyone knows it."

Rollo sighed heavily, settling into an armchair across from Nicholas. "So you've

spent your life being exactly what everyone expected—the charming playboy who never gets serious. And then this witch comes along and messes up your carefully constructed bullshit."

Nicholas closed his eyes, feeling the truth of it settle in his bones. "I was an ass to her deliberately. Thought I could push her away. Keep her safe."

"And how's that working out for you?"

"She hates me," Nicholas said, his voice hollow. "Finding that relic was the last straw. She thinks I cursed her on purpose."

"Did you tell her about your family? The curse?"

Nicholas shook his head. "I began to, but then she found the relic before I could explain. Besides what am I supposed to really say, 'Hey, by the way, I've been terrible to you because I'm afraid if I admit what you mean to me, something awful will happen to you?'"

"Sounds like a start," Rollo shrugged. "Better than letting her believe you're just a manipulative jerk who played with dark magic to trap her."

Nicholas realized that he'd been so focused on protecting Sylvie from the curse that he'd ended up hurting her anyway.

"I'll ruin her life," Nicholas whispered. "Just like my father ruined my mother's."

"Kid," Rollo leaned forward, his weathered face serious, "you're already ruining her life by not being honest. And yours too, from the looks of it." He nodded toward Nicholas's arms, where patches of fur still rippled beneath his skin. "That half-shift isn't going away until you face this."

Nicholas stared into his whiskey, seeing Sylvie's stormy grey eyes reflected in the amber liquid. "I don't know how to fix this."

"Sure you do," Rollo stood, heading for the door. "You're just too damned scared to do it."

SYLVIE

Sylvie swiped angrily at the newly failed candle of the morning, her knuckles grazing the hot wax. She didn't even flinch at the burn, a small pain compared to the hollow ache that had settled in her chest since she'd kicked Nicholas out the other day.

The Moonshadow Apothecary stood eerily quiet. No customers had ventured in today, perhaps sensing the storm of emotions radiating from the shop's owner. Or maybe it was the blackened scorch marks on the ceiling from yesterday's magical mishap.

"I thought I locked that door." Sylvie didn't look up as the bell chimed, already knowing who'd barged in. Only one person ignored her CLOSED sign with such consistency.

"Locks are merely suggestions to the determined." Nico strode in, their brocade vest shimmering with embedded crystals that caught the late morning light. They carried a wicker basket covered with a purple cloth. "And if you'd bothered checking your messages, you'd know I was coming."

Sylvie's phone lay face-down on the counter, deliberately ignored since Nicholas's name had flashed across it seventeen times in the past twenty-four hours.

"I'm busy." She gestured to the mess of half-formed candles, spilled herbs, and scattered crystals.

Nico surveyed the chaos with a raised eyebrow. "Yes, I can see your productivity is simply off the charts."

The bell chimed again, and Missy Sage swept in with the scent of sage and something spicier. Her silver-streaked hair was braided with tiny bells that tinkled as she moved.

"Beautiful day to hide from life, isn't it?" Missy's keen eyes took in everything—Sylvie's unwashed hair, the dark circles under her eyes, the tremor in her hands. "I see we're right on time."

"You two planned this." It wasn't a question. Sylvie's eyes narrowed.

"Intervention is such an ugly word." Nico placed their basket on the cleanest corner of the counter. "We prefer 'magical assist.'"

Missy circled behind Sylvie, gently untangling a strand of hair from where it had caught on a dried herb. "You look terrible, darling."

"Thanks. Always good to have honesty." Sylvie pulled away, busying herself with reorganizing the already organized shelf of essential oils.

"That tiger boy looks worse," Missy said casually.

Sylvie's fingers tightened on a bottle of lavender oil. "He's not my concern."

"Rollo says he can't shift properly." Nico lifted the purple cloth, revealing an assortment of candle-making supplies. "Half-tiger, half-human. Stuck between. Sound familiar?"

"That's his problem." The words tasted false even as they left her lips.

"Hmm." Missy pulled ingredients from Nico's basket—silver shavings, clarity crystals, moon water, and a chunk of raw beeswax that smelled faintly of star anise. "The bond works both ways, you know."

Sylvie watched them arrange the supplies with practiced efficiency. "What are you doing?"

"Making a candle." Nico's tone suggested she'd asked if water was wet.

"I can see that. Why in my shop?"

"Because you've lost your spark." Missy's voice gentled, her hand coming to rest on Sylvie's shoulder. "Your magic is clouded by unacknowledged truths."

Sylvie tried to muster indignation, but exhaustion won out. "He lied to me."

"Did he?" Nico measured powdered moonstone into a small bowl. "Or did he withhold information while trying to figure things out, just like you've done your entire life?"

The parallel struck too close. Sylvie turned away, but Missy guided her back to the worktable.

"This," Missy held up a clear crystal, "is a Candle of Clarity. It burns only with true intent and reveals what the heart knows but the mind denies."

"I know what I feel." Sylvie crossed her arms. "Betrayed."

"And yet your magic won't work." Nico mixed the herbs with practiced hands. "Curious, for someone so certain."

They worked in silence for several minutes, Sylvie watching despite herself as they crafted a perfect white taper candle embedded with silver flecks. When it was done, Missy placed it in a simple holder before Sylvie.

"What?" Sylvie asked.

"Light it," Nico challenged, sliding a matchbook toward her.

"This is ridiculous."

"Then prove us wrong." Missy's eyes twinkled. "If you truly hate Nicholas Whitmore, this candle will burn black. If you're merely angry but confused, it might flicker blue or green. But if?—"

"I know how clarity candles work." Sylvie grabbed the matchbook.

Her hand trembled slightly as she struck the match. The candle stood stubbornly unlit through three attempts.

"You have to mean it," Nico said softly. "Ask the question you're afraid to answer."

Sylvie closed her eyes, feeling the familiar weight of denial pressing against her ribs. What would happen if she stopped fighting? If she admitted that underneath the anger lay fear—not of Nicholas, but of what he made her feel?

The question formed in her mind as she struck another match.

Do I love him?

The wick caught instantly. Instead of the expected yellow-orange, the flame burned pure, brilliant silver, casting the room in ethereal light. Reflections danced across the

ceiling, forming what looked suspiciously like tiger stripes.

"Oh," Sylvie breathed, watching the silver flame grow taller, steadier.

Something cracked inside her chest, not breaking, but opening. All the feelings she'd pushed away came rushing in: the flutter when he smiled, the comfort of his scent, the way her magic sparked brighter in his presence.

"The bond didn't create anything, it simply removed the barriers you both built," Missy said gently.

Tears slipped down Sylvie's cheeks as the realization settled into her bones with magic finally gone right. With peace settling inside of her. "I'm in love with him."

"And water is wet." Nico winked, but his expression held genuine warmth. "The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

The silver flame flickered higher, illuminating a truth Sylvie had been running from her entire life: love wasn't something to control or contain—it was wild magic, unpredictable and transformative.

"I need to find him," she whispered, eyes never leaving the brilliant silver flame. "I need to let him explain. And I need to try."

NICHOLAS

N icholas's hands wouldn't stop shaking.

The relic pulsed with sickly light through the cloth he'd wrapped around it, casting an eerie glow against the trees as he trudged through the morning mist and deeper into the forest. He hadn't slept properly in two days—not since Sylvie had discovered his secret and kicked him out of her shop and her life.

His tiger prowled restlessly beneath his skin, fighting to break free, while his human side remained clamped down, refusing the shift.

Caught between forms, he felt his muscles spasm painfully. Neither fully man nor beast. Just like his thoughts, neither here nor there, neither resolved nor at peace.

He stumbled over a root, catching himself against a tree trunk. The bark bit into his palm, drawing blood. The scent triggered his tiger's hunting instinct, but the shift remained incomplete with claws emerging from human fingertips, canines elongating in a human mouth.

Perfect metaphor for my life , he thought bitterly.

Hazel Fairweather's cottage appeared through the trees, the smoke from her chimney curling up into the morning air like a beckoning finger. Nicholas hadn't planned to visit the forest witch, but his feet had carried him here anyway. If anyone could tell him how to fix this, it would be Hazel.

He knocked on her moss-covered door, the sound hollow against the ancient wood.

"Back again?" Hazel's voice preceded her as the door swung open. Ancient eyes peered out from a face that seemed both eternally young and impossibly old. "You look like death warmed over, tiger."

"Feel worse," Nicholas managed, his voice rough.

"Come in before you collapse on my doorstep. I've enough fertilizer in my garden."

The interior of Hazel's cottage felt larger than physics should allow with books piled to the ceiling, herbs hanging from rafters, and strangely, what looked like fish swimming through the air in lazy circles.

"Atmospheric sprites," Hazel explained, following his gaze. "Distant cousins to water nymphs. They're drawn to emotional turmoil." She poked at one that had drifted too close to Nicholas's shoulder. "And you're practically a buffet for them right now."

Nicholas slumped into a chair by her hearth and placed the relic on the table between them. "Can you help me destroy it?"

She snorted. "If I could destroy it, I would have done so centuries ago."

"You've tried before?"

Hazel placed her hands on either side of the relic, not quite touching it. "Close your eyes, tiger boy."

"I didn't come here for?—"

"Close. Your. Eyes." Each word carried the weight of ancient command.

Nicholas obeyed, and immediately felt a rush of images flooding his mind.

A forest clearing, not unlike Echo Woods, but pristine and untouched by modern development. A broad-shouldered man with familiar amber eyes—eyes that matched Nicholas's own—stood with a woman whose face glowed with love. They exchanged vows beneath a full moon, their hands bound with silver cord.

"Your ancestor," Hazel's voice floated through the vision. "William Whitmore. First of your line to settle in these parts."

The scene shifted. The same man now hunched over a wooden table, a familiar relic glowing between his palms. His face contorted with grief, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"What happened to her?" Nicholas asked, though somehow he already knew.

"The curse consumed her," Hazel replied. "William found the relic during a border dispute with a rival pack. It promised power, protection for his mate and future cubs. But power always carries a price."

Nicholas watched in horror as the vision showed the woman, William's mate, withering, her life force draining into the relic with each passing day, until nothing remained but a hollow shell.

"The relic feeds on bonds," Hazel explained as the vision faded. "Particularly mate bonds. It drains them, corrupts them, turns love to ash."

Nicholas forced his eyes open, gasping as if he'd been held underwater. "Is that what's happening to Sylvie and me?"

Hazel studied him. "The bond between you and the witch wasn't created by the relic.

It was there all along, just waiting to be acknowledged."

"But the candle spell?—"

"Merely unmasked what both of you were too stubborn to see and still are." Hazel reached for a kettle and poured something that smelled like pine needles and moonlight into two cups. "The relic is drawn to your bond because it's powerful. Pure. Exactly the kind of connection it feeds upon."

Nicholas stared into his cup. "How do I stop it?"

"The same way William failed to." Hazel sipped her tea. "Choose love. Not by fate's design, not by magical compulsion, but by conscious choice."

"But Sylvie thinks I trapped her on purpose. She won't even talk to me."

"Then make her listen." Hazel's gaze turned sharp. "But first, you need to contain that thing before it does any more damage. Take it to Briar Hollow Inn."

"The haunted hotel?"

"The very same. Ask for Mayble Marlowe. Tell her I sent you."

Nicholas drained his cup and stood. Finally, after far too long, his tiger settled, as if satisfied they finally had a plan.

"Thanks, Hazel." He wrapped the relic carefully.

"Nicholas?" Hazel called as he reached the door. "The curse in your bloodline ends when someone loves deeply enough to break it. William couldn't save his mate because he thought the magic would do it for him. Love isn't passive, boy. It's the

most active choice you'll ever make."

Nicholas nodded once and stepped back into the forest, his path suddenly clear.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

The clarity candle's flame had finally gone out, but its message still burned bright in Sylvie's mind.

After hours of watching its unwavering light, the truth had settled into her bones like an old friend.

She loved Nicholas. Not because of some spell gone wrong or because magic dictated it, but because her heart had chosen him despite her every attempt to deny it.

Sylvie pulled her car onto the winding road that led through Echo Woods, her fingers tapping nervously against the steering wheel. "This is crazy," she muttered to herself, watching the morning sunlight filter through the ancient trees. "Absolutely bat-crap crazy."

Her phone buzzed from the cup holder, nearly causing her to swerve. Nicholas's name flashed across the screen. Sylvie pulled over, her heart hammering as she answered.

"Sylvie," his voice sounded strained, almost desperate. "I need you to come to Briar Hollow Inn."

She blinked, thrown off by the coincidence. "I was actually on my way to find you."

"You were?" Hope flickered in his voice before urgency took over again. "Listen, I've brought the relic here. Maybe thinks we can contain it, but we need?—"

"Your flame," a smooth, velvet-rich female voice cut in from the background. "We need a witch's flame fed by genuine emotion, and according to tiger boy here, yours is the strongest in town and you're the one connected to him."

"Who was that?" Sylvie asked, though she had a good guess.

"Maybe Marlowe," Nicholas confirmed. "Look, I know I'm the last person you want to see right now, but this isn't about us. This thing is dangerous, and it's getting worse."

Sylvie chewed her lower lip, tasting traces of the peppermint lip balm she'd nervously applied and reapplied all morning. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Briar Hollow Inn loomed at the edge of town, a Victorian monstrosity with too many spires and not enough paint.

Locals had avoided it except on Halloween, when the hauntings were considered festive rather than terrifying.

Sylvie had always found something oddly comforting about the place, like the ghosts were just old friends having perpetual dinner parties.

But now it was a hit, given the recent expulsion of the more dangerous ghost.

She parked beside Nicholas's mud-splattered truck and took a steadying breath. Her reflection in the rearview mirror showed eyes bright with determination and cheeks flushed with anticipation. "You've got this," she whispered, tucking a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

The inn's front door creaked open before she reached it. A tall woman with skin the color of moonlight and hair that seemed to absorb all light stood in the doorway. Her

lips, painted the precise shade of freshly spilled blood, curved into a knowing smile.

"About time you showed up," Mayble Marlowe said, her voice like crushed velvet. "I was about to send the specters to fetch you."

"I came as fast as I could," Sylvie replied, stepping inside.

"Not fast enough for him." Mayble nodded toward the grand staircase, where Nicholas paced like a caged animal, his shoulders tight with tension. "He's been wearing a path in the two-hundred-year-old carpet."

Nicholas froze mid-step when he saw her, his amber eyes widening. For a moment, he looked like he might rush down to her, but instead, he gripped the banister so hard Sylvie heard the wood crack.

"You came," he said simply, his voice rough.

"I said I would." Sylvie climbed the stairs, stopping two steps below him. Even with the height advantage, she had to tilt her head to meet his gaze. "Where is it?"

"In the séance room." His eyes never left her face, as if searching for something. "Mayble thinks a containment box will hold it, but it needs to be sealed with powerful magic."

"My flame."

"Yes." Nicholas's hand moved reflexively toward her before dropping back to his side. "I wouldn't have asked if there was any other way."

"I know." Sylvie hesitated, then added quietly, "Nicholas, before we do this, I need to tell you?—"

"Room first, heart-to-hearts later." Maybe glided past them toward a door at the end of the hallway. "That thing is getting more aggressive by the minute, and I just reupholstered in there."

The séance room was circular, ringed with windows that cast prismatic light across black velvet wallpaper. In the center, on a round table, sat an ornate wooden box beside the cloth-wrapped relic.

"Charming little abomination," Maybe said, gesturing toward it. "Been trying to convince me I'm already dead for the past hour." She handed Sylvie an ivory candle. "Light this, focus your intent on containment and protection, then let the wax seal the box once we place it inside."

Sylvie took the candle, her fingers brushing against Nicholas's as he stepped closer.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "For everything."

Sylvie looked up into his face—the face she'd spent weeks trying to avoid and nights dreaming about. The clarity candle's message echoed in her mind: Love is a choice, not a trap.

"I came here to find you," she admitted, her voice steadier than she felt. "Before you called. I made a candle of clarity and... Nicholas, I need to tell you something important."

His eyebrows lifted, hope and fear battling in his expression. "What?"

Maybe cleared her throat dramatically. "As touching as this is, and trust me, I'm all for romance, I have a signed first edition of *Wuthering Heights* —that relic is actively trying to drain every magical entity in this building.

So perhaps declarations of undying affection could wait until after we contain the soul-sucking artifact? "

Sylvie nodded, focusing on the task at hand. "Let's do this first. On my terms."

She placed the candle on the table and extended her palm. Nicholas, understanding without words, placed his hand beneath hers, their skin barely touching.

Sylvie closed her eyes, summoning her magic.

Instead of pushing away the feelings Nicholas stirred in her, she embraced them.

The frustration, the attraction, the tenderness, and the hunger.

The flame that erupted from her palm blazed blue-white, so intense it cast their shadows against the ceiling.

"Now," Mayble directed, lifting the lid of the box.

Nicholas unwrapped the relic, revealing its pulsing black heart. As they moved to place it in the box, a tendril of darkness lashed out, wrapping around Nicholas's wrist.

"Nicholas!" Sylvie grabbed his arm, her flame surging protectively.

"It's fighting back," he grimbled, Veins of black crawled up his arm, his tiger eyes flickering gold with pain.

Without thinking, Sylvie pressed her flaming hand against his chest, directly over his heart. "Not him," she commanded, feeling her magic respond to the fierce protectiveness surging through her. "You can't have him."

The darkness recoiled from her flame, retreating back into the relic. Nicholas gasped as the black veins receded, his free hand covering hers against his chest.

"Now!" Mayble shouted.

Together, they dropped the relic into the box. Sylvie directed her flame around it, watching as the wax from her candle flowed like water, sealing the container with symbols that glowed blue before settling into the wood.

Mayble slammed the lid shut, and a wave of energy rippled through the room, sending all three of them staggering backward. The spectral fish that had been swimming through the air fell like rain, then dissipated into mist.

"Well," Mayble said, straightening her black lace collar, "that was more dramatic than my usual Tuesday."

NICHOLAS

Nicholas stared at the sealed box on the table, his pulse still racing from the relic's attack. The black veins had faded from his arm, but he could still feel the echo of darkness that had tried to claim him and the fierce heat of Sylvie's flame that had driven it back.

"You two should probably talk," Maybe said, gathering her skirts with elegant precision. "Preferably somewhere that isn't my séance room. Emotional outbursts make the spirits jealous."

As if to emphasize her point, a nearby candlestick toppled to the floor.

Nicholas cleared his throat. "We'll get out of your way."

"Good idea. I'll keep this little horror locked in the deepest basement until I figure out a more permanent solution.

" Maybe lifted the box with surprising strength for someone who looked like she subsisted entirely on moonlight and dramatic sighs.

"Don't worry, I've contained worse. My ex-husband, for instance. "

With that cryptic comparison, she swept from the room, leaving Nicholas alone with Sylvie for the first time since their fight.

The silence between them felt both brittle and heavy. Nicholas rubbed the back of his

neck, noticing how Sylvie tracked the movement with those stormy eyes that had haunted him for weeks.

"Your place or mine?" he finally asked, aiming for casual but landing somewhere near desperate.

To his surprise, Sylvie's lips quirked upward. "My apartment, I think. Your cabin probably smells like tiger and regret by now."

"Fair enough."

The drive back to town happened in two cars and complete silence.

Nicholas kept glancing in his rearview mirror to make sure Sylvie's car was still behind him, half-convinced she might change her mind and veer off in another direction.

But she followed him all the way to Moonshadow Apothecary, parking beside him in the small lot behind the shop.

The stairs to her apartment creaked under his weight as they climbed to the second floor. Her keys jingled as she unlocked the door, and Nicholas found himself holding his breath.

"Come in," she said, stepping aside to let him enter first.

Her apartment was undeniably Sylvie. Books stacked on every surface, herbs drying in bunches from the ceiling beams, and candles—hundreds of them—in various stages of completion. The scent wrapped around him, so distinctly her that his tiger rumbled with pleasure.

"Sorry for the mess," she said, though she didn't sound particularly apologetic. "I don't usually have visitors."

"It's you, no need to apologize."

Sylvie busied herself in the tiny kitchenette while Nicholas continued his examination of her space.

He paused at a small workbench near the window where a half-carved candle sat beside a jar of silver dust. The candle was etched with a familiar pattern, one he recognized from the sanctuary's historical records.

"Is this a bonding pattern?" He couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

Sylvie appeared at his side with two mugs of tea, her cheeks flushed. "It's a clarity candle."

"And?"

"And it burned silver." She handed him a mug decorated with cartoon tigers—a gag gift from someone with a sense of humor, he suspected. "I came looking for you this morning because of what it showed me."

His tiger, usually restlessly pacing inside him, went utterly still—listening, waiting. "What did it show you?"

Sylvie set her own mug down on the cluttered table and raked a hand through her hair, loosening several strands from her messy bun. "That I'm in love with you. And I think I have been for longer than I want to admit."

The words hit him like a physical force. Nicholas set his mug down with a clatter, tea

sloshing over the rim. "Sylvie?—"

"Let me finish." She held up a hand, her expression determined.

"I've spent my whole life believing that love should make sense.

That it should be rational and controlled, like properly measured ingredients in a spell.

But that's not how it works, is it? It's messy and terrifying and it makes you do stupid things, like binding yourself to someone who drives you absolutely crazy. "

"In my defense, you're the one who cast the spell," Nicholas couldn't help pointing out, his lips twitching.

"Because you walked in and completely threw off my concentration! Years of perfect spellcasting, and then you saunter in with your ridiculous smile and your tight shirts, and suddenly I'm creating magical disasters."

"You think my smile is ridiculous?"

"That's what you took from that?" Sylvie rolled her eyes, but there was warmth there now, a familiar spark of irritation that had always masked something deeper. "I'm trying to tell you that I don't regret it. The spell, the bond—it showed me something I was too stubborn to see."

Nicholas stepped closer, close enough to see the flecks of silver in her eyes, to count the freckles dusting her nose. "And what's that?"

"That sometimes the heart knows what it wants before the head catches up." Her voice softened, vulnerability stealing across her features. "And my heart wants you,

Nicholas Whitmore. Heaven help me."

His tiger surged forward, nearly forcing a shift with the intensity of its joy. Nicholas reached out, fingers hesitating just shy of touching her face. "Can I?—"

Sylvie nodded, and he cupped her cheek, marveling at the softness of her skin beneath his calloused palm. She leaned into his touch with a sigh that shattered the last of his restraint.

"I've spent every day since I met you wanting this," he confessed, tracing the curve of her jaw with his thumb.

"Every date with someone else was just distraction because I never thought I could have you.

I know that know because of the bond. And I was too scared to listen to what my instincts were telling me. "

"You had me the night you brought that wounded fox to my back door at three in the morning," Sylvie whispered, her hand coming up to cover his. "I just didn't want to admit it. And I think that's why I wanted to hate you. I saw softness in you but you forced yourself to be this... play boy."

Nicholas brought his other hand up to frame her face, liquid gold flooding his eyes as his tiger pressed close to the surface. "I need to tell you something important. More about the curse, about why I tried to push you away."

"I know about the curse. Missy told me." A tear slipped down her cheek, catching on his thumb. "When I sought out Hazel, she showed me your ancestor, what happened to his mate."

"Then you know why I was afraid." Nicholas's voice broke. "I couldn't bear it if something happened to you because of me."

"Nothing is going to happen to me." Sylvie reached up, brushing away a tear he hadn't realized he'd shed. "We contained the relic. And Hazel told me how to break the curse."

"How?"

"By choosing love consciously—not because fate demands it." She smiled then, full and bright. "And I choose you, Nicholas. Not because of some spell or bond, but because my heart won't have it any other way."

The bond between them flared to life—but instead of the familiar purple spark, it glowed golden, lighting up the space between them with warmth that felt like sunrise.

Nicholas leaned in, resting his forehead against hers. "I choose you too, Sylvie Sage. My witch. My mate."

She tilted her face up, and their lips met in a kiss that tasted of tea and tears and something wild and sweet—like honey and smoke.

SYLVIE

The purple bands burned to a golden glow between them and pulsed like a heartbeat as Nicholas's lips met hers.

Sylvie's fingers tangled in his wild dark hair, scattering ash from her workbench across his shoulders.

His growl vibrated through her chest as he walked her backward, the scent of pine and musk drowning out her usual cedar-and-clove sanctuary.

"Your bed," he murmured against her mouth, amber eyes bleeding to full tiger gold. "Where is it?"

"Through there." She jerked her chin toward the beaded curtain, its glass strands clattering like windchimes as they crashed through. "But Nicholas?—"

He stilled with her blouse half-unbuttoned, calloused hands framing her ribs. "Tell me to stop and I stop."

She arched into him, teeth grazing his lower lip. "Don't you dare."

The quilted comforter swallowed them both as they fell onto the bed. Nicholas's shirt hit the floor with a rip, revealing sun-kissed skin stretched over muscle that flexed as he braced himself above her. Sylvie's laugh came out breathless. "Been waiting to do that?"

"Since the day you called my smile ridiculous." His thumb swept over her collarbone, following the path of a loose curl that had escaped her bun. "You taste like burnt sugar and defiance."

"Yours is all arrogance and—oh!" Her mockery dissolved into a gasp as his teeth found her earlobe. The golden bond flared brighter, casting tiger-stripe shadows across her walls.

He worked her skirt up her thighs with agonizing slowness. "And what?"

"Hunger." She hooked her leg around his waist, rolling them over until she straddled him. Her hair fell around their faces in a blonde curtain as she yanked her tank top off. "Like you want to devour me whole."

"Only if you ask nicely." His hands spanned her waist, thumbs brushing the underside of her breasts. When she rocked against the hard line of his cock through his jeans, his claws pricked through just enough to make her gasp. "Careful, witch. My tiger's feeling... possessive."

Sylvie pressed her palm over his pounding heartbeat. "Let him out."

The growl that ripped from Nicholas's throat shook the dried herbs hanging above the bed. His eyes glowed fully feral now, canines sharp against his lip as he flipped her onto her back. "You sure?"

In answer, she traced the waistband of his jeans. "I didn't spend three hours carving silence runes into my headboard for subtlety."

His laugh came out ragged as he shucked his remaining clothes.

The sight of him fully naked—all corded muscle and thick cock already glistening at

the tip—stole her breath.

She reached for him, but he caught her wrists, pinning them above her head with one hand while the other slid between her thighs.

"Look at you," he murmured, fingers slipping through her slickness. "All that fire, and here you're dripping for me."

Sylvie's words, laced with a teasing bite, hung in the air, an ephemeral challenge that Nicholas was all too eager to accept.

"Arrogant... bastard..." she breathed out, the insult losing its edge as he expertly circled her clit with the pad of his thumb.

Her hips bucked wildly when he inserted a second finger, the sweet burn of the stretch igniting a fire deep within her core.

The room around them transformed into a sanctuary of light and shadow as candles burst into flame without the touch of a match, their wicks sputtering to life as if in response to the growing intensity of their passion.

Wax pooled at the base of each candle, liquid gold that mirrored the molten heat building inside Sylvie.

Nicholas's breath hitched, a sound that was part growl, part wonder, as he watched her magic respond to the surge of her arousal.

His amber eyes, flecked with the untamed wildness of his tiger, reflected the flickering candlelight.

"That's it," he encouraged, his voice a low, rumbling purr that vibrated through her.

"Let me see you burn."

His mouth descended upon her, capturing a taut nipple between his lips and sucking with a fervor that sent jolts of pleasure straight to her core. "Fuck, Sylvie," he groaned against her skin, his words a heated caress.

Sylvie's fingers clawed at his shoulders, her blunt nails leaving a trail of red against his sun-kissed skin. "Stop talking and—" she gasped, her demand cut short as he mercilessly crooked his fingers within her, dragging a shattered cry from her throat.

"Make you come?" he finished for her, his voice laced with dark promise.

He applied the perfect pressure, his touch masterful and unrelenting, stoking the flames of her desire to an almost unbearable peak.

"With pleasure," he assured her, and then there was no room for words, only the exquisite sensation of falling over the edge.

Sylvie's body convulsed around Nicholas, the first climax shattering her like a bolt of lightning.

It ripped through her, leaving her quivering and gasping for air.

Before she could even begin to recover, Nicholas was moving, his strong body sliding up hers with a predator's grace, his cock, hard and insistent, dragging through her wetness.

"Look at me," he commanded, his voice a low growl that resonated with the power of his tiger. His golden eyes, flecked with amber, locked onto hers, demanding attention. "I need you to see this isn't just the bond."

Forcing her heavy eyelids open, Sylvie met his gaze.

The golden light that had been flickering between them, a tangible representation of the bond they shared, throbbed in time with their racing hearts.

As he pressed inside her, the intrusion slow and deliberate, she could feel every inch of him, the ridges and veins of his cock mapping out a new geography within her.

Her choked cry of his name came out half-sob as he filled her completely, their bodies fitting together as though they were made for this very purpose.

"Christ, you're perfect," Nicholas whispered, his forehead resting against hers. His muscles trembled with the effort of holding still, of savoring this moment. "Tell me this is real. That you're really here."

In response, Sylvie clenched around him, earning a guttural moan from deep within his chest. "Feels real enough when y?—"

"Don't," he interrupted, his hand cupping her face, his tiger's gaze burning into her. "Don't deflect. Not now."

The raw vulnerability in his voice cut through the haze of pleasure, stripping away her last defenses.

With a tenderness that surprised her, Sylvie carded her fingers through his sweat-damp hair.

"I'm here," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Not because of magic or fate. Because every stupid, reckless part of me wants this. Wants you."

A shudder ran through Nicholas, and with a sharp snap of his hips, he drove into her, drawing a twin gasp from both of them.

The rhythm he set was relentless, a series of deep, powerful thrusts that had her seeing stars with every stroke.

Her calves locked around his waist, holding on as the golden bond pulsed brighter with each passing moment, their skin glowing where they touched, intertwined in the most intimate of dances.

The air around them crackled with the combined force of their passion, the magic of the room responding to their escalating emotions. Candles that had been extinguished flared back to life, casting a warm, golden light over their entwined bodies.

"Nicholas, I'm?—"

"Let go." He sealed the command with a kiss, swallowing her cry as she came apart. His own release followed hard, a roar tearing from his throat as he spilled into her. The bond blazed like sunlight, illuminating every corner of the room before settling into a warm hum beneath their skin.

They lay tangled in the aftermath, Nicholas's face buried in her neck. Sylvie traced the flex of his shoulder blades, marveling at the way her magic swirled lazily around them, finally content.

SYLVIE

Sylvie watched the slow rise and fall of Nicholas's chest as he slept beside her.

His wild dark hair splayed across her pillow, one strong arm still draped possessively across her waist even in sleep.

Golden morning light filtered through her bedroom curtains, painting his sun-kissed skin with an almost ethereal glow.

She traced a finger lightly over the scratch marks on his shoulder—remnants of the night before when everything had changed between them. The gold light of their bond still hummed beneath her skin, a steady warmth unlike the erratic purple sparks that had plagued them for weeks.

"You're staring," Nicholas mumbled without opening his eyes, his voice rough with sleep. A small smile played at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm observing. Different thing entirely." Sylvie brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. "Scientific method and all that."

"What's your hypothesis, then?" His amber eyes flickered open, still heavy-lidded but focused entirely on her face.

"That shifters drool in their sleep." She wiped an imaginary spot from his chin.

Nicholas caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "False. Tigers are far too

dignified." His thumb caressed her wrist where her pulse jumped. "Your turn for a hypothesis."

"That I'm still not convinced this isn't some elaborate dream." The confession made her feel naked. Vulnerability, her least favorite emotion, but somehow easier in the hazy morning light with him.

Nicholas pulled her closer, his warmth enveloping her. "Want me to pinch you?"

"I think we did enough of that last night." Sylvie felt heat climb her cheeks at the memory.

"Fair point." He laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest and into hers where they touched. His expression grew serious. "How's your magic feeling?"

Sylvie closed her eyes, taking inventory. For weeks, her power had felt like a live wire. Unpredictable, dangerous, ready to spark at the slightest provocation. Now it flowed through her veins like honey, smooth and controlled.

"Settled," she answered. "Like it found its center again."

Nicholas nodded, unsurprised. "And the bond?"

"Gold instead of purple." She flexed her fingers where tiny golden sparks danced between them. "It doesn't hurt anymore. It feels..."

"Right," he finished for her.

Sylvie slipped from the bed, wrapping herself in a silk robe. Her body felt different—his, but also strangely more her own than it had been in weeks. She moved to the window, pushing the curtains aside to let more light stream in.

"I need to go to the shop," she said. "Make sure nothing's exploded since we've been... occupied."

Nicholas stretched, the sheet falling dangerously low on his hips. "Want company?"

"No." She shook her head. "You need rest. That relic drained you, and the shift..." She stopped, remembering how his claws had slid out during their most intimate moments, how his eyes had gleamed tiger-gold. Not a full shift, but power bleeding through nonetheless.

"I'm fine."

"You're exhausted." Sylvie crossed her arms. "And I need a minute to process... everything."

Nicholas studied her face, then nodded. "Scared?"

"Terrified," she admitted. "But not running."

He smiled, relief evident in his eyes. "Progress."

Sylvie leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. "Stay. Sleep. I'll bring breakfast back."

"Bossy witch." But he burrowed back into her pillows, already half-asleep again.

The Moonshadow Apothecary smelled different when Sylvie unlocked the front door.

The usual blend of herbs, wax, and smoke remained, but now intertwined with notes of pine and warm spice, Nicholas's scent embedded in the very walls of her sanctuary.

Her magic had pulled him in, weaving him through the shop's essence.

She moved through the familiar space, trailing her fingers over jars and books, expecting to find disaster. After weeks of magical mishaps with exploding candles, levitating herbs, smoke that formed accusatory shapes, she'd grown accustomed to cleaning up after her unruly power.

But everything was in order. Peaceful. As if her shop had exhaled in relief along with her.

At her workbench, Sylvie gathered supplies.

Beeswax, not paraffin. Dried lavender and rose for love.

Citrine chips for clarity. Cedarwood oil for strength.

Her hands moved with practiced precision, melting, mixing, pouring.

This wasn't a commissioned piece or a spell for a customer, this was for her. For them.

As the wax cooled, Sylvie realized what she was making: a candle of hope. After years of warding love away, of protecting herself from heartbreak, here she was, purposefully inviting it in.

The irony wasn't lost on her.

When the wax had set, she carved their initials into the side—not hidden in the bottom as she'd unconsciously done before, but visible, deliberate. Her finger traced the interlocking letters, and the candle warmed beneath her touch.

Magic responded to intent. That had always been the foundation of her craft. And for the first time in weeks, her intent was clear.

She'd choose this. Choose him. Not because a spell went wrong or a bond forced her hand, but because when given the chance to love safely or love completely, she finally understood which was the greater magic.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

NICHOLAS

N icholas woke to an empty bed. The sheets still held Sylvie's warmth, and he rolled into the space she'd left, breathing her in. His tiger stretched beneath his skin, content in a way it had never been before. No restlessness, no urge to prowl or hunt. Just... peace.

He glanced at the bedside clock—nearly noon. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so deeply. The exhaustion of the past weeks, the constant struggle against the bond, the relic's drain on his energy—all of it had finally caught up with him.

His phone buzzed with a text from Rollo: Still alive or did the witch finally hex you?

Nicholas grinned, typing back: Very much alive. Better than alive.

About damn time. Sanctuary needs you back eventually. The wolves are getting cocky.

Nicholas set the phone down, stretching languidly. His muscles ached pleasantly, reminding him of every moment with Sylvie. The way she'd arched beneath him, the soft sounds she made when he?—

The bedroom door opened, and Sylvie appeared with a brown paper bag and two coffee cups balanced precariously in her hands.

"You're awake." She kicked the door closed behind her. "I was starting to think you'd hibernate until spring."

Nicholas sat up, sheet pooling at his waist. "Is that from Sip?"

"Cinnamon rolls and coffee." She set everything on the nightstand and perched on the edge of the bed. "I figured you'd need the sugar after last night."

"Thoughtful." He reached for her, pulling her against his chest. "Though I can think of sweeter things."

Sylvie rolled her eyes but didn't resist. "You're insatiable."

"Only for you." The words slipped out easily, honestly, and he felt her stiffen slightly before relaxing into him.

"So..." She traced a pattern on his chest, not meeting his eyes. "About last night."

"Which part? The part where you admitted I rock your world, or the part where?—"

"The bond." She cut him off, cheeks flushing. "It's different now."

Nicholas nodded, suddenly serious. "Gold instead of purple. Stable instead of volatile."

"What does that mean for us?"

He studied her face. The uncertainty in her stormy eyes, the slight furrow between her brows. For someone who'd spent years running from commitment, the answer should have terrified him. Instead, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"It means," he said, taking her hand and pressing it over his heart, "that I'm yours. And you're mine. By choice, not just by magic."

Sylvie's lips curved into a small smile. "That's a pretty serious statement from a man who once told Millie Grace he was allergic to second dates."

"I'm recovering nicely." He caught a strand of her blonde hair, tucking it behind her ear. "Besides, I think we're well past the second date, considering."

"We never even had a first date." She laughed, the sound warming him from the inside out.

"I'll fix that." He reached for the coffee she'd brought. "After caffeine."

They ate sitting cross-legged on her bed, trading bites of cinnamon roll and kisses that grew increasingly sticky and sweet. Nicholas couldn't remember a morning that had felt so easy, so right. The golden bond hummed between them, a gentle warmth rather than the electric jolt it had been.

"I should head to the sanctuary," he said reluctantly, licking icing from his thumb. "Rollo's been covering for me, but there's a new rescued mountain lion that's giving everyone grief."

"And I have appointments this afternoon." Sylvie gathered their trash, hesitating before adding, "But maybe dinner? Later?"

"It's a date." The smile she gave him in response made his tiger purr. "I'll pick you up at seven."

After a shower—which took significantly longer than intended when Sylvie joined him—Nicholas finally dressed and headed out.

The day was crisp and clear, autumn settling into its full glory around Briar Hollow.

Red and gold leaves drifted down from the trees lining the streets, and the air smelled of woodsmoke and cider.

He detoured by the Briar Hollow Inn, intending to check on the relic. The magical box that Mayble had helped create should hold it safely, especially now that Sylvie had added her flame to the sealing spell. Still, after everything that had happened, Nicholas wasn't taking chances.

Mayble greeted him at the reception desk, her silver hair piled in an elaborate updo adorned with small bird feathers. "Well," her keen eyes assessed him. "You're looking positively radiant, dear. I take it things with our resident witch went well?"

"You could say that." Nicholas leaned against the polished wooden counter. "How's our guest?"

Mayble's smile dimmed slightly. "Tucked away in the old storage room, just as you asked. The box is holding, but..." She trailed off, frowning.

"But?"

"It's been making noise." She lowered her voice, though the inn's lobby was empty. "Like whispers. None of the guests have noticed yet, but I've had to strengthen the silencing spell twice since yesterday."

Nicholas's tiger stirred uneasily. "I should take a look."

"Suite yourself." Mayble handed him a vintage brass key. "Storage room's in the basement. End of the hall, past the boiler room. I'd come with you, but I've got guests coming in in about five minutes."

The inn's basement was dim and musty, the stone walls damp with age. Nicholas

followed the narrow corridor, the single bulbs overhead casting long shadows as he passed. His tiger's senses heightened, picking up the subtle vibration in the air.

The storage room door was heavy oak banded with iron. The key turned with a clunk, and Nicholas stepped into a space cluttered with outdated furniture and stacked boxes. In the center, on a small table draped with black velvet, sat the ornate box containing the relic.

Even from across the room, he could feel it. The malevolent energy pulsed like a heartbeat, a rhythm that sought to match his own. And Mayble was right, there were whispers, too faint to distinguish words but persistent, like insects buzzing around his head.

Nicholas approached cautiously. The box was intricately carved wood inlaid with silver and moonstone, Sylvie's candle wax sealing the edges. It should have been secure. It should have been dormant.

It wasn't.

As he reached for it, a crack appeared along the seam of the box—tiny, barely visible, but unmistakable. Black mist seeped through, tendrils reaching toward him like grasping fingers. The whispers grew louder, more insistent.

...mine...bond...take...

Nicholas jerked back. The mist retreated into the box, but the damage was done. The seal was breaking.

His phone buzzed in his pocket—Sylvie.

"Hey," he answered, backing toward the door. "Everything okay?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing." Her voice was tight with concern. "The candle I made this morning just turned black. All the way through, like ink spreading through the wax."

Nicholas stared at the box, watching another hairline fracture appear along its surface. "I'm at the inn. The relic—it's breaking free."

"That's impossible. The box is sealed with my strongest flame. It should hold for months."

"Well, it's not." He swallowed hard. "And it's whispering. I can almost make out what it's saying."

"Don't touch it. Don't listen to it. I'm on my way."

"No." The word came out sharper than intended, his tiger surging forward protectively. "Stay at the shop. I'll bring it to you."

"Nicholas—"

"Please." He softened his tone. "Trust me on this. I don't want you anywhere near it until we're ready."

After a moment, she relented. "Fine. But be careful. Whatever it wants, I'm pretty sure it's not friendship bracelets and good vibes."

Despite everything, he smiled. "Your concern is touching."

"Just get here in one piece. We'll figure this out."

Nicholas ended the call and turned back to the box. The cracks were spreading, black

mist seeping through each new fissure. The whispers had escalated to murmurs, words almost coherent now.

...claimed...bond...mine...

He needed to move fast. Grabbing a discarded tablecloth from a nearby stack, Nicholas wrapped it around the box, careful not to touch it directly. The cloth darkened where the mist made contact, but it contained the worst of it.

As he lifted the bundle, a jolt of pain shot up his arms, like ice and fire combined. The relic was fighting him, its magic lashing out in protest. His tiger snarled, pushing against his skin, demanding release to protect them both.

He made it out of the basement and through the inn's lobby, ignoring Mayble's concerned questions. Once outside, he placed the wrapped box gently on the passenger seat of his truck and started the engine.

The drive to Moonshadow Apothecary took less than ten minutes, but it felt like hours.

The bundle pulsed beside him, the whispers growing louder with each passing minute.

By the time he pulled up in front of the shop, the tablecloth was completely black, and the murmurs had resolved into a single, repeated phrase:

The bond is mine. The bond is mine. The bond is mine.

SYLVIE

Sylvie's hands trembled as she gathered candles, herbs, and salt from her supply shelves. The shop felt unnaturally cold despite the afternoon sun streaming through the windows. Every candle she'd lit that morning had extinguished itself, their wicks curling into black, twisted shapes.

The bell above the door jangled violently as Nicholas burst in, cradling what had once been a white tablecloth. Now it resembled a bundle of midnight, pulsing with malevolent energy.

"That doesn't look contained," she said, keeping her voice deliberately steady despite the fear crawling up her spine.

Nicholas set the bundle on the counter, careful not to disturb the wrapped box inside. "It's fighting. Hard." Sweat beaded his forehead, and his amber eyes flickered with tiger gold. "I could hear it the whole drive. It kept saying?—"

"The bond is mine," Sylvie finished, feeling the words echo in her mind. "I know. I've been hearing it too."

"That's... concerning." He unwrapped the bundle just enough to show her the fractures spreading across the box's surface.

Sylvie reached toward it, then snatched her hand back as black mist curled eagerly in her direction. "My seal shouldn't have failed this quickly."

"Unless it's feeding off something." Nicholas glanced at her, his expression grave. "Us. Our bond."

The golden thread connecting them pulsed in response, and Sylvie felt it flare with protective warmth. Whatever lived in that box wanted what they had, the magic they'd created together.

"We need to get it somewhere uninhabited." She grabbed her emergency kit, a leather satchel filled with protective herbs and talismans. "If it breaks free completely?—"

"Echo Woods," Nicholas said. "The old mating circle. It's got natural containment properties."

"Where you found the relic in the first place?" Sylvie raised an eyebrow. "Seems counterintuitive."

"Trust me." He wrapped the bundle tighter as more black mist seeped through. "The circle was there to bind things, not just for mating rituals. It's our best chance as long as we are together fighting this. Last time I tried alone, it fought me, this time it shouldn't win."

The bundle gave a violent shudder, and a crack split the air like thunder. They both jumped back as the box inside broke partially open, black energy shooting upward before retracting.

"Fine. Woods it is." Sylvie grabbed her keys. "My car's out back."

Nicholas shook his head. "We'll take my truck. Better clearance for the forest trails."

They moved quickly, Sylvie locking up the shop with a hasty protection spell. The bundle seemed to grow heavier between them as Nicholas carried it to his truck, the

whispers growing louder.

Mine, mine, mine...

"I don't think we have much time," Nicholas said as they sped toward the edge of town. The forest loomed ahead, ancient trees standing sentinel against the afternoon sky.

Sylvie clutched her satchel. "Just drive faster."

The truck bounced over the rough forest trail, jostling them as Nicholas navigated between trees. The bundle between them pulsed angrily, black tendrils occasionally escaping before retreating.

"Almost there," Nicholas muttered, knuckles white on the steering wheel.

The mating circle appeared ahead—a perfect ring of white stones set into the forest floor, surrounded by towering pines. Nicholas skidded to a stop, and they both leaped from the truck.

As Sylvie's feet touched the earth within the circle, the world... shifted. The forest blurred around them, time stretching like taffy. The bundle in Nicholas's arms exploded into darkness, the relic finally free.

It hovered before them, an obsidian disk inscribed with symbols that hurt to look at directly suddenly. Black energy poured from it, forming shapes that resolved into images. Them. But not quite them.

Sylvie watched in horror as a version of herself appeared, older, face twisted with bitterness, alone in the apothecary surrounded by dead candles.

"Don't listen," Nicholas growled, his body half-shifting as his tiger fought to protect them. "It's trying to make us afraid."

The vision shifted, showing Nicholas wild-eyed and feral, fully tiger but wrong somehow—twisted, rabid, attacking everything in his path.

"This isn't real," Sylvie stated firmly, reaching for Nicholas's hand. Their fingers intertwined, the golden bond between them flaring defiantly. "This isn't our future."

The relic shuddered, spinning faster, throwing more images at them. Their bond shattered, their lives in ruins. Sylvie's magic corrupted. Nicholas's tiger lost forever.

"None of this is true," Sylvie shouted over the howling wind that had risen around them. "This is fear, not fate."

She squeezed Nicholas's hand tighter, feeling their bond pulse between them. Whatever the relic wanted, it couldn't have this—couldn't have them. Not when they'd finally found each other.

NICHOLAS

The black mist coiled like vipers around them, each tendril seeking weakness. Nicholas felt his tiger clawing beneath his skin, desperate to break free and protect what was his. The relic hovered before them, spinning faster, its malevolent energy pulsing outward in waves that made his teeth ache.

"Stay behind me," Nicholas growled, his voice deepening to something barely human. He pushed Sylvie back as another vision materialized, this one showing her crumpled on the forest floor, candle magic extinguished forever.

"This isn't real," Sylvie said, but Nicholas barely heard her.

His tiger surged forward, pushing against his human restraint. Partial transformation ripped through him—claws extending, spine cracking as it began to reshape. Pain blinded him momentarily as his face elongated, canines lengthening.

The relic sensed his instability and struck. Black lightning forked across the circle, hitting him square in the chest. Nicholas roared, stumbling backward.

"Nicholas!" Sylvie moved toward him, but he snarled, tiger eyes flashing.

"Stay. Back." Each word was agony, his vocal cords halfway between human and beast.

Another vision erupted: Nicholas fully shifted, but wrong. Corrupted. His tiger's beautiful stripes twisted into morbid shadows as he rampaged through Briar Hollow,

terrorizing everyone he'd ever cared about. Ending with Sylvie, her throat in his jaws.

The shock of it pushed him further toward transformation. Fur sprouted along his arms, his clothes tearing at the seams. The tiger was winning, dragging him under a tide of protective rage.

"Nicholas. Look at me." Sylvie stepped directly into his path, placing herself between him and the relic. "Not at that thing. At me."

His tiger's eyes tracked her, predatory instinct warring with the bond that glowed golden between them. A snarl tore from his throat.

"I know you're in there." She raised her hands slowly, palms out. Her scent cut through the corruption trying to cloud his senses. "Both of you. Man and tiger. I need you both right now."

The relic shrieked, sending another barrage of visions of their future torn apart, their bond corrupted, twisted into something unrecognizable.

Nicholas saw himself alone, prowling the sanctuary grounds as a monster, neither fully tiger nor man, but something else entirely, a creature of shadow and rage.

He saw Sylvie's apothecary burned to ash, her grimoire pages scattered like fallen leaves.

His chest heaved violently as he fought against his transformation, caught between forms, muscles rippling beneath skin that couldn't decide whether to remain smooth or erupt into striped fur.

The tiger inside him paced frantically, desperate to protect her, but the relic was cunningly twisting that protective impulse into something destructive, poisonous.

"Remember last night?" Sylvie's voice remained steady, cutting through the chaos like a beacon in a storm.

Her words anchored him to reality, to the present.

"How the candlelight looked on your skin?

The way the shadows danced across your face?

How we fit together, like we were carved from the same stone? "

His breathing slowed incrementally, the tiger's frantic pacing inside him calming slightly. The memory of her body pressed against his, warm and real, pushed back against the relic's illusions.

"I never believed in fate," she continued, taking a careful step closer, the hem of her layered skirt brushing against the ritual circle's edge.

Her stormy grey eyes never left his, unwavering despite the amber glow and vertical pupils that had overtaken his human irises.

"Still don't. But I believe in you. In us.

What we chose. Not what some ancient piece of cursed jewelry thinks we should be.
"

The relic spun violently in response to her defiance, its obsidian surface fracturing with veins of crimson light.

It shot tendrils of darkness directly at Sylvie's unprotected back, aiming for the vulnerable space between her shoulder blades.

Nicholas lunged forward with inhuman speed, a guttural sound erupting from his throat.

His partially clawed hands closed around her waist to pull her against his chest, his body curving protectively over hers, shielding her completely.

The darkness struck his back instead, searing pain lancing through him like molten metal poured into his veins.

"Nicholas!" Sylvie wrapped her arms around him, fingers clutching desperately at his torn shirt.

Their golden bond vibrated between them like a plucked string, humming with power and possibility.

He could feel her heart racing against his chest, her scent wrapping around him like a shield against the darkness.

"I've got you," he managed, his voice a rumbling mixture of human and tiger, deeper than usual and rough with pain. His arms tightened around her, claws carefully retracted to avoid hurting her. "Won't let it hurt you. Not while I still breathe."

"And I won't let it have you." She pressed her forehead against his chest, right over his thundering heart. "Tiger or man, you're still Nicholas. Still mine."

The simplicity of those words— still mine —rippled through him. His tiger, poised to break free completely, instead settled beneath his skin, alert but no longer fighting him. They were in agreement: protect Sylvie, defeat the relic, preserve their bond.

Nicholas felt his form stabilize, caught between human and tiger but no longer painfully shifting. He turned, keeping Sylvie behind him but maintaining enough

clarity to think.

"This ends now," he growled at the relic, feeling Sylvie's hand press against his lower back, grounding him. Whatever happened next, they would face it together. Man, tiger, and witch against an ancient darkness that had finally met its match.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

The relic hovered before them, spinning with malevolent energy as Nicholas stood half-transformed, his body a beautiful amalgamation of man and beast. The golden bond between them pulsed with each heartbeat, stronger now than ever before.

Sylvie reached for that connection, letting it flood her senses. Her fingertips tingled with untapped magic as she stepped out from behind Nicholas's protective stance to stand beside him.

"Together," she said, twining her fingers with his clawed ones. "That's how we beat this thing."

Nicholas's amber eyes flashed, vertical pupils narrowing as he nodded. "What do you need me to do?"

The relic screeched, sending another wave of dark energy crashing toward them. Sylvie ducked, pulling Nicholas with her. The attack sailed overhead, scorching the ancient oak behind them.

"I need fire," she said, breath coming fast. "My candles. I didn't bring?—"

Nicholas reached into his torn pocket, producing a small tin. "Never leave home without one." He flipped it open to reveal a book of matches.

A laugh bubbled up from Sylvie's chest, incongruous with their dire situation. "Of course you'd have matches. Don't tell me—you keep them for romantic

emergencies?"

His mouth quirked into that familiar half-smile, even as his tiger features rippled beneath his skin. "You know me well, Sage."

The relic spun faster, sensing their momentary distraction. Black tendrils shot toward them, aiming for their intertwined hands.

Nicholas yanked her behind him again, swiping with his free hand. Claws extended, slicing through the dark energy. It dissipated like smoke, but not before leaving angry welts across his forearm.

"Your magic responds to emotion," Nicholas said, voice strained. "Use that. Use us."

Sylvie's mind raced. Every candle she'd ever crafted required wax, wick, herbs—but those were just conduits. The true magic had always been inside her, channeled through intention and emotion.

"I need you to hold it still," she said, striking a match. The tiny flame flickered, casting golden light across Nicholas's transformed features. "Just for a moment."

He squeezed her hand once before releasing it, dropping into a predatory crouch. "One shifter restraint, coming up."

Nicholas lunged, faster than Sylvie had ever seen him move. His partially transformed body was powerful, graceful in its hybrid state. He circled the relic, clawed hands swiping at the tendrils that reached for him. The darkness hissed where his claws made contact, recoiling but always reforming.

"Anytime now," he called, narrowly avoiding another attack.

Sylvie cupped the tiny matchstick flame in her palms, feeling it respond to the wild beating of her heart. To the fear for Nicholas. To the love that had grown between them, not because of the bond, but in spite of it. Choice, not compulsion.

"Fire of will and flame of heart," she chanted, letting the words form naturally. "Reveal the truth and tear apart the shadow's hold, the ancient lie."

The matchstick flame grew, expanding beyond natural limits until she held a ball of fire between her palms. It burned silver-gold, just like the candle of clarity she'd crafted days ago. The one that had shown her what her heart already knew.

"Nicholas!" she called.

He spun toward her voice, dodging another tendril. His eyes widened at the sight of the fireball between her hands.

"Pin it down!"

With a roar that was more tiger than man, Nicholas leapt directly at the relic. His claws sank into the rippling darkness surrounding it, somehow finding purchase in the intangible shadows. The relic screamed, its spinning faltering as Nicholas wrestled it toward the ground.

Sylvie advanced, the fireball growing with each step. The bond stretched, vibrating with intensity. She could feel Nicholas's strength flowing into her, bolstering her magic like nothing she'd ever experienced.

"Magic forced is magic false," she continued, the words rising from some ancient place within her. "What's freely given cannot break."

Nicholas struggled against the thrashing darkness, his muscles straining as he forced

the relic down toward the forest floor. His shirt hung in tatters around him, revealing the beautiful transition of sun-kissed skin to striped fur along his spine.

"Now, Sylvie!" he growled, pinning the relic with one powerful hand while the other slashed at tendrils trying to encircle his throat.

She thrust her hands forward, releasing the silver-gold flame. It engulfed the relic instantly, burning away the darkness like morning mist. The relic's obsidian surface cracked under the onslaught of pure intention, fissures spreading across its ancient face.

"By my will and by my choice," Sylvie shouted above the relic's dying scream. "By our bond that stands unforced!"

Nicholas's clawed hand reached through the flames, completely unburned, to close around the fracturing relic. With one powerful squeeze, he crushed it in his grip. The relic shattered, crumbling into ash that scattered in a sudden breeze.

Silence fell over Echo Woods. The unnatural shadows retreated, leaving only dappled moonlight filtering through the canopy above.

Nicholas straightened, his breathing ragged as his features slowly shifted back toward human. The tiger receded beneath his skin, but his eyes still glowed with amber fire.

"Is it—" Sylvie began.

"Gone." Nicholas opened his palm, revealing only a smudge of black dust. He wiped it away on what remained of his jeans. "You did it."

"We did it," she corrected, stepping closer to him. The golden remnants of the binding spell pulsed, but differently now, Not with the frantic energy of the spell, but

with something deeper. Something chosen.

Nicholas reached for her hand, his now free of claws. "The bond—" he started, uncertainty flickering across his face. "Is it broken?"

Sylvie closed her eyes, sensing the connection between them. It had changed, transformed like Nicholas himself had moments ago. But it wasn't gone.

"No," she said, opening her eyes to meet his worried gaze. "It's still there. But it's different now."

"Different how?"

She placed her hand over his heart, feeling its steady rhythm beneath her palm. "Before, it was something that happened to us. Now it's something we chose."

Nicholas covered her hand with his own, a slow smile spreading across his face. "So we're still stuck with each other?"

"Seems that way," Sylvie replied, unable to stop her own smile. "Think you can handle that?"

Instead of answering, Nicholas pulled her against him, one arm wrapping around her waist. His forehead pressed against hers, their breaths mingling in the cool night air.

"Try and stop me," he whispered, before his lips claimed hers in a kiss that tasted of freedom and choice and a future neither of them had dared imagine.

NICHOLAS

The air hung thick with pine and spent magic as Nicholas pressed Sylvie against the ancient oak.

Her back arched into him, her wavy blonde hair catching the moonlight like frayed gold thread.

The night buzzed, vibrating with old spells and something far older—the pulse of instinct claiming what was his.

His tiger purred low, deep in his chest, pacing just beneath his skin as Sylvie gripped the back of his neck and bit his lower lip—hard. Challenge and surrender all in one.

“Still think candle witches and tigers don’t mix?” he asked, trailing the tip of a claw—blunted but threatening—down her side, careful not to tear the lace-edged tank top she wore.

Her breath hitched as he found that sensitive hollow just above her hip bone. “Says the man who literally growled when I unbuttoned my skirt.”

“You dumped wolfsbane in my coffee last month,” he murmured, nosing along the arch of her collarbone, inhaling cedar and the sharp, electric tang of her arousal. “Forgive me for savoring the moment you finally want me closer than ten feet.”

Her nails slid beneath his ruined shirt, scratching across the hard planes of his abdomen. His cock twitched, already thick and aching beneath his jeans. “Less

talking. More proving this isn't just your inner beast riding a high."

The heat between them surged. He crushed his mouth to hers, tongue sweeping in, claiming her gasp.

His thigh slid between hers, pressing up until her pussy ground against him through the thin fabric of her panties.

The skirt's hem bunched in his grip. He yanked it higher, baring the pale skin of her thighs to the moonlight.

Her legs wrapped around his hips, her body arching for more.

"You taste like cloves and wildfire," he growled into her throat, fingers slipping beneath the edge of her panties. His touch found her slick and pulsing. "Even your pussy's plotting chaos."

She rocked into his hand with a broken laugh. "Says—ah—the walking furnace with a cock twitching like it has something to prove."

He chuckled darkly and, with a quick flick of his claw, tore the lace barrier in half. "Careful," he warned, nipping at her jaw. "Shifters bite when teased."

Her hand fisted in his hair, yanking hard enough to make him groan. "Show me."

The command unraveled him.

He dropped to his knees in the moss, spreading her thighs open against the bark.

Her skin glowed in the moonlight, every inch flushed and kissed by ash and starlight.

He pressed his mouth to the crease of her thigh, breathing in the wild scent of her arousal—earth, heat, and magic.

His tongue found her folds, sliding through wet silk as she gasped and clutched his shoulders.

“Gods, Nicholas...” she panted, hips jerking when his mouth sealed around her clit. “Don’t stop. Don’t even think about stopping.”

He didn’t. He licked and sucked until her thighs quaked against his ears, her moans scattering into the night air like sparks. Her magic responded—candle-like heat building around them, curling through the woods like wildfire kept just barely at bay.

When she came, it wasn’t quiet. Her stormy voice broke against the trees, and he felt it—not just the clench of her pussy, but the wave of power cresting over him, sinking into his bones.

Before the last shiver left her, he was back on his feet, pinning her to the oak. Her wrists pressed above her head, held in one of his hands. The other gripped her thigh, lifting her as he ground the thick length of his cock against her soaked entrance.

“Still scared I’ll break you?” he rasped, dragging his tongue up the slope of her breast before sucking her nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue as she arched into him.

“Terrified,” she whispered, her hips rolling. Her cunt slick and ready, spreading heat across his cock like fire. “But break with me anyway.”

That was it.

With a low snarl, he drove into her—hard. A single, brutal thrust that buried him to the hilt. Her head snapped back against the tree, eyes wide and mouth open in a cry

that echoed through the woods. Her pussy clenched tight around him, welcoming him, daring him to move.

“Fuck, Sylvie,” he growled, voice ragged. “You feel like fucking heaven.”

“Then don’t stop,” she gasped. “Wreck me, Whitmore.”

He pulled back and slammed into her again, over and over, each thrust shaking the ground beneath them. The bark dug into his hands, but he didn’t care. Nothing mattered but the heat of her wrapped around him, the slick slide of her walls clenching his cock like a spell meant just for him.

Magic snapped and sparked between them—real, ancient, volatile. Candles would’ve exploded if they were anywhere near a wick.

“Look at you,” he snarled, fangs flashing. “Taking every inch. Worshipping this bond you swore you didn’t want.”

Her answer was a cry that vibrated through them both. She tightened her legs around him, heels digging into the base of his spine, pulling him deeper. “Yours,” she moaned, voice wrecked. “Yours because I say so.”

The tiger inside him roared in triumph, demanding claim.

His right hand shifted—claws erupting in a flash of golden light. He scored a mark down the curve of her hip, just shallow enough to sting, just deep enough to claim. Sylvie screamed, her back arching away from the tree, golden light blazing from the wound as it sealed itself in fire.

Their bond flared—a mirror brand seared across Nicholas’s side. He growled through clenched teeth, driving into her one last time as they both shattered.

Her pussy spasmed around him, milking his cock as he spilled deep inside her, his roar swallowed by her lips as she pulled him into a final, desperate kiss.

They collapsed together into the moss and fern, tangled limbs sticky with sweat and sex and something far older than either of them. Nicholas rested his forehead against hers, still inside her, their bodies buzzing with magic.

Her fingertips traced the claw mark on her hip, now glowing faintly. “So,” she breathed. “Still think you’re walking away from this?”

His smile was lazy, sated. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

She rolled her eyes—but didn’t let go.

The tiger inside him purred.

He belonged now. Not just claimed—but chosen. For once, Nicholas Whitmore wasn’t afraid of that word.

SYLVIE

The first light of dawn found them limping back toward town in tattered clothes, pine needles tangled in Sylvie's hair and mud caked to Nicholas's boots. His truck had failed to start after being corrupted and damaged from the relic.

Her legs trembled with each step, partly from exhaustion, partly from the lingering sensation of his body against hers. Every few feet, Nicholas would brush his fingers against her wrist, as though reassuring himself she was still there.

"You know they're going to ambush us the moment we show our faces," Sylvie muttered, pulling Nicholas's torn shirt tighter around her shoulders. Her own clothes hadn't survived their encounter. "And you look like you went three rounds with a wood chipper."

Nicholas grinned, golden flecks dancing in his amber eyes. "Worth it. Besides, you aren't exactly walking the runway yourself, sweetheart." He plucked a twig from behind her ear. "Though I do like this whole forest nymph aesthetic you've got going."

She batted his hand away, but couldn't suppress her smile. "I'd hex you if I had the energy."

"No, you wouldn't." He pulled her against his side, lips brushing her temple where a smear of ash remained. "You like me now."

The searing mark on her hip, a perfect impression of tiger claws, tingled in response,

and Sylvie fought the urge to touch it through the fabric of her skirt. The reality of what they'd done, what they'd become to each other, settled over her like an incantation.

As they rounded the corner onto Main Street, the Moonshadow Apothecary came into view. Light blazed from every window despite the early hour, and at least half a dozen shadows moved behind the curtains.

"Looks like the cavalry assembled," Nicholas murmured.

"Great. Just what I need—an audience for the walk of shame."

"Shame? I'm calling it the stride of pride."

Before Sylvie could retort, the shop door flew open.

Missy Sage stood in the doorway, her silver hair wild around her face, hands planted on her hips.

Behind her loomed Rollo's massive frame, Millie Grace's delicate silhouette, and Nico's lanky form, all crammed into the narrow entrance like they'd been playing supernatural sardines.

"Three more minutes and we were sending out a search party," Missy's eyes narrowed as she took in their bedraggled appearance. "Though from the look of you both, seems like you found exactly what you were searching for."

Heat flooded Sylvie's cheeks. "We're fine. The relic's gone."

"Oh, we know," Nico pushed past Missy, their usually immaculate hair sticking up at odd angles.

"Maybe called at midnight, hysterical about shadows exploding and golden light ripping through the forest. Then your protection wards went haywire—" They paused, eyeing their state of dishevelment. "But I see you two sorted it out."

Nicholas's arm tightened around Sylvie's waist. "The relic shattered. It won't be hurting anyone else."

And the binding spell? Millie signed, her gentle eyes focused on the place where their bodies touched.

Sylvie hesitated. The original purple thread that had sparked between them was gone, but something else had replaced it. "It changed."

"Into what exactly?" Rollo's deep voice rumbled with curiosity.

Nicholas met Sylvie's gaze, a question in his eyes. She nodded slightly, and he tugged down the waistband of his shredded jeans just enough to reveal the golden claw marks gleaming on his hip. Sylvie lifted the edge of her borrowed shirt, showing the matching mark.

Missy let out a low whistle. "Well, would you look at that. You two are gloriously doomed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sylvie scowled.

"It means," Missy said, eyes twinkling, "that you found the real thing. The kind of bond that burns worlds and rebuilds them. The kind that makes the universe sit up and pay attention."

Sylvie rolled her eyes. "Always with the dramatic pronouncements."

But she couldn't deny the truth of the words as she turned to Nicholas, whose face was softer than she'd ever seen it.

Without hesitation, she rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

His arms encircled her, lifting her off the ground as she wound her fingers through his wild hair.

The kiss tasted like possibility and promise, like every candle she'd ever lit in the darkness.

"Get a room!" Nico called, though their voice betrayed their delight.

Nicholas broke the kiss just enough to murmur against her lips. "Already did. Several times. Against a tree."

Sylvie pinched his side, forcing him to set her down. "You're impossible."

"And you're stuck with me," he replied, the tiger's satisfaction rumbling beneath his words.

Millie clapped her hands together before signing, Well, this calls for celebration tea!

"And explanations," Rollo added, crossing his thick arms. "Maybe said something about time distortion and shadows with teeth."

Sylvie exchanged a look with Nicholas. "It's a long story."

"Which can wait until after you two have showered," Missy declared, shooing them toward the stairs that led to Sylvie's apartment above the shop. "Separately or together, I don't care, but you're tracking forest floor all over my clean herbs."

"Your clean herbs?" Sylvie raised an eyebrow. "Since when is this your shop?"

Missy waved a dismissive hand. "Details. Now go make yourselves presentable while we prepare the questioning chamber."

Nicholas chuckled, his breath warm against Sylvie's ear as they moved toward the stairs. "Think they suspect what we were really doing in those woods?"

"Every single one of them knows exactly what we were doing," Sylvie whispered back. "Except maybe Millie, who's too polite to say it."

His teeth nipped her earlobe. "Worth it."

And despite the impending interrogation, despite the mud and scratches and exhaustion, despite everything that had tried to tear them apart, Sylvie couldn't bring herself to disagree.

NICHOLAS

N icholas's fingers trembled as he arranged the last candle in the garden behind Moonshadow Apothecary. Six weeks had passed since they'd defeated the relic, and every day with Sylvie had only deepened the bond between them.

He'd spent all afternoon transforming the small garden into something magical by stringing fairy lights through the climbing roses, setting up a table with her favorite wine, and arranging dozens of candles he'd purchased from her shop over the past month.

Each one represented a different moment between them, scents that told their story: pine and cinnamon for their first meeting, cedar and sage for their first kiss, honey and smoke for the night in the woods.

The small velvet box in his pocket weighed a ton. His tiger paced restlessly within, eager and nervous in equal measure.

"Need a hand with anything?" Rollo's voice came from the back door. "Millie sent me to check if you're actually going through with it or having a panic attack."

Nicholas wiped his damp palms on his jeans. "Do I look like I'm panicking?"

"You look like you might shift and bolt into the forest at any second."

"That obvious, huh?" Nicholas ran a hand through his hair, probably making it worse.

"I've never done this before."

Rollo chuckled. "Most people haven't. That's the point."

A small flame sputtered to life at the edge of Nicholas's vision, one of the candles lighting itself. Sylvie's magic, responding to his emotions even when she wasn't present. It happened constantly now, little flickers of flame whenever his feelings ran high.

"She's on her way," Rollo said, glancing at his phone. "Missy's bringing her back from dinner now." He clapped Nicholas on the shoulder. "Just remember to breathe. And maybe don't crush the ring."

Nicholas nodded, unable to form words as his friend disappeared back into the shop. He took a deep breath, inhaling the mingled scents of flowers and candle wax, trying to center himself.

The back door creaked open, and Sylvie stood framed in the doorway, her stormy eyes wide as she took in the transformed garden. She wore a flowing midnight blue dress, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders rather than in its usual knot.

"What's all this?" she asked, her voice soft as she stepped into the garden. Behind her, he caught a glimpse of Missy's silver hair before the older woman discreetly closed the door.

"Just thought we could use a quiet night," Nicholas said, crossing to take her hands, which were dusted with a fine layer of powdered herbs. "No relics, no curses, no well-meaning but intrusive friends watching our every move."

Sylvie's eyebrow arched. "You set up all these candles for a quiet night?"

"Well..." He gestured to the table. "And wine. And maybe...something else."

As if responding to his nerves, several candles flared higher around them. Sylvie glanced at them, then back at him, lips curving into a knowing smile. "Your emotions are making my candles act up again."

"Can't help it." Nicholas drew her closer, breathing in her scent. "You do that to me."

"Do what, exactly?" She tipped her head back to look up at him, challenge in her eyes.

Instead of answering, Nicholas took a step back and lowered himself to one knee. The tiger within him settled, suddenly calm and certain.

"Nicholas," she whispered, her hands flying to her mouth.

"Sylvie Sage." He pulled the box from his pocket and opened it to reveal a delicate gold ring.

It held no diamonds—she'd mentioned once how boring she found them—but instead featured a small amber stone that matched his eyes, surrounded by tiny moonstones.

"You turned my life upside down the moment you accidentally bound us together.

Everything since then has been... chaos and magic and the most alive I've ever felt. "

Every candle in the garden blazed higher, responding to Sylvie's emotions as tears welled in her eyes.

"I don't want to waste another minute not being yours in every way possible." His voice caught. "Will you marry me?"

For a heartbeat, she stood frozen. Then she dropped to her knees in front of him,

taking his face between her hands.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips. "But only if I get to plan the whole wedding."

Nicholas laughed, relief and joy flooding through him. "Sweetheart, you can plan whatever you want, as long as I get to be the groom."

"Bold of you to assume I'd let anyone else have the job." She kissed him deeply, and every candle in the garden exploded with light, bathing them in a golden glow that matched the marks on their hips and the bond between their souls.

When they finally broke apart, Nicholas slipped the ring onto her finger, watching as it caught the candlelight.

"Just so we're clear," Sylvie said, her voice playfully stern despite her radiant smile, "I handle all the details. Every flower, every invitation, every magical precaution to keep things from going sideways—because with our luck, something will try."

"Whatever you want," he promised, pulling her into his lap as he sat back on the garden path. "I'm just smart enough to know when to let the expert take over."

She laughed, the sound bright enough to rival the candle flames. "Smartest thing you've ever said, tiger."

SYLVIE

Sylvie wiped sweat from her brow as she crossed another item off her color-coded wedding planner.

Two months into planning, and the binder had already doubled in thickness.

She'd anticipated challenges, magical weddings always came with their share of complications, but she hadn't expected Nicholas to have so many opinions.

"Absolutely not," she said without looking up from her checklist. "We are not having glitter potions as party favors."

Nicholas leaned against the counter of Moonshadow Apothecary, his amber eyes gleaming with amusement. "Why not? Nico swears they're the hit of every celebration."

"Because I've seen what happens when someone drops one. That sparkly nightmare took three cleansing rituals to remove from the café floors." Sylvie tucked a stray blonde curl behind her ear. "And I'm not having our guests trailing glitter through town for weeks."

"But they change colors with your mood," Nicholas argued, moving closer to wrap his arms around her waist from behind. "Think about it—all our guests lighting up like mood rings."

Sylvie felt his warmth against her back and leaned into it despite her exasperation.

"And what happens when your uncle Ferris gets into a fight with the McNallys? The whole reception hall will look like a disco ball exploded."

The bell above the shop door jangled as Delilah stepped in, carrying an enormous portfolio of sketches. Her dark chestnut waves were tied back with green silk ribbon, and she'd tucked wildflowers behind both ears—a habit that had only intensified since she'd begun planning the floral arrangements.

"Don't let me interrupt," she said, eyeing Nicholas's arms around Sylvie with a knowing smirk. "But I need decisions on centerpieces before these moondrops go out of season."

Nicholas pressed a kiss to Sylvie's temple before releasing her. "I'll let you two handle the flower talk. I'm due at the sanctuary anyway."

"Coward," Sylvie muttered, though her eyes softened as he headed for the door.

"Love you too, Sage!" he called over his shoulder, flashing that tiger grin that still made her heart skip.

Delilah spread her portfolio across the counter as soon as Nicholas departed. "That man would agree to anything you wanted, you know."

"Except giving up on Nico's glitter potions," Sylvie grumbled, examining the flower sketches. "These are beautiful, Delilah."

"They'll do more than look pretty." Delilah ran her fingers over a drawing of intertwined moondrops and tiger lilies. "These will enhance the binding ritual. And these—" she pointed to a cluster of blue vervain and rowan berries "—will protect against any, um, unexpected magical disturbances."

Sylvie raised an eyebrow. "You've been talking to Missy."

"Everyone's talking to Missy. She cornered Rollo yesterday to discuss 'appropriate safeguards' for the ceremony." Delilah's hazel eyes sparked with golden flecks as she laughed. "Speaking of which..."

The door swung open again, and Missy Sage swept in carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle. Her silver hair was braided elaborately, and her flowing emerald dress rustled as she moved directly to Sylvie's side.

"There you are, dear. I've brought the family heirloom for your something old." She set the bundle on the counter with the reverence one might give a sleeping baby.

Sylvie eyed the package warily. "Please tell me it's not cursed."

"Not cursed." Missy unwrapped the cloth to reveal an ornate silver hair comb. "Just... particular about its wearer."

"What does that mean exactly?" Sylvie picked up the comb. It vibrated slightly in her palm, tiny amethysts winking along its edge.

Missy waved dismissively. "It merely rejects those it finds unsuitable for the Sage line. There was that unfortunate incident with your second cousin's fiancé in '87..."

"The one who lost all his hair the day before the wedding?" Delilah asked, leaning forward with interest.

"It grew back. Eventually." Missy patted the comb fondly. "But you needn't worry. It seems quite content with Nicholas. I tested it on a lock of his hair last week while he was napping on your couch."

Sylvie closed her eyes and took a deep breath, counting backward from ten. When she opened them, both Delilah and Missy were watching her with identical expressions of concern.

"You're doing it again," Delilah said gently. "That breathing thing you do when you're overwhelmed."

"I'm fine," Sylvie insisted, setting the comb down carefully. "Just processing the fact that my grandmother stole my fiancé's hair to test with a semi-sentient family heirloom."

"Would you rather I'd surprised you on the wedding day?" Missy asked reasonably. "Better to know now if adjustments are needed."

Sylvie's candles flickered across the shop, responding to her surge of emotion. She took another deep breath, focusing on the scent of clove and cedar that permeated the space, grounding herself in the familiar.

"You're right," she conceded. "Thank you for thinking ahead."

Missy beamed. "That's my practical girl. Now, about the blessing circle—I've asked Hazel to join us. With her divination skills, we can ensure no temporal disturbances during the vows."

"And I've bred special protection blooms for the archway," Delilah added, flipping to another page in her portfolio. "They'll absorb any negative energies."

Looking between them, Sylvie felt a rush of gratitude warm her chest. For all the chaos of wedding planning, she wasn't doing it alone. Her candles steadied, flames burning bright and clear.

"What would I do without you all?" she asked softly.

"Probably elope," Delilah suggested with a wink. "Though Missy might track you down anyway."

"You're absolutely right I would," Missy confirmed, rewrapping the hair comb. "Now, let's discuss the binding candles. I was thinking seven points of light rather than the traditional five..."

Sylvie smiled and opened her planner to the ritual section, ready to note Missy's suggestions. The chaos would continue, but surrounded by people who loved her, and with Nicholas waiting at the end of it all, she found she didn't mind it quite so much.

NICHOLAS

N icholas paced the small antechamber of the sanctuary, fingers fumbling with his cufflinks for the third time.

Morning light filtered through stained glass, casting prisms across the polished wooden floor.

His custom-tailored charcoal suit felt simultaneously too tight and too loose, the emerald green tie at his throat a silken noose.

"If you keep this up, you'll wear a path in that hundred-year-old hardwood," Rollo observed from his perch on a bench, already dressed in his best man's attire—a lighter gray suit with a matching emerald pocket square.

"Can't help it," Nicholas muttered, running a hand through his carefully styled dark hair, immediately ruining the effect. "Is it hot in here?"

Rollo's laugh was deep and rumbling. "Your tiger doesn't think so."

It was true. While Nicholas's human side was a swirl of jitters and anticipation, his tiger remained utterly, infuriatingly calm. The beast lounged contentedly in his consciousness, occasionally stretching with lazy satisfaction.

"Easy for him to say. He already claimed her months ago." Nicholas checked his reflection in the mirror, straightening his lapels. The suit was perfectly fitted to his athletic frame, designed to accommodate a partial shift if his emotions ran high. "He's

not the one who has to remember vows."

"Speaking of which..." Rollo reached into his pocket and pulled out a small wooden box. "You might want these."

Nicholas accepted the box, opening it to reveal two bands. One was a sleek platinum, the other a delicate silver vine intertwined with tiny emeralds that matched his tie.

"I can't believe I almost forgot the rings." He ran a finger over Sylvie's band, feeling the hum of protective magic embedded within the metal. "Some groom I am."

"The best kind—one who's actually showing up." Rollo stood and clapped him on the shoulder. "Unlike that cousin of yours who ran off to Brazil rather than face his mate."

"That was different. Garrett's mate was trying to hex him bald."

"And Sylvie hasn't tried?"

Nicholas's lips quirked. "She's been tempted."

A soft knock interrupted them as Hazel Fairweather entered, resplendent in flowing robes of midnight blue, her silver hair cascading down her back adorned with tiny stars that actually twinkled.

"It's time," she announced, her ageless eyes studying Nicholas. "The elements are aligned, the moon is in position, and your bride is ready."

Nicholas's heart hammered against his ribs. "Is she... how does she look?"

"Like the answer to a question you've been asking your whole life," Hazel replied, her

voice softening. "Now come. We mustn't keep fate waiting, especially when it took such a circuitous route to get you two here."

They followed her through winding corridors until they reached the outdoor clearing.

The sanctuary's ancient grove had been transformed into something out of a dream.

Moondrops and tiger lilies formed an aisle between rows of wooden chairs filled with townsfolk.

Candles hovered in the air, their flames steady despite the gentle breeze.

At the far end stood an arch twined with flowers and vines that seemed to pulse with life.

Nicholas took his position beneath the arch, his tiger suddenly alert and attentive. The assembled guests quieted as string music filled the air—no traditional wedding march for Sylvie. Instead, the haunting melody of an old protection charm floated through the clearing.

And then she appeared.

Sylvie walked the path alone, as was witch tradition.

Her gown was unlike anything Nicholas had imagined—not white, but the color of moonlight on water, silvery blue that shifted as she moved.

It hugged her curves before flowing out in layers that resembled candle smoke.

Her blonde hair was partly up, secured with Missy's silver comb, the rest cascading in waves around her shoulders.

Around her throat gleamed a pendant that matched his tie, and in her hands, she carried not flowers but a slender white candle that burned with a golden flame.

Nicholas felt his claws extend slightly, pricking his palms. His tiger pushed forward, eager to see, to claim, to cherish.

"Easy," he whispered to himself, retracting the claws with effort.

By the time Sylvie reached him, Nicholas had forgotten his nervousness entirely. There was only her—her storm-gray eyes meeting his, her lips curved in that half-smile he adored.

"Hi," he whispered as she took her place opposite him.

"Hi yourself," she replied, her voice steady even as the candle flame in her hands flickered higher. "Ready to be gloriously doomed together?"

His grin was pure tiger. "I was born ready."

Hazel raised her hands, and the clearing fell silent. "We gather beneath ancient boughs and eternal stars to witness the binding of two souls who found each other against all odds—and despite themselves."

A ripple of knowing laughter passed through the guests.

"Nicholas Whitmore, tiger-shifter and protector," Hazel continued. "Sylvie Sage, witch and flame-keeper. You stand before your community to declare your choice, not fate's choice, not magic's choice, but your own."

She gestured to Sylvie, who raised her candle higher. "With this flame, I welcome both man and beast. I bind myself to your protection, your passion, your loyalty." Her

voice was clear, unwavering. "When darkness comes, I will be your light. When storms rage, I will be your shelter."

The candle flame leaped higher with each word, casting golden light across her face. Nicholas felt something tighten in his chest—pride, love, awe.

Hazel nodded to him, and Nicholas found his voice.

"With fang and claw, I claim you as my own.

I bind myself to your wisdom, your strength, your magic.

" He felt his eyes flash amber as his tiger pushed forward, wanting to be part of this moment.

"When shadows threaten, I will stand between you and harm.

When doubt whispers, I will remind you of your power. "

As he spoke, Sylvie's candle flame turned from gold to blue, then to a deep purple that matched the color their bond had first manifested as.

"The flame acknowledges your vows," Hazel said, placing her weathered, bark-textured hands over theirs.

Her touch felt like ancient roots connecting them to something primordial and unshakable.

"Now, the rings, symbols of your unbroken circle, just as your souls have found their completion in one another. "

Nicholas reached into his pocket with steady fingers, though his heart thundered like a storm in his chest. He withdrew a delicate band of silver intertwined with gold, tiny amber stones catching the candlelight like captured flames.

The metal felt warm against his skin, almost alive with the magic Sylvie had infused into it during its creation.

Sylvie's eyes widened slightly as he took her hand. The witch who always had a sarcastic comment ready was momentarily speechless, her stormy gray eyes glistening with unshed tears. Nicholas slid the ring onto her finger, feeling the pulse of her magic jump to meet his touch.

"With this ring," he murmured, his voice rough with emotion, "I honor the witch who tamed the tiger, not with chains but with understanding."

Sylvie then reached for the leather cord around her neck, pulling forth a broader band of burnished copper with intricate runes etched along its surface. The metal gleamed with protective spells she'd spent weeks perfecting.

"With this ring," she whispered, sliding it onto his finger, "I honor the man who showed me that surrender can be strength."

The moment the ring settled into place, their bond flared visible—a luminous purple aura connecting their joined hands.

Nicholas couldn't wait another second. He pulled Sylvie into his arms, one hand cradling the back of her head as his lips found hers in a kiss that sealed their vows more thoroughly than any words could.

Her candle flared brilliantly between them, casting their joined shadows as one against the forest floor.

The assembled guests erupted in cheers and applause as tiger-shifter and witch claimed each other completely, their kiss a promise of protection, passion, and partnership that would endure through whatever trials fate still held in store.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

SYLVIE

The moon hung heavy over Shifter's Rest, casting the hidden grove in a veil of silver and shadow.

Moss glistened like velvet beneath Sylvie's bare feet as she stepped into the clearing.

Her wedding gown whispered against the stones, the hem shimmering like spilled mercury in the candlelight.

Dozens of votives—each lit hours ago with whispered spells and sealed with her breath—hovered midair, their flames dancing between gold and violet with every shift of wind and pulse of magic.

Nicholas's hands found the clasp between her shoulder blades.

"This took you thirty minutes to get into," he murmured, voice low, reverent.

She leaned back into him, letting her hips nestle against the unmistakable pressure of his cock pressing through his slacks. The crimson mating runes that curled across his sun-kissed skin glowed faintly, wrapping over his chest and shoulders like ancient fire.

"Good thing you've got those clever claws," she whispered, her voice a little breathless already.

He chuckled—rough and dark—and the sound vibrated through her spine just as the

clasp gave way. Her dress fell like water, pooling at her feet, leaving her bare to the night air and his gaze. Cool wind kissed her spine an instant before his mouth did.

His teeth grazed the sensitive dip where her neck met her shoulder, and she gasped, swaying back into him. “Still think candles are just for warding?” he murmured, licking along the arch of her neck.

“Still think shifters don’t burn?” she whispered, arching her back as his hands slid up her ribs to cup her breasts. His thumbs brushed over her nipples through the lace of her bridal lingerie, teasing until they peaked under his touch.

His cock ground against her ass, hard and heavy.

She turned in his arms, breath catching at the wildness in his eyes—amber flickering with a predator’s hunger, barely held in check.

“I think...” Her fingers curled around his belt buckle. She tugged it open, slow and deliberate, the leather hissing as it slipped through the loops. “...someone’s been neglecting their containment rituals.”

His breath stuttered when her fingers dipped into the waistband of his pants, dragging them down just enough to free his cock.

It sprang free, thick and flushed, pulsing in the cool air.

Her mouth watered at the sight of him—long, veined, perfect.

He smelled like pine needles crushed underfoot, musk and warm spice, and something deeply, instinctively male.

“Flamekeeper.” His voice cracked slightly as his hand caught her wrist. “You don’t

have to...”

“I want to.” She dropped to her knees on the moss-soft earth. “Let me taste what’s mine.”

The tiger purred beneath his skin as he fisted her hair—not to guide, just to ground himself.

She dragged her tongue along the underside of his cock, from base to tip, tasting him—salt, sweat, want. He trembled beneath her, abs flexing under the effort to hold still.

“Fuck, Sylvie...” His hips jerked when she wrapped her lips around the head, hollowing her cheeks.

His cock filled her mouth, thick and hot, and she took him in deeper, moaning as magic sparked over her skin.

The candles overhead flared with each flick of her tongue, golden light pulsing in rhythm with his moans.

“Stop,” he rasped. “Or I’m going to come down your throat.”

She pulled back with a wet pop and smirked up at him. “You say that like it’s a threat.”

His growl shook petals from the magnolia overhead.

In one smooth movement, he hauled her up. Her back met the warm stone bench as he tore her panties clean off with a clawed swipe, tossing them into the shadows. “Need to be inside you. Now.”

She hooked a leg over his hip, guiding him to her with a wicked smile. “Then claim your wife properly.”

He pressed the blunt head of his cock to her soaked entrance. She arched into him as he thrust forward—slow at first, the stretch burning, exquisite, inevitable. Her pussy welcomed him with a shuddering clench, heat coiling low in her belly.

His body covered hers, shielding her from the world as he braced his forearms beside her shoulders. “Sylvie...” he breathed against her throat, trembling. “You’re so fucking tight. So wet.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist, locking him in place. “So move.”

He did.

Each thrust punched air from her lungs. His cock filled her, stroked against every nerve, dragging gasps and curses from her lips. Her hands raked down his back, blunt nails scraping the mating runes as they pulsed brighter.

With every thrust, her magic spilled free—embers rising from her skin, floating upward to merge with the candlelight above. “Yes... gods, yes,” she gasped. “Harder, Nicholas—fuck, please —don’t stop.”

His thumb slid between them, rubbing her clit in tight, merciless circles. “You feel this?” he growled. “Every time your pussy clenches around my cock—it’s like you’re branding me from the inside out.”

“I am .” She met his gaze, stormy eyes blown wide. “I’m claiming you right back.”

He surged harder, hips snapping into hers until the slap of skin on skin echoed through the grove. “That’s right. Let it burn, witch. Let me see you fall apart.”

When she shattered, it wasn't quiet.

Golden light blazed from her body, searing across his vision.

Her scream tore through the clearing as her pussy clamped around his cock, milking him into ecstasy.

Nicholas lost control. The tiger took over.

His fangs grazed her shoulder as he came with a roar, burying himself deep, spilling inside her as his claws raked across her hip.

Twin mating marks blazed to life—hers glowing on her left thigh, his a mirror image along his ribs. Their bond sealed in light and heat and irrevocable truth.

They collapsed, tangled in each other and the ruins of her dress, sweat-slicked and panting.

Nicholas nuzzled the sweat-damp hollow of her throat. "Round one to the witch."

Her laugh gusted out, fingers carding through his wild hair. "Tiger tapped out already?"

The growl against her breastbone raised every hair on her body. He surged up, flipping them so she straddled his lap. "Just getting started."

Moonlight silvered the scars on his chest as she rose on trembling thighs, hands braced against his pectorals. "Think you can handle—"

The rest became a gasp as she sank down, taking every throbbing inch. His hands spanned her waist, guiding her rhythm as candle flames shot upward in spiraling

columns.

"Look at you," he breathed, thumb brushing her peaked nipple. "My fierce Flamekeeper queen."

She rolled her hips in answer, magic and pleasure building like a thunderhead.

When his mouth closed over her breast, tongue circling the aureole, the storm broke.

Golden light blazed through the garden as she came again, his roar of completion harmonizing with her cry as they continued to blend into the night and each other.

NICHOLAS

Six months since the wedding night, and Nicholas still caught himself smiling at nothing.

Morning light glinted through the partially constructed pergola beams casting latticed shadows across the garden soil behind Moonshadow Apothecary.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he hammered the final nail into place.

"You know I could've enchanted those boards to fit together by themselves," Sylvie called from the shop's back door, a steaming mug in each hand.

Nicholas straightened, rolling his shoulders as he watched his wife navigate the stepping stones he'd laid last weekend.

Her blonde hair caught the light, its waves escaping her messy bun in tendrils that framed her face.

Even in her worn jeans and faded Moonshadow t-shirt, she still stole his breath.

"And miss out on all this manly showing off?" He flexed dramatically before accepting the offered coffee. "My tiger would never forgive me."

Sylvie's eyes rolled, but the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her. "Your tiger is a show-off. Just like his human."

"You love it."

"I tolerate it."

Nicholas set down his mug on a nearby bench and pulled her against him, coffee sloshing dangerously in her hand. "You love it," he murmured against her ear, relishing the shiver that ran through her.

"Fine. I love it." She kissed him quickly, then ducked out of his arms to survey his handiwork. "This garden is going to be magical when it's finished."

Nicholas squinted up at the skeleton of the pergola, mentally placing the climbing jasmine and moonflowers he'd picked up from Celeste's nursery. "Just wait until the full moon. The light will hit those crystal prisms you hung perfectly."

"Speaking of light..." Sylvie set her mug beside his and took his hand, tugging him toward the shop. "The first batch is ready."

Inside the workshop behind the main shop floor, shelves lined with glass jars of dried herbs and crystallized resins gave way to a long workbench covered in candles. Not the usual variety Sylvie crafted for clients these glowed with a soft inner light that pulsed gently, like heartbeats.

"Bond candles." Nicholas picked one up, turning the pearlescent wax in his hands. Warmth tingled up his arm, and the amber specks suspended within the wax glimmered in response to his touch. "They're beautiful."

"They respond to emotion." Sylvie tucked herself against his side, her fingers tracing the curve of the candle he held. "When someone's mate or soulmate touches them, they glow brighter."

Nicholas raised an eyebrow. "Testing that theory, are we?" He leaned in, lips

brushing her temple as the candle flared golden between them, bright enough to cast shadows. "Looks like it works."

"It's not just for mates." Sylvie took the candle and placed it back among its fellows. "They react to all kinds of bonds— friendship, family. I've been testing them with Missy and some of the others."

"Let me guess, Nico wanted theirs to sparkle?"

"With rainbow glitter," she confirmed with a laugh. "I had to talk them down to gold and silver."

Nicholas followed her through to the main shop, where the morning light streamed through the stained-glass window, casting kaleidoscope patterns across the worn wooden floor. The door creaked open as Hazel Fairweather swept in, her multicolored scarves trailing behind her like autumn leaves.

"I sensed new light in the ether!" Hazel's gaze went immediately to the display table where several bond candles sat nestled in beds of dried lavender and rose petals. "Oh, Sylvie! They're exquisite."

"Just finished the first batch this morning." Sylvie moved behind the counter as Nicholas leaned against the doorframe, content to watch his wife in her element. "Want to try one?"

Hazel picked up a slender taper, gasping as it glowed silver in her palm. "Oh my. It remembers my bond with Arthur, even after all these years."

Nicholas remembered Sylvie telling him about Hazel's late husband, how their bond had been legendary among the supernatural community.

"The heart never forgets," Sylvie said softly, her eyes finding Nicholas's across the

room.

As the day progressed, more townspeople filtered into the shop, drawn by whispers of Sylvie's newest creation.

Markus and Rowan from Pines & Needles bookstore bickered good-naturedly as their candle flickered between blue and green.

Cassian Drake from The Gilded Fang bought three, though he refused to say who he'd test them with.

Even Rollo stopped by, his massive frame dwarfing the delicate candles, his eyes suspiciously bright when one glowed russet at his touch.

Nicholas helped where he could, wrapping purchases and fetching supplies, but mostly he observed the ripple effect of joy spreading through their little community. What had begun as an accidental binding spell had evolved into something that illuminated bonds throughout Celestial Pines.

Later, as twilight painted the sky in watercolor streaks of pink and purple, Nicholas found Sylvie in their garden. She'd hung fairy lights along the pergola's frame, their soft glow mingling with the first stars.

"Quite the successful launch day." Nicholas slipped his arms around her waist from behind, chin resting on her shoulder. "The tiger's very proud of his clever witch."

"I couldn't have done it without you." Sylvie turned in his embrace, linking her hands behind his neck. "You're my catalyst, remember?"

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Her laugh warmed him more than any summer evening could. "I'm being serious for

once. Those candles wouldn't exist if you hadn't walked into my shop that day."

"And ruined your love-warding spell?" He traced the line of her jaw with his thumb.

"Best mistake I never made."

"It wasn't a mistake." Sylvie's eyes held his, storm-gray and certain. "It was exactly what was supposed to happen."

Nicholas felt the truth of it settle in his bones as he leaned down to kiss her, their bond—magical, fated, and entirely chosen—glowing golden between them like the candles that now lit windows throughout the town.