



The Hazelwood Pact

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A broken ritual. A shattered love. A second chance that could save, or destroy, their world.

Ten years ago, Rowan Blackthorn tried to bind the Hollow's magic to her will and lost everything. Her status. Her control over her magic. And most painfully, Linden Thorn, her sunshine fae boyfriend.

Now, the ley lines beneath the enchanted town of Briar's Hollow are collapsing, unleashing chaos from sentient barley to magical storms. The Witch Council invokes the ancient Hazelwood Pact, forcing Rowan to reunite with Linden, her ex-lover turned irritatingly serene caster, for a series of intimate harmonic rituals that require complete emotional and physical resonance.

Rowan would rather hex herself than share breath, beds, or body heat with the man she never truly stopped loving. But the Hollow is unraveling. And Linden is no longer the soft-spoken fae she remembers. He's stronger, calmer, and entirely too willing to touch her magic...and her heart.

As their bond reignites with aching slow-burn tension and rituals laced with desire, Rowan must confront more than the magical sabotage threatening their home. She'll have to face her deepest fear: what it means to love, trust, and be utterly undone by someone who sees all of you and chooses you anyway.

Total Pages (Source): 20

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

Ten years ago.

The moon was fat and smirking over Briar's Hollow, the air so thick with enchantment it clung like sweat.

Somewhere, an owl was attempting to serenade a cat.

Somewhere else, a baker's sourdough had risen with suspicious enthusiasm.

And in the clearing behind Aunt Mirin's vine-smothered cottage, Rowan Blackthorn was trying very hard not to scream at the love of her life.

"I know what I'm doing, Linden," she snapped, shoving a tangle of chestnut curls out of her face as she adjusted the chalk circle for the third time. Her hands were trembling. Not from fear. Certainly not from fear. "You don't have to hover like I'm going to blow myself up."

Linden Thorn, with his warm hazel eyes and leaves-in-his-hair softness, stood just beyond the line of lantern light.

He looked like the Wildwood itself had taken up concern and knitted it into a man.

"I'm not saying you don't know what you're doing," he said gently.

Too gently. "I'm saying you're doing it too fast."

Rowan laughed, and it cracked straight down the middle.

Like eggshells. Like old glass. Like something she'd been keeping whole for far too long.

"Too fast?" she echoed, flinging her arms wide as if the whole clearing could bear witness.

Her voice was too loud for the hush of the Hollow, bouncing off mossy stone and the heavy boughs overhead.

"I've been preparing this for a year . The coven agrees.

The stars agree. Even the blasted runes agree. "

She whirled back toward the sigil etched in salt and silverleaf, its edges precise and glittering with captured starlight. She didn't look at him.

"But you don't," Linden said softly.

That made her turn. Hard and sudden, skirts kicking up with the whisper of angry petals and dried lavender. Her boots scuffed the edge of the ritual circle. "You think I'm afraid."

He stepped closer. Moonlight caught the silver dust in his curls. His voice didn't rise, but it rooted deep, gentle and infuriating. "I know you're afraid."

Rowan hissed in a breath, her teeth flashing like witchfire. "I'm ambitious," she spat. "Not reckless. And if I were afraid, which I'm not , it would be because I've got a fae telling me I should be small and slow and safe. Again."

Linden's mouth parted and she hated how her heart ached just looking at it. A flush rose high on his cheeks, a pale greenish-pink blooming like spring shame across his

skin. “That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” Her voice rose again, iron-laced and brittle. “Every time I want to move forward, it’s you . Standing there like a hedge in my path. Telling me to wait, to breathe, to trust.”

She was breathing too fast. Her fingers curled into fists.

“Trust what , Linden? My instincts?” Her laugh now was sharp as crushed glass. “The same ones that’ve been telling me to kiss you for the last two years and look where that got me?”

The woods held its breath. Even the wind stilled. Somewhere above them, the moon blinked behind a cloud, as if it too had gone shy with embarrassment.

Linden flinched. Just enough for her to know the arrow had landed, deep and true. His whole body stilled the way the forest does before a storm.

And then, he did it again . He pulled back. She felt it like a door closing between them. Like an inhale never followed by an exhale.

His voice came soft, mossy and sad, the way all beautiful things are when they’ve been hurt too often. “You don’t have to prove anything, Rowan. Not to me. Not to anyone.”

But she couldn’t hear him. Not really. Not past the roaring in her head, the way her heartbeat pounded in her ribs like fists on a locked door.

Not past the shame already curling in her gut like smoke, thick and hot and choking.

And not past the panic, the sheer animal need to win at something, become

something, mean something.

“I’ll be High Witch by moonrise,” she said, her chin rising with all the pride and fury she had left. Her voice shook a little. “With or without your blessing.”

He looked at her then. And there was something in his face, wounded and warm and helplessly, hopelessly loving, that nearly undid her.

But he only nodded. Slow. Solemn. Like trees bowing under snow they’d known was coming.

“Then I hope the moon’s kind to you,” he said.

And like fog retreating from the edge of morning, he was gone.

The ritual space had always felt older than the rest of the Hollow, like the woods themselves bent reverent around it.

Carved into the glade like a forgotten hymn, the clearing pulsed with hush and memory, wild violets creeping over sun-warmed stone, dew-heavy moss drunk on moonlight, and the weight of ancient things listening from the dark.

Rowan stood at the center. Her boots sank slightly into the velvet loam, and the smell of burning lavender clung to her throat like a plea. She was calm. Polished. Grief lacquered over with confidence, rage threaded neatly through her spine.

Around her, the coven gathered: six witches in a ring, each humming with the sleepy thunder of blooded magic.

Candles burned blue and low, their flames leaning inward like they too were watching.

Sigils blazed across the stones in foxfire gold, etched by her own hand.

The ritual was tight. Balanced. Everything should have worked.

But she could still feel Linden's absence like a bruise, a wound she wouldn't name. His leaving had left the air thinner. Like something sacred had been pulled from the circle when he walked away.

Aunt Mirin stepped forward. Her voice always sounded like bark and bone and hard-earned knowing. "Rowan Blackthorn," she intoned, lifting her arms toward the moonlight. "Do you come willingly to the binding?"

"I do," Rowan said.

And to her credit, the words didn't stick in her throat. Not even a little.

The binding was meant to be beautiful. Holy, even.

A sealing of self to the land, to the ley lines that spiderwebbed under Briar's Hollow like veins under skin.

It would root her here, forever and always.

It would declare her High Witch before the Hollow and the stars and every smug-faced ghost in the woods.

It would make her enough .

She opened her left palm and drew the ritual blade. She didn't flinch when the tip kissed skin. Blood welled, red and sure, and she let three drops fall into the sigil's heart.

They hissed. The way blood always does when it meets old magic. Then shimmered gold.

“Ley lines awake,” Mirin murmured, her voice reverent and taut with awe. “Circle made, blood paid, path laid...”

Rowan closed her eyes. The world tightened to a single point of heat behind her sternum. She reached out with her magic, with the parts of herself that ached to belong. Down into the soil. Into the threads of magic beneath Briar's Hollow, the latticework of ley lines like breath beneath earth.

She felt it.

A current. A heartbeat. Magic old enough to remember names not spoken in centuries. It welcomed her at first, warm and sinuous as honey.

But it wasn't enough. She wanted more .

She reached farther.

Too far.

The ground shuddered.

It was barely perceptible at first, just a flicker in the candles, a single warble in the spell-song. Rowan's brow furrowed. She didn't stop.

The sigils warped.

What had glowed gold now bled crimson , the way sunset bleeds into bruises. A sound rang out, the kind of noise bones make when they break under a spell.

The earth howled . The ley lines bucked like wild horses under the soil. The carved stones cracked. The candles exploded in twin jets of blue fire.

“No... no, no, hold...” Rowan gasped, but the power was already yanking her under like a riptide.

Then the circle detonated .

Sound vanished in a heartbeat, swallowed by a blast of pressure that sent the trees bending backward, wind snapping like a whip through the glade. Blinding light surged. It peeled open the sky, turned air into glass, magic into shrapnel.

There were screams. She saw Aunt Mirin’s mouth open, red at the edges, but there was no sound. Someone flew sideways into the trunk of a tree and slid down like a puppet with its strings cut. Another witch curled in on herself, sobbing, blood pouring from her ears.

The circle, the anchor , was gone.

Rowan’s own magic burst inward, burning through her like wildfire. No. Like a star collapsing .

It was painful and wrong .

Her spine arched. Her hands lit up in sparks that fizzled and caught her sleeves. Her vision fractured. Blotches of color, fragments of moonlight, silhouettes like ghosts

pressed up against her ribs.

She was falling, except her body didn't move. She was burning, except her blood had turned to ice . She was unmade .

It stretched on. A breath held too long. A heartbeat skipped. A lifetime in the blink of disaster.

And then... Silence.

From the treeline, Linden watched.

He had felt it begin. The moment the ley snapped, the moment Rowan reached too deep. He had tried to run to her, but the magic had held him back, screaming through his bones, a storm too ancient and feral to disobey. All he could do was watch the girl he loved break herself open.

When the light finally faded, she lay crumpled in the wreckage, hair singed, blood at her temple, her aura frayed like an unraveling thread. The coven staggered around her, some weeping, some silent.

Linden did not move.

Not when they lifted her limp body.

Not when Aunt Mirin whispered, "Her magic... it won't settle. It's gone wild."

Not when they carried Rowan away, leaving the shattered ritual site to fester like a wound in the land.

He stood in the dark until dawn, listening to the Hollow weep.

Rowan had wanted everything.

And that night, she lost it all.

Her title. Her future.

And Linden.

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Present-day.

The apothecary smelled like over-steeped mugwort, scorched thyme, and just a hint of existential dread.

Rowan, witch, alchemist, and semi-functional adult disaster, stood barefoot on the creaking floorboards of her shop and contemplated arson. Again.

“No one ever talks about how potioncraft is ninety percent waiting and ten percent things catching fire,” she muttered, squinting at a bubbling cauldron that had started to hiss in a tone she did not like.

The tonic inside, meant to lull restless sleepers into soft, herbal dreams, was vibrating in its flask like it was auditioning for a role as an earthquake.

She prodded it with her wand.

The potion shrieked, turned bright magenta, and exploded with a noise like a frog being stepped on. Rowan yelped, threw her arms over her head, and ducked behind a nearby workbench as glass, vapor, and glittery smoke rained down.

The glitter, naturally, clung only to her.

She surfaced a moment later, coughing, hair full of sparkles, and smelling like a lavender candle that had died screaming.

“Perfect,” she wheezed. “Brilliant. A triumph of the arcane sciences. Truly, what the

ancestors dreamed of when they laid the ley lines.”

From the high shelf near the door, a disdainful hrrrmph issued.

Mottle, her familiar, peered down at her through his tiny round spectacles.

He was a toad, enchanted, eternally disgruntled, and the only creature she’d managed not to drive away in the last ten years.

Probably because he had nowhere else to go and enjoyed judging her too much to leave.

“That’s the third sleep tonic you’ve murdered this week,” Mottle said, blinking slowly. “Shall I alert the dreams tribunal?”

Rowan pulled glitter out of her hair.. “That batch was warded. It should’ve held.”

“Should it?” Mottle asked, arching an invisible toad brow. “Because I recall the last time you said that, we ended up with an apothecary full of hallucinating chickens.”

“That was not entirely my fault,” Rowan sniffed, attempting to look dignified while scraping potion goo off her cheek. “Gertrude brought her hens in unscheduled. Unscheduled poultry voids all warranties.”

“Uh-huh.” Mottle adjusted his spectacles with one webbed foot. “Are we doing accountability today, or are we just going to glower at things and burn the toast again?”

Rowan pointed a glittery spoon at him. “You’re on thin ice, toad.”

The shop, Blackthorn Apothecary , looked quaint if you squinted.

It was housed in a crooked stone building that leaned slightly to the left, nestled between the bakery which was always too cheerful and a tailor's shop that mostly catered to cryptid clients.

Inside, dried herbs hung from the rafters like the ghosts of better days, and every surface was stacked with jars, books, and failed good intentions.

The shelves were slightly askew. The doorbell jingled with a noise like a startled bell sprite. And the whole place was wrapped in so many protective wards, it could probably survive a small meteor strike or, worse, a visit from the Witch Council.

Rowan lived in the attic flat above, where her bed was unmade, her windowsill was full of stormglass bottles, and her coffee pot hissed like it wanted to file for magical emancipation.

She brewed her potions behind three layers of anti-chaos wards. Not out of prudence, but because the local fire brigade had firmly requested it after the Dandelion Incense Incident.

And even then, things still shuddered around her magic. Slipped. Sparked. Broke.

It hadn't always been like this. Once, her magic had been steady, if a little sharp at the edges. Once, people had called her prodigy. Now they mostly called her that one, followed by a whisper and a hasty sign against misfortune.

And really, it wasn't her fault her magic backfired with the enthusiasm of a sugared-up raccoon wielding a fire wand. Not entirely. Not technically.

She wiped her hands on her apron and sighed. "You know," she said, voice echoing around the scorched rafters, "some people's familiars offer encouragement. Or affection. Or, gods forbid, a smidgen of emotional support."

Mottle croaked. “You have glitter on your nose.”

“Excellent. That’ll really sell the ‘reliable hedgewitch’ vibe I’m going for.”

She reached for another flask, then stopped when the floorboards shivered . The wards fluttered. Somewhere, deep in the earth, something tugged.

Rowan went still.

Magic. Magic was tugging , like an invisible hand catching on a loose thread. A wrongness whispered at the edge of her senses. The ley lines didn’t usually move this way. And they certainly didn’t ripple like overfilled teacups.

Rowan closed her eyes. Reached with the part of her that still knew how to listen.

Veins of power, spidered under Briar’s Hollow like roots. Familiar. Quiet. And beneath that, strain . Like roots being pulled too tight. Like something deep unraveling.

The wards hiccuped again.

She opened her eyes.

“Oh, hells ,” she muttered.

Just then, the shop bell gave an apologetic little ding, and a frantic voice called from the front room. “Rowan? Rowan Blackthorn? You’d better come quick!”

It was Junie, baker’s apprentice and town gossip funnel. She was red-faced, wide-eyed, and smelled faintly of burnt sugar and crisis.

Rowan trudged out, trying not to look like she'd recently exploded herself. "Unless this is about someone finally exploding the scone cart, it can wait."

Junie waved a crumpled scroll. "It's a Council missive. Official. They've sent a flock of messenger crows."

"Oh, good," Rowan muttered, "it's never ominous when birds start delivering death notes."

Junie thrust the scroll into her hands. "Magic's going weird again. Wards are failing. Glamours slipping. Even Mrs. Withers' hexed begonias tried to bite the vicar. And now the Council's panicking."

Rowan cracked the wax seal. Read the message. And then read it again, because surely the world couldn't be that perverse.

The Council, in all its infinite wisdom, had decided to summon help .

Not just any help. Outside help.

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The day started with a burnt scone, an uncooperative kettle, and Mottle threatening to unionize.

So really, Rowan should have known something was coming. Something worse than under-sugared tea and another charmed batch of sleep tonic deciding it was sentient, fabulous, and ready to detonate.

She stood behind the warped counter of the Blackthorn Apothecary, still faintly glittery from yesterday's glitter-based chemical betrayal, and stared into her chipped mug of tea. It was cold. Possibly sentient. Smelled vaguely like despair, licorice root, and regret.

She hadn't even meant to brew the "Comforting & Grounding" blend. Her fingers had just wandered to it while she'd been pretending not to spiral. The label on the tin promised "emotional equilibrium and a smooth finish," which, frankly, was false advertising on the level of felony .

Outside, Briar's Hollow pulsed with high-strung magical tension.

The cobblestones gleamed a little too brightly, as if freshly licked.

The wind stirred the lavender bushes in her window boxes with the conspiratorial hush of a gossipy aunt.

Somewhere in the distance, the bells at the shrine of the Maiden of Milk and Ash gave a nervous little chime, despite there being no wind strong enough to move them.

The veil between wild magic and domestic peace was thinning , and all Rowan could do was pretend her ex-boyfriend from a decade ago wasn't currently haunting her frontal lobe like a sexy poltergeist.

Even the tea leaves in her infuser had formed the unmistakable shape of a middle finger. She tried to tell herself it was a spade. Or a pine tree. Something rustic and seasonal. But no. It was clearly flipping her off.

Mottle, her toad familiar and the only creature in her life less emotionally available than she was, gave a long, soul-deep sigh from his perch atop the brass scale beside the till.

"You're pacing," he announced in his usual gravel-slicked drawl, eyelids heavy with disdain. "You only pace when your anxiety is doing a can-can in your spleen."

"I am not pacing," Rowan snapped, just as she took another tight turn from the crooked front window to the scorched workbench and back again. Her spine was stiff with denial. Her hair crackled like dry thatch. "I'm... circulation-enhancing."

"You're brooding with cardio."

"I'm ignoring you with intention ," she said through gritted teeth, resisting the urge to hex the toad into a decorative soap.

But he was right, damn him. Something was off .

She could feel it beneath her skin, under her tongue, in the place just behind her sternum where the ley lines used to hum in harmony.

Now they itched. They prickled. They twitched like a freshly plucked nerve or a particularly annoyed cat.

The Hollow was off-balance , and she could feel it like a second heartbeat.

And on the counter, taunting her with its authoritative calligraphy and the arrogant swoop of the Council's wax seal, lay the scroll that had ruined her mood since yesterday.

Its presence was like a slap in cursive.

The Witch Council of the Nine Grove had written to inform her, with all the grim cheer of a funeral notice, that the town's wards were collapsing, the ley threads were coming undone, and in an act of absolute and irrevocable desperation, they'd decided to call in outside help .

Rowan's teeth ground together. Outside help .

As if Briar's Hollow wasn't already teetering on the edge of a magical identity crisis. As if a decade of chaotic, unanchored ley magic wasn't her cross to bear. As if she hadn't spent ten years trying to clean up the ruins of the very ritual that had broken it... broken her.

She rolled her shoulders, cracked her knuckles, and stormed over to the window again, fully prepared to spot some smug stranger with too many credentials and not enough sense.

And then she dropped her teacup.

Not metaphorically. Literally . The mug shattered against the wide-plank floorboards, herbal sludge splashing across her boots and the baseboards with a hiss like wounded pride.

Because, of course , it wasn't a stranger.

It was him .

He arrived like something out of a fever dream that had been left in a meadow too long.

A moss-covered cart rumbled down the cobbled main lane of Briar's Hollow, pulled by two drowsy, speckled oxen who looked like they'd achieved nirvana through the medium of cud.

The cart jingled faintly with the sound of glass bottles and dried herbs, like a traveling apothecary or a very committed druid had crashed headfirst into an antique shop.

Perched lazily on the edge of it, one leg dangling, the other tucked up with obscene, barefoot ease, was a man.

Not just a man.

That man.

Linden Thorn.

Tall and annoyingly graceful, as if he'd been woven together by moonlight and moss, dressed in the soft, fraying hues of a woodland fairy who could absolutely still break your heart and write poetry about it.

His homespun shirt was unlaced at the throat in a way that felt deeply illegal before noon.

His trousers clung to his thighs with the effortless sensuality of someone who did not own a mirror and had therefore never developed shame.

His hair, still too long, still braided with wildflowers, was flaxen gold, loose at the temples where a few curls had slipped free to kiss his cheeks.

And the worst part?

He looked happy .

Not the smug, self-satisfied happiness of someone who'd finally figured out the correct balance of goat's milk and lavender in their moisturizer, but the quiet, sun-drenched kind. The kind of happiness that wrapped around your ribs and squeezed until you couldn't quite breathe right.

Bees orbited him like familiars. One landed on his finger, dainty and golden. He whispered to it, lips barely moving, and the bee nodded . Nodded. Then zipped off like it had urgent pollination business and was late for a brunch meeting.

Rowan's stomach dropped into her boots. Her jaw followed shortly after, unhinging with the grace of a woman whose past was quite literally riding back into town in slow motion, smelling like pine needles and mistakes she wasn't over.

"No," she said, decisively, to absolutely no one. "Absolutely not. I refuse."

And then she ducked behind the counter like the act of not looking would rewrite time.

Mottle, unhelpfully regal atop the scale, didn't even twitch. "So. I see the cinnamon roll has returned."

"Don't," Rowan muttered, pressing her palms to the cool wood. "Just... don't."

But the sound was already coming. The footsteps.

Measured. Familiar. Deeply, deeply irritating.

Wooden stairs creaked. The old bell above the apothecary door jingled with its usual infernal cheer.

Rowan considered, genuinely considered, immolating the entire shop. She could blame it on spontaneous combustion. Or the ley lines. Or excessive sexual tension.

She stood instead. Slowly. With the reluctant grace of someone rising to meet a ghost. A golden, forest-scented, ex-boyfriend ghost.

And there he was.

Standing in the doorway of her crooked little apothecary like he'd never left. Like he belonged in the Hollow. Like the Hollow had simply paused without him.

Older now, yes. But not diminished. Like time had ripened him into some sort of ancient, benevolent chaos god with a honey laugh and tree bark for bones. His eyes were the same: hazel, tilted, laugh-lined at the corners, and they broke , just slightly, when they landed on her.

“Hey, Rowan,” he said, soft and warm and unbearable. “You look like hell.”

Her fist connected with his shoulder before her brain had the chance to stage an intervention.

It wasn't a hard punch. But it was satisfying . He barely flinched. Just rocked a little, his moss-green shirt soft under her knuckles, the line of his mouth twitching.

“Ow,” he said mildly. “You've gotten stronger.”

“And you,” Rowan spat, voice sharp with memory and caffeine withdrawal, “have no right to walk into my shop looking like the poster boy for rustic sensuality and insult me like it’s 1012 when we still do courtship rituals involving public humiliation .”

His brows went up a little. “I said you looked like hell, not bad. There’s a difference.”

“I swear to all nine realms, if you start talking in riddles again, I will weaponize this tea kettle.”

He had the audacity to smile. Just the corners of his mouth. Just enough to feel like being grazed by sunlight.

“Still sharp-tongued,” he murmured. Almost fondly.

“Still alive, somehow,” she replied.

They stared at each other. The air thickened, slow and golden and heavy with everything they hadn’t said in ten years. Rowan’s hand itched. Her mouth burned. She didn’t know whether she wanted to scream into his pecs or bite him.

Possibly both. In reverse order.

Linden tilted his head, looking around the shop like it was a museum exhibit he’d once loved. “Smells like mugwort and repressed emotion in here.”

“Thank you,” Rowan said sweetly. “It’s called branding .”

Outside, the bees had massed on the window boxes in quiet, supportive formation. A squirrel sat beside them on the ledge, staring at Linden with silent, feral judgment. The ley threads gave another twitch. Tense, like a string drawn too tight.

“I’m staying across the lane,” Linden said, casual as anything. “The old ivy cottage. The Council wanted me close to the source.”

Rowan’s eye twitched. “The source ? I am not a source. I am a private citizen with an apothecary license and a tax record. I just happen to have a fully dysfunctional relationship with the ley lines .”

“You’re the person with the most experience touching the Hollow’s deep magic,” he said gently. “Even if it bit back.”

She flinched. Just slightly. But he saw it. Of course he saw it.

And then he looked past her. To the sigils burned into the walls, the jars carefully arranged in wild, protective order. The kettle still spitting sparks. The raw, warded life of the place.

He looked at it the way he’d once looked at her.

Like she was worth loving. Even broken. Even sharp-edged.

Rowan’s throat tightened like a noose.

“I didn’t come to fight,” he said finally. “I came to help.”

She exhaled through her nose, hot and sharp and possibly containing traces of steam. “Fine,” she said. “But you stay out of my apothecary. Got it?”

Linden gave her a smile so soft and devastating it might as well have been a slow-burn sex scene. “No promises.”

Rowan slammed the door in his face.

And then promptly opened it again because she'd forgotten Mottle on the stoop.

The toad blinked up at her with dry amusement. "He's still hot."

"I will enchant you into a footstool."

"You tried that once," Mottle said. "I ended up with a throw pillow fetish."

Rowan hissed like an enraged kettle, snatched him up under one arm, and stomped back inside.

But she could still feel him.

Linden. Like a storm just waiting to come back in season. Like sun-warmed stone and rosemary and every memory she'd ever shoved into a drawer and padlocked shut.

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Rowan Blackthorn had exactly three rules before noon: no customers, no spellwork, and no forced interactions with people she might be tempted to hex into oblivion. Especially not before tea. And especially not in a blouse that still smelled vaguely of exploded mugwort and despair.

So naturally, that was when Elder Thistle herself knocked on her front door like a tax collector bearing bad news and rhubarb.

"Town Hall," the Elder said with the grim finality of a thunderclap. She stood prim as a periwinkle in full bloom, the gold threads of her Council robes slightly frayed and entirely unimpressed by Rowan's protest of, "I have a rash. A magical rash. Contagious. Possibly fatal."

"You'll live," Thistle said briskly, and then proceeded to escort Rowan down the cobbled lane like a maiden being marched to the gallows.

Town Hall was exactly as Rowan remembered it: drafty, full of creaky floorboards and even creakier politics, and smelling faintly of beeswax, herbal tension, and one too many mildewed spellbooks.

The building had once been a chapel, then a grain store, then a goat shelter during the Flooding, and it still bore the architectural confusion of all three.

The room was packed. Villagers filled the old pews, voices pitched in anxious chatter.

Someone had brought knitting. Someone else had brought scones.

The Witch Council sat at the head table beneath the faded banner of the Hollow: a circle of hawthorn and hazel surrounding a leaping hare.

Rowan recognized them all. Elder Thistle.

Elder Gorse. Elder Juniper, who appeared to be meditating or asleep, possibly both.

And beside them, as if he belonged there, sat Linden.

Rowan stopped walking. Her spine became a lightning rod of pure, incandescent irritation.

He wore a mossy green tunic, sleeves rolled to the elbow, exposing forearms dusted with golden hair and a lattice of old scars like ivy grown under his skin.

There were flowers in his braid again, daisies and something star-shaped she refused to name.

The sight of him made her stomach lurch in a way she chose to interpret as indigestion.

He saw her, of course. His eyes lit with something maddeningly gentle, and his lips twitched like he wanted to smile but thought better of it. She immediately wished for the floor to become quicksand.

Elder Thistle took her seat with the weary air of someone who had seen three plagues, two uprisings, and at least one enchanted goose scandal.

“This emergency Council session will now come to order.”

The room quieted at once.

Knitting needles paused mid-click. Scone crumbs froze mid-hover, caught in the air by a jittery telekinesis spell that didn't know whether to scatter or settle. Someone's enchanted thermos gave an anxious burp and hissed lavender steam into the rafters.

Thistle stood with the slow, deliberate drama of a woman who'd made entire generations tremble with a single arch of her eyebrow. She tapped the scroll in her hand against the table, the parchment crackling with old magic and newer irritation.

“As you are all aware, the ley lines under Briar's Hollow have begun to fray.”

A ripple of murmurs passed through the gathered crowd consisting of villagers, witches, herbalists, and two goats that no one had managed to banish from the meeting room.

“More like throwing full-on tantrums,” someone muttered from the back. Rowan recognized the butcher's voice — Milo, eternally meat-scented and permanently unimpressed.

“Magic surges are increasing,” Thistle continued, her voice clipped and cool. “Storms are rising without warning. Crops are failing. The barley grew teeth.”

That one got them. The room sucked in a collective breath. Even the goats looked alarmed.

Rowan slouched in her folding chair, arms crossed, expression set to apathetic local menace. She hadn't wanted to come.

“We have consulted with seers, historians, and a very expensive coven of academic witches in Morbraith,” Gorse intoned. “All agree: the Hollow's anchor must be stabilized before the ley lines collapse completely.”

The council table turned as one, slowly, ominously, like sunflowers following the sun, o look at Rowan.

Specifically, to glare.

Thistle's voice dropped a register. "That means you."

Rowan raised her brows and gave a brittle, theatrical smile. "Delighted. Can't wait to singlehandedly untangle a magically ruptured landscape with the same fingers I once lit on fire trying to charm a teaspoon."

There was a pause. A moment in which hope, for a brief and fragile heartbeat, dared to flicker that maybe, maybe , this would end there.

It did not.

"Not singlehandedly," Elder Gorse said, and Rowan's stomach plunged like a poorly cast broomstick.

Her gaze slid, slow as molasses and twice as sticky, to Linden.

Linden was smiling that soft, tragic smile. Looking like the goddamn Spirit of Spring Equinox.

He offered a helpless shrug, as if to say don't blame me, I only agreed to help stabilize reality itself, not emotionally devastate you again in public.

The traitor.

"The Council has invoked the Hazelwood Pact," Thistle said.

It hit like a silence spell dropped from ten feet up.

Rowan blinked. The room around her seemed to ripple, warping at the edges. Somewhere, someone actually dropped a biscuit.

“You what now ?” Rowan said, sitting up straight as if yanked by her own incredulity.

Juniper stirred, her voice papery and precise. “The Hazelwood Pact is a rarely used provision for magical emergencies of regional significance. It permits the Council to mandate a pairing of bonded casters to perform harmonic rites for land healing.”

“Bonded casters?” Rowan echoed, her throat inexplicably dry. “You mean like...”

“A magical pair with historic emotional resonance,” Thistle said briskly.

Rowan laughed.

It was not a sane laugh.

It was the sound of someone two syllables away from hurling a scone at a government official. Or possibly herself. Preferably into the sun.

“You want me,” she said, voice rising like steam off a bubbling cauldron, “to perform harmonic rites with him ?”

A beat of silence.

Elder Gorse nodded gravely. “The land remembers you together.”

Rowan made a sharp, strangled noise, something between a scoff and a snarl. “The

land also remembers the night I cracked the ley lines like a cheap teacup at a hexed estate sale.”

“Which,” Thistle said, folding her hands with the exact smugness of someone who always planned the last move on the chessboard, “is why it must be you to help mend them.”

Rowan whirled toward Linden, who was — and this was deeply, obscenely offensive — blushing . Just the faintest pink dusting his cheeks, like he'd just remembered something filthy during a sermon.

“ You’re okay with this? ” she hissed at him, every syllable a little poisoned dart.

He looked at her with that maddening, unflinching honesty. That open, earthy steadiness that once made her want to kiss him and throttle him in the same breath. “If it helps the Hollow. If it helps you . Yes.”

Rowan blinked. Once. Twice. She was not going to burst into flames. She was not going to burst into tears . She was going to burst into something , though, and it would be dramatic and possibly legally actionable.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake ,” she muttered.

Thistle cleared her throat with all the delicacy of a guillotine being wheeled into place. “The rites will require shared spells. Prolonged proximity. And emotionally charged intent.”

Rowan could feel the villagers leaning forward. The sheer, unbearable lean of a small-town full of romantically under-stimulated people witnessing a live slow-burn enemies-to-lovers reunion like it was serialized theatre. You could’ve bottled the atmosphere and sold it as Aphrodisiac No. 9.

Mottle, from the depths of her coat pocket, let out a long-suffering croak that echoed through the rafters.

“ Sounds horny, ” he muttered, without shame.

Rowan slapped a hand over him with the desperate force of a woman trying to both save and end her own life.

“You expect us to what ... live in each other’s pockets?” she demanded, gesturing wildly, her braid swinging like a dangerous tail. “To share rituals? Possibly beds? And feel things together ?”

“The magic,” Elder Juniper said in a tone usually reserved for tragic operas and aggressively floral teas, “must resonate through a full chord. Mind, body, and heart. ”

Rowan’s expression went through seven stages of grief in two seconds. She considered combusting on the spot. She considered begging for exile. She considered kissing Linden just to get it over with and then punching him out of principle.

Across the room, Linden had the audacity to look calm.

His hands were folded neatly in front of him, his expression soft but unreadable, as though he were already halfway into some meditative grounding spell.

His flaxen hair glowed like sun-warmed straw.

His entire posture said: I am emotionally healthy and willing to grow.

Which, frankly, felt like a personal attack.

“We can start with the easier rites,” he said, gently. “Grounding spells. Shared circles.

I won't push."

Of course he wouldn't.

He never pushed. That was the problem. He'd let her run off the edge of a cliff with her magic unraveling like ribbons, and still he'd stood there, arms open, waiting for her to come back when she was ready.

Which she never had been. Until now, apparently, when the ley lines had finally decided to blackmail her with her own unfinished business.

Rowan stood, all angles and brittle tension, stiff as a broom cursed into stubborn animation. Her hands trembled. She clenched them into fists and met Thistle's eyes.

Her voice was very precise. Very sharp.

"Fine. But if this ends in me murdering him with a binding charm, I'm putting it on your tab."

Thistle inclined her head like a pleased executioner. "Duly noted."

Beside her, Juniper sipped her tea and murmured, "We'll send you the rite scrolls this evening. And perhaps a soothing oil blend."

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

The ritual site was a glade so old it didn't remember a time before magic. Rowan arrived late.

Technically, one couldn't be late to a harmonic rite.

It began when both casters were present, breath aligned, hands linked, intent shared.

But that didn't stop Rowan from stomping into the clearing like she'd been personally insulted by every moss-covered stone.

Her boots squelched in the damp grass, her shawl flapping behind her like an irritable flag.

The clearing was ringed with standing stones carved with faint glyphs, old enough to weep lichen and gossip.

And there he was. Already barefoot, because of course he was. Linden stood in the centre of the circle, shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, hair half-tied and already catching bits of falling blossom. He looked like something conjured by a lonely bard. He looked like he belonged.

Rowan felt the headache bloom behind her eyes like a spell gone sideways.

Probably tension. Or dread. Or the fact that she hadn't slept more than three consecutive hours since this whole damn harmonic rite business started swirling around her like a particularly persistent wasp.

She stepped into the glade with the grace of a woman entering her own execution, shoulders hunched, jaw set, already halfway to a snarl.

“Nice of you to show up,” Linded said, voice calm but warm. As if he were greeting her at a garden gate with a cup of herbal tea and not standing across from her about to perform magically-mandated couples therapy with soulstrings and clover pollen.

“If you’d prefer I leave, just say the word,” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest and immediately regretting it, because it only made her aware of the way her heart was stuttering off-beat and disjointed.

Linden smiled. Like an orchard gate on a spring morning. Like a hand offered without expectation. “I’m glad you came.”

Rowan narrowed her eyes, ostensibly so she wouldn’t have to look directly at the soft hollow of his throat, where his pulse beat quiet and steady and unfairly serene. “Let’s get this over with before I remember any better options like drinking the local well dry or self-immolation.”

He only nodded and gestured toward the altar at the center of the circle.

It was a rough-hewn slab of granite sunk into moss, ringed with warding stones and ferns that curled protectively toward the sigils.

Two silver bowls of saltwater gleamed in the dappled light.

Between them, a small drift of dried petals, rose, marigold, something pale that might’ve been ghost lily, lay scattered over an etched ring of bone dust and clover pollen.

The ingredients pulsed faintly with contained power.

The setup was precise, reverent, meticulous.

He must've done it himself. Bastard.

Rowan exhaled sharply and stepped across the circle's boundary. The wards recognized her touch, the magic humming low against her skin like the first pluck of a harp string. She moved to stand opposite Linden, grounding her boots against the stone and willing her spine to stop trembling.

"First harmonic rite," she muttered, just loud enough for the birds to hear. "Step one: Touch the idiot."

"Technically," Linden said, in that maddeningly mild tone of his, "we begin with synchronizing breath."

"Worse," she said flatly, eyes narrowed to slits. "Now I have to breathe with the idiot."

He didn't rise to the bait. Just extended his hands toward her, palms open and steady. Waiting.

Rowan stared at them like they were venomous.

Long, elegant fingers dusted with flecks of gold powder.

Nails clean and trimmed. Faint calluses on the pads from years of handling seedlings, stringing protective runes, twining vines into wards.

Hands that had once cupped her face like something precious. Hands she had not touched in ten years.

Three seconds passed.

Four.

Don't be weird about it , she told herself savagely. Just hold the damn hands, perform the damn rite, fix the damn ley lines, and go home to scream into a pillow and pretend none of this ever happened .

Her fingers met his.

And the world stilled.

It should've felt neutral. Professional.

Clinical, even, like plugging in a ley stone or completing a circuit.

But it didn't. It felt like pressing bare skin to sun-warmed stone.

Like stepping into a bath at the perfect temperature.

His hands were warm and dry and steady. Not gripping.

Not demanding. Just... there. Welcoming. His fingers curled slightly to meet hers, not laced but aligned, like twin notes played in harmony.

Her breath hitched in her throat. She masked it with a cough and immediately regretted that, too.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Let's breathe.”

One inhale.

One exhale.

And then the air shifted.

Magic stirred. Not in her veins, where it usually lived, unruly and twitchy, but under her skin.

In the soil. It rose around them like morning mist over tea, gold-tinged and tentative, warm where it should've been wild.

It smelled like rosemary and cracked pepper.

It smelled like autumn apples and the soft loam of the forest floor.

It tasted like something she'd forgotten how to want.

The ley lines rustled.

Their joined hands began to glow.

It was a soft thing just a low golden pulse where their palms met.

A thrum. A slow, coaxing hum that moved from skin to nerve to bone.

Rowan could feel it settle into her ribs.

Into her belly. It vibrated under her sternum like a chord plucked by a gentle hand.

A resonance. She was half sure if she opened her mouth, she'd sing.

And then Linden looked up.

His eyes were caught in the golden light. Alive. Reflective. Full of the ache of old things and the grace of something trying so hard not to hope.

And he smiled.

That did it.

Rowan yanked her hands back like she'd touched an open flame. The glow shattered, dissipating into the air like a breath held too long. The glade itself seemed to exhale in her wake. The wards dimmed.

"Shit," she muttered, already rubbing her palms on her skirt like she could wipe him off. Like that warmth hadn't already imprinted.

"It worked," Linden said softly. Not with triumph. Not with smugness. Just... with quiet wonder. As if it mattered less that the ritual succeeded and more that they had managed it together.

She threw him a look so sharp it could've sliced through leather. "Don't get used to it."

He tilted his head slightly. "You okay?"

Rowan gave him a brittle smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I am, against all odds, still alive. Great job, team."

Linden said nothing, only turned toward the altar to extinguish the saltwater bowls with a murmured charm, the smoke curling up like a final sigh.

Rowan didn't wait for him to finish. She turned on her heel and stalked out of the glade like the hounds of the Wild Hunt were nipping at her heels.

Mottle was waiting for her when she returned, perched on the porch rail like a demonic weather vane. His head tilted as she approached, and Rowan didn't even make it to the top step before he opened his mouth and let loose the verbal equivalent of a slap to the face.

"You smell like horny tension and clover," he said, voice scratchy with delight. "Did you make out or fight?"

"Shut up," Rowan snapped, too tired to be clever, too flayed to pretend she wasn't still reeling.

"So both," he croaked with gleeful certainty, hopping sideways along the rail like he was doing a celebratory jig.

She slammed the door hard enough to rattle the dried bundles of sage and wolfsbane that hung beside it. The wards flickered faintly in protest, but she didn't bother whispering an apology. Let the whole Hollow be unsettled. She already was.

The house was quiet, blessedly so. The kind of silence that draped itself across her shoulders like a heavy shawl and didn't ask questions.

She climbed the stairs slowly, legs leaden, hands twitching by her sides like they hadn't quite learned how to be hands again.

The attic door groaned in its frame as she pushed it open, and the familiar scent of thyme and old smoke met her like an old friend. Comforting. Contained. Her space.

She peeled off her boots and coat with something that might've been exhaustion or ritual shedding or both, and collapsed onto the narrow bed that sat beneath the slanted

ceiling, its quilt faded and full of stitched charms. The mattress creaked in protest, and she curled onto her side, burying her face into the pillow she definitely did not, under any circumstances, treat like a stand-in for anyone's chest.

But her body was treacherous.

Her arms curled tighter around it without permission, muscle memory kicking in where logic refused to tread.

Her palms still tingled. Not with magic, not exactly, but with the afterimage of warmth.

The echo of touch. The shadow of Linden's hands cradling hers like they were meant to fit.

Like she was something whole. Something safe to hold.

It wasn't the glow that haunted her, not really.

Not the ritual, not the power, not even the way the ley lines had responded like sleepy hounds waking to a familiar whistle.

No, what pressed against her mind now with the persistence of a bruise was the quiet steadiness of his fingers.

The grounded way he'd held her. No pressure.

No doubt. No hesitation. Just the honest shape of his hands around hers like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Rowan let out a muffled sound and shoved her face deeper into the pillow.

Her cheeks were hot, but not from embarrassment.

From fury. From want. From the sheer stupidity of her own heart, which had apparently decided that after years of cold distance and justified anger, it was time to get sentimental.

She kicked the covers off, then yanked them back on. Turned over. Turned back. Huffed. The bed creaked in complaint.

Ley lines, she could handle. Wild currents of ancient magic, rooted in the marrow of the earth and bound to the will of living things? Sure. That she could manage. That was manageable.

But this?

This ache behind her ribs? This stubborn warmth in her palms? This phantom memory of a boy she'd spent a decade trying to unlove?

This was going to ruin her.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

Rowan woke up in a tangle of sweat-damp sheets, clutching her pillow like it owed her an apology.

Her palms still buzzed faintly from the harmonic rite, a traitorous echo of Linden's hands that lingered like morning dew on skin.

It made brushing her teeth a personal affront.

It made pulling on her boots an act of vengeance.

Mottle sat smugly on the windowsill, a lumpy silhouette against the morning light, his eyes gleaming like shriveled citrus. "Still glowing, or has the horny faded?"

Rowan didn't even look at him. She tugged her cloak on with unnecessary violence, half-strangling herself in the process. "I will put you in a jar."

"Oh, good," he croaked, launching himself onto her shoulder. "Threats. That means we're back to normal."

She didn't dignify him with a reply. Her silence was weaponized, her expression a full spectrum of withheld violence, and her mood, the specific flavor of sour that came from waking up with tingling palms and dreams full of Linden's hands, was best left undisturbed.

She shoved the door open and stalked into the street, steps sharp as snapped twigs. The Blackthorn Apothecary slammed shut behind her with the melodrama of an offended ghost.

Unfortunately, Briar's Hollow did not believe in privacy, personal boundaries, or mornings free from unsolicited social interaction.

The village streets coiled through the land like lazy script written by an absent-minded god.

Cobblestones pressed into uneven patterns, worming between mossy stoops and overgrown planters, each one humming faintly with the residue of old rituals and spilled cider.

Ivy curled around windows like gossip, and the roofs of the houses, most of them leaning at slightly concerning angles, dripped with moss, lantern vines, and the occasional roosting gremlin.

The village smelled, as always, of damp earth and cinnamon, but also something slightly more unholy this morning, as if someone had tried to caramelize desire itself and accidentally summoned a minor baking demon.

Rowan turned the corner and caught sight of it: the bakery.

The Wren sisters' shop was aggressively cozy in the way of all dangerous things.

The door had a carved sign that read Wren a wheel of cheese went spinning off like a sentient discus.

"Drop dead!" Clove bleated, entirely without remorse, as she bounded past a spice vendor and skidded into a flower cart with glee.

Rowan turned just in time to witness the goat's grand finale: a perfectly executed leap over a wicker cart, three terracotta pots, and the hedge fence that bordered Linden's garden.

She landed among the seedlings with a triumphant bleat, scattering snapdragons and dignity in equal measure. A wheelbarrow full of compost tipped over with a mournful slosh.

And then he appeared.

Linden emerged from the greenery like a dryad's daydream. Sleeves rolled up, forearms dusted in loam and golden pollen, hair tousled by wind or mischief or both. Of course he was smiling. He always smiled, as if life were a song he happened to know all the words to.

He crouched in the garden bed, murmuring something low and coaxing to Clove as he held out a palm full of rosemary.

The goat, traitorous hellspawn that she was, took one look at him and melted like a drunken bridesmaid at a ceilidh.

She butted her head against his hand and nibbled at the herbs like a creature entirely innocent of market theft and topiary crimes.

Rowan's stomach did an embarrassing swoop.

She looked away so quickly her hood nearly spun sideways. Her face was hot again. Too hot.

"Still not glowing," Mottle sighed from her cloak pocket, his tone one of exaggerated disappointment. "But you're getting flushed just watching him touch a goat. You might be past saving."

"I will turn you into a decorative soap dish," she growled.

But even as the words left her lips, her gaze was dragged sideways.

Not by Linden, or the goat, or even the deeply unfortunate flutter of her own traitorous heartbeat, but by something at the edge of the square.

A shimmer. A flicker. A twist in the light that did not belong to sun or heat or shadow.

The wardstone near the old well pulsed faintly, then sputtered. Its glow twisted sideways for a moment like something had tugged it wrong. Rowan frowned. Walked closer. Pressed a hand to its surface.

"Feels... jagged," she muttered.

"Not natural," Mottle agreed, crawling up her arm to peer at it. "That's not ley flux. That's interference."

Rowan's brow furrowed. "Someone's tampering with the ley. Or trying to."

She glanced back across the square, saw Linden crouched among his herbs, brushing soil from a sprig of lemon balm with infinite care.

Something under her skin buzzed, uneasy.

Back at the apothecary, she slammed her supplies onto the counter, warded the doors with more force than necessary, and refused to meet Mottle's eyes as she tried, and failed, to unthink the shape of Linden's fingers curled around hers.

She had bigger problems.

Like ley lines that didn't just feel sick, they felt sabotaged .

She clenched her jaw. Brewed something too strong. Burned it. Swore.

This wasn't working.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

The bell over the apothecary door jingled with the polite insistence of someone who meant to be unobtrusive but never quite managed. Rowan didn't look up immediately. She was elbow-deep in crushed starpetal, her fingers stained blue-violet and her mortar throwing sparks like it had opinions.

When she did glance up, half-expecting another nosy villager or a Wren sister with baked goods charged with libido, the sight of Linden in her doorway stopped her heart in its tracks. Or maybe just gave it a hiccup. Same effect.

He was holding a bundle in both hands, cradled against his chest like something fragile.

The morning sun framed him with rude generosity, turning his hair into spun gold and the wisps around his ears into halos.

Of course. Of course he'd look like a soft-focus devotional painting while she looked like she'd been rolled in compost and sprinkled with glitter.

"Hey," he said, and the word landed like a soft touch to the base of her spine.

Rowan looked up too fast, irritation sparking by instinct before her brain caught up. Her jaw set. Her magic, unpredictable even on the best of days, gave a minor sizzle beneath her skin. "If that's more sympathy propaganda," she said, voice clipped, "I will set something on fire. Possibly you."

Linden didn't flinch. He didn't even blink.

Of course he didn't. He had always been a maddening contradiction.

Utterly unshakable and yet gentle to the point of heartbreak.

Instead, he smiled, that same calm, unbearably kind thing he'd been offering her since the day he walked back into this cursed Hollow.

"Just herbs," he said, holding up a modest bundle wrapped in muslin and twine. "Lemon balm. And a bit of ghost-thyme. I thought they might help... with the dreams."

The dreams.

Rowan went still. The kind of still that wasn't simply physical, but elemental.

As if her magic had sucked all the movement from her limbs, frozen her fingers mid-grind on the pestle.

The mortar gave one last reluctant scrape and then silence descended.

Like a thunderhead gathering just out of sight.

"I don't..." Her voice caught, low and splintered. Denial came easily, like muscle memory. She could have finished the sentence a hundred different ways. I don't dream. I don't need help. I don't want anything from you.

But he didn't let her lie to either of them.

"I know you don't sleep much," Linden said gently, like he wasn't trying to win or prove a point, just offer her something that didn't come with strings.

Like he'd simply noticed the shadows under her eyes, the way she winced when someone mentioned the word rest, the way she flinched when the wind through the glade sounded too much like voices from the past.

The silence that followed was full of those tiny emotional barbs that clung to the insides of her ribs, catching on memories she'd buried under ten years of guilt and sheer bloody-minded stubbornness.

He stepped forward, slow and careful, like she was a feral thing that might bolt.

His boots made no sound on the wooden floor, and when he reached the counter, he didn't push the bundle toward her or try to press it into her hands.

He just placed it there, reverently, like an offering at an altar.

Not demanding anything. Not expecting even a thank you. Just... giving.

Rowan's fingers twitched, but she didn't reach for it. Couldn't.

Because if she touched it, she might soften.

And if she softened, she might break.

Linden didn't seem to need more from her. Maybe he understood that small kindnesses were sometimes the loudest things in a room full of regret.

He lingered for only a breath longer than necessary, as if hoping, just slightly, that she'd say something. Take the herbs. Look at him properly.

When she didn't, he turned without complaint and made for the door.

But not before she noticed the way his fingers brushed the edge of the counter as he passed, like he was leaving behind something of himself. Like he needed to anchor himself to her world, if only for a moment.

Like he still remembered how she liked her tea: strong, with lemon balm, just enough to keep the nightmares from taking root.

And stars help her, but she remembered him too.

"Thank you, Thornling," she said before she could think better of it.

The words slipped out like breath, like memory, like something stored too long behind locked teeth finally breaking free. And the second it left her mouth, she wanted to drag it back by the roots.

He froze. Just a moment of stillness, like the world had been briefly pressed between glass panes. He turned, slow and careful, as if she were a wild creature mid-bolt. As if he knew one wrong movement might send her flying into the rafters.

Rowan wished the floorboards would creak open and drop her straight into the cellar. No, deeper. The void. Tartarus. A boiling cauldron full of bat spleens and regret. Anything but this. Anything but the weight of what she'd just said.

The way her tongue had betrayed her. Rifled through old drawers and pulled out the nickname she hadn't used in...

Gods, how many years?

His eyes met hers, and they were soft. Not triumphant. Not smug. Just soft. Like fresh moss after rain. Like he hadn't expected the gift of that word but cherished it anyway.

"You haven't called me that in a long time," he said, quiet as dusk.

Rowan turned sharply, nearly knocking over an entire shelf of bottled moonwort. She shoved a jar of stardust salts back into place with enough force to make the glass rattle. "It was a slip," she muttered. "Don't let it go to your fae little head."

"I won't," he said, and it sounded like a promise he'd keep.

She made a noise that might've been meant to be a scoff, but it betrayed her, came out high and choked and just this side of a whimper.

Mortified, she fled, storming into the back room with enough force to ruffle the spellpapers stacked by the hearth.

She nearly tripped over Mottle's cushion, cursed under her breath, and flung herself against the door like a soldier bracing for a siege.

The cushion was empty.

Because the traitorous toad was at the door, watching the entire exchange like it was a sold-out play.

"So," Mottle said as the door slammed shut behind her, muffling the sound of Linden's footsteps fading into the Hollow. "That's what we're doing now. Blushing at herbs."

"I wasn't blushing," Rowan growled, dragging her hands down her face.

"Darling, your ears turned pink."

Rowan groaned.

She waited. Waited longer than necessary, pressed against the wood, heart traitorously hopeful in the quiet. But he didn't knock again. Didn't linger.

When she was certain, certain, he'd gone, she eased the door open.

The workroom felt too still, like it had held its breath while she was gone.

The herb bundle sat on her worktable, just where he'd left it. Tied with a bit of braided flax cord, the knot tidy and simple, with a kind of domestic grace that made her throat tighten.

Lemon balm. Pale green and fresh, the scent already soothing the edges of her brittle temper.

And ghost-thyme, nearly translucent, fine as spider silk and just beginning to shimmer in the dim light.

Rare. Maddeningly hard to harvest. Both herbs used in spells for dreamless sleep and easing spirit-burn.

And he'd just, brought them. Without fanfare. Without strings.

Rowan stared.

She stared for a long moment like the bundle might bite, or bloom into something too dangerous to name. Then, with an exhale that trembled more than she wanted to admit, she moved.

Gathered her tools: the silver-etched pressboard journal, the drying racks, her gran's shears worn smooth from decades of use. She laid them out with reverence she would never confess to.

Snip by snip, she processed the herbs. Sorted them into bunches, arranged them to dry by the window, labeled them in her spidery script.

And then, quietly, she opened her journal.

Between two sheets of parchment, she pressed a few delicate sprigs of lemon balm. Her pen hovered over the margin for a long while before she scribbled a note beside them: gift from L.T.

Later, when the sun had dipped low and the shadows stretched long across the floorboards, Rowan went to make tea. Her fingers hesitated over the jar of lemon balm.

She could use the other herbs. The less emotionally incriminating ones.

But...

Muttering a curse under her breath, she dropped a pinch into the pot. The scent rose like a soft exhale, citrus-sweet, clean, somehow cutting through the potion smoke and the lingering tang of singed hair.

She carried the mug to the threadbare chair by the window and curled into it like something trying not to be lonely. Cradled the warmth in her hands.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:23 pm

The storm hit like a spell gone sour.

One moment, Rowan was sipping lemon balm tea, definitely not thinking about Linden's forearms, or his mouth, or the fact that her journal now contained pressed lemon balm from his garden. The next, the sky cracked open with a sound like cosmic betrayal and tried, very sincerely, to kill her.

Thunder bellowed like a wrathful old god whose sacrificial goat had run off with a shepherd.

The window panes rattled in their frames.

The wind screamed through the eaves, uprooting hedgerows and flinging them at innocent gnomes.

Rain lashed the cobblestones sideways, and the very air thickened, dense with wild magic, the kind that made your teeth hum and your inner wards pucker like offended cats.

From his perch atop the apothecary counter, Mottle blinked up at the ceiling.

"Oh, good," he drawled. "A weather tantrum. Haven't had one of those since the last full moon."

Rowan was already halfway to the hearth, robes flapping, hair frizzing with static, teeth clenched around a protective chant. Her palms lit with golden sigils just as the first bolt of ley-charged lightning struck the chimney.

The resulting boom knocked her flat on her arse. Several jars of dried nettles launched themselves suicidally from their shelves, smashing on the slate floor in a flurry of acrid dust, shards, and what was either smoke or her last good nerve fraying.

The second bolt of lightning fried the hearth sigil, her primary ward. The runes shrieked in protest and disintegrated in a puff of violet smoke and sullen judgment.

The third bolt hit her roof. With a sound like a particularly enthusiastic sponge being wrung out. The entire ceiling gave up.

It only took five minutes for her cottage to become a swamp.

Rowan stood ankle-deep in ice-cold rainwater, gripping her enchanted kettle as if it were a holy relic.

The kettle was shrieking like it had seen the end of days and wanted everyone to know it.

Her boots were soaked, her underthings clung in the most undignified way imaginable, and she was fairly certain her mattress had transformed into a floating bog spirit and was now haunting the pantry.

“Brilliant,” she muttered, wiping a strand of wet hair from her face. “Just absolutely... brilliant.”

Then came a knock at the door. A delicate, polite knock, as if someone had mistaken her for a reasonable person in a dry house.

The door swung open without waiting for permission.

Elder Thistle entered with the calm authority of a woman who had never once in her

life been surprised by the apocalypse.

Her waxed cloak gleamed like fresh candlefat, rain sluicing off it in neat rivulets.

Her galoshes made soggy thumps across the flooded floor as she stepped over an unconscious garden sprite and what remained of Rowan's herbal notebook.

She looked around the room as if cataloging a particularly unruly hedge. "Rowan," she said crisply, as though announcing the start of a trial. "Due to current magical instabilities and residential flooding, you are hereby reassigned to emergency lodging under the Hazelwood Pact Clause 9b."

Rowan squinted up at her through the steam rising off the ruined kettle. "Is that Council-speak for we're making you bunk with your ex?"

"Yes," said Elder Thistle with terrifying cheer. "Pack quickly. We'll be moving you across the lane."

Rowan stared at her, rain dripping down the tip of her nose. "You do remember he's left me ten years ago?"

"He also bakes, has excellent insulation, and isn't currently floating toward the river in a cursed bedframe," said Thistle. "Priorities."

Mottle belched. "She's going to cry. I can taste it."

"I'm going to hex you," Rowan snapped.

But she was already grabbing her satchel and stuffing it with what she could salvage.

Mottle leapt into her satchel like it was a life raft. "If we die, I want it known I never

liked that boy.”

Rowan ignored him.

Outside, the storm whipped the path into a blur. Lightning cracked in the clouds. Her heart cracked a little harder in her chest.

Linden’s cottage was, of course, not flooded.

Because the ley lines loved him. Because he was born on a solstice and kissed by moss and probably whispered bedtime secrets to the weather.

Because of course Linden Thorne, with his stupid golden soul and his annoyingly competent carpentry, had a roof that held under ley-charged lightning and gale-force winds.

Rowan sloshed in behind Elder Thistle, each step a wet slap of humiliation against the pristine floorboards.

Her boots squelched. Her hair dripped. She smelled like panic, burnt sigils, and whatever terrible mistake had been bottled inside the jar labeled Definitely Not Cursed , which was currently wedged under one arm.

The contrast between her and the interior of Linden’s home was frankly offensive .

Warm light gilded every exposed beam. The hearth crackled in smug contentment, casting golden shadows across shelves lined with orderly jars and carefully labeled apothecary bottles.

The air smelled of rosemary and fresh bread and fig jam , because the universe really wanted her to feel unmoored and underfed.

And then Linden appeared from the kitchen, sleeves rolled to the elbows, his linen shirt soft and slightly wrinkled, collar open just enough to suggest temptation.

His hair was damp, curling at the edges like he'd just finished wrestling the storm into submission, and he was holding a tea towel like some kind of domestic demigod.

Rowan hated how good he looked. She hated how safe this place felt. How clean . How soft . How utterly unacceptable .

He took one long look at her, sopping, wild-haired, disheveled as a thunder-blasted banshee, and his brows knit in that gentle, maddening way that made her want to throw the soap dish at his head.

“Your roof?” he asked softly.

She glared at him. “Don’t want to talk about it.”

“Understood,” he murmured, already moving to clear space near the hearth. No hesitation. No questions. Just... making room for her . Like he hadn’t walked away and left her to stitch her own heart back together with sour moonlight and tea.

Rowan adjusted her grip on her jar of Possibly Contained Regret and tried not to scream.

Elder Thistle, meanwhile, had finished summoning what looked suspiciously like an official checklist from the pocket dimension concealed inside her waxed coat. It unrolled with a thwap, covered in tiny Council handwriting and a few cryptic blood sigils.

She handed it to Linden with bureaucratic solemnity. “You are now officially cohabitating. Congratulations. Keep each other alive. Try not to set anything on fire.”

Rowan opened her mouth to protest...

Thistle vanished in a puff of eucalyptus and judgement.

There was a beat of silence. Rain pattered softly against the windows, as if even the storm were waiting to see what happened next.

Rowan stood there dripping, feral with indignation, arms full of magical chaos and grief-knitted scarves. Linden, maddeningly calm, scanned the checklist.

“Do I have to sign in blood?” he asked, deadpan.

“Only if we consummate the housing arrangement,” Rowan muttered, too tired to filter.

His gaze flicked up, eyes unreadable, heat flickering behind them like banked fire.

“Tempting,” he teased.

Rowan made a strangled noise that might have been a hex or a sob or both. Mottle burped in agreement.

And then, without ceremony, Linden crossed the room. “I’ll make tea,” he said, turning toward the stove.

Rowan swallowed the lump in her throat, unspooled one damp scarf from her arm, and muttered to the hearth rug, “This is going to be a disaster.”

She had every intention of maintaining the high ground, the cold, windblown, emotionally fortified high ground where wounded witches took shelter behind pride and sarcasm.

Even now, marooned in her ex's maddeningly intact cottage, she clung to her principles like a lifeline: do not yield, do not soften, and under no circumstances let Linden see that she was at all affected .

Rowan turned her back on the man in the kitchen, already plotting how best to make this entire arrangement emotionally sterile and logistically tolerable.

But of course, Linden had always been at his most dangerous when she wasn't looking. She should have remembered that. Should have remembered how easily he wielded gentleness like a knife.

Because when she turned again, it wasn't to a smug grin or a barbed remark. It was to the unmistakable sound of a teapot humming to life, and Linden moving with infuriating ease through the kitchen.

And then came the scent. Not just rosemary and bread, but the scent — her tea, the one she used to make in the aftermath of too much magic, when her fingers trembled from channeling moonlight too greedily, when the weight of the world pressed too heavily on her ribs.

Verbena, fennel, yarrow, and a ghost of honey, steeping gently like a spell whispered just for her.

She froze. The kind of freeze that ran bone-deep, the kind that came not from cold but from the unbearable intimacy of being known. Slowly, reluctantly, she turned toward him, already dreading the look on his face and hating that she wasn't wrong.

“I don’t need...” she started, voice brittle with the need to pretend she was still unshaken.

“You look like a drowned cat in the aftermath of an exorcism,” Linden said, without mockery, without pity. Just quiet, maddening warmth. “Have the tea, Rowan.”

She opened her mouth to retort, to summon some clever rejoinder that would put a safe distance between them, but no words came. Just silence. Just the thunderous quiet of recognition.

Because this... this was how it started, always. With a cup of tea, with the tiny softnesses he offered without thinking. With comfort disguised as convenience. With honey and hearthlight and the kind of gaze that said I still remember how you take it, even after all this time .

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He crossed the room, barefoot and stupidly serene, and offered her the cup with both hands, like it was sacred. And Rowan took it... because she wasn't stupid, and because tea was a weapon in its own right, and because some part of her needed it too badly to pretend otherwise.

She took a sip, and the warmth hit her like a hex. Low in her chest, unwinding something she'd kept bound for far too long. Her breath shuddered. Her eyes closed. She made a small, involuntary sound that might have been a sigh if it weren't so close to surrender.

Linden smiled. A little tilt of the lips that spoke of satisfaction and memory and things unspoken. It made her want to hex his eyelashes off one by one.

"I also have something dry for you," he said, turning to rummage through the cedar chest by the fire.

"If it's a monk's robe or a cursed blanket, I swear...

" she began, but the words faltered as he turned around, holding a sweater.

Not just any sweater. His sweater. Enormous and soft and dark green, worn thin at the elbows, hand-darned with the same stubborn care he gave everything he loved.

It was the kind of thing that smelled like rosemary and smoke and heartbreak.

Rowan stared at it like it might bite her.

“Linden,” she said warningly.

“It’s the only thing I have that isn’t hexed, warded, or made of wool thick enough to insult your dignity,” he replied mildly. “It smells like me, yes. And no, that wasn’t the point, but I’m not going to pretend I didn’t know you’d notice.”

She narrowed her eyes. He met them with maddening sincerity.

“I’m not putting that on.”

“You’ll catch a chill.”

“I’m immune to chill. I’ve dated warlocks.”

“Rowan.”

She groaned. Clutched her tea like a lifeline. Glared at the sweater as if sheer willpower could combust it.

“Fine,” she snapped, grabbing it from his hands with a speed that nearly spilled her tea. “But if I find even one memory thread in this thing, if it tries to whisper our song to me, I will hex your knees backward.”

He had the gall to laugh. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She stalked away before he could say anything else unbearably kind, the sweater clutched to her chest like a shield.

In the little washroom, surrounded by lavender soap and an alarming number of plants that definitely shouldn’t have been flowering in June, she peeled off her wet layers and pulled the sweater over her head.

It was enormous. It smelled like comfort. It clung to her wrists and pooled around her thighs and somehow managed to fit her perfectly in all the places that mattered.

Out in the kitchen, she heard the clink of ceramic, the hush of running water. Linden was washing her teacup like it was the most ordinary thing in the world, like he hadn't just disarmed her completely with wool and warmth and remembered details.

Rowan hated him. She hated how soft he was. She hated how safe he made her feel.

And most of all, she hated that she was already wondering what it would feel like to fall asleep beside him again, wrapped in this stupid sweater, in this stupid house, in this stupid, flickering hope.

The bedroom was where things truly began to unravel, like a spell miscast in haste. Too much feeling in too small a space. Rowan stood in the doorway, arms crossed and sweater sleeves swallowing her hands, staring at the bed as if it had grown teeth.

It was small. Criminally small. A charming little iron-framed thing with a patchwork quilt and hand-embroidered pillows and the distinct, unmistakable energy of a bed that had seen things .

Worse still, it was neat. Warm. Clearly slept in.

The blankets bore the faint indent of Linden's long body, the pillow at the head still shaped to cradle a neck she had once kissed.

The entire room smelled of rosemary, beeswax, and old magic — his magic, soft and woody, clinging to every corner like a memory she hadn't invited in.

“This can’t be it,” Rowan said, her voice flat and faintly accusatory, like the bed itself had personally wronged her.

Linden winced, a hand drifting up to rub the back of his neck in that way he always did when guilty or unsure. “It’s the only one in the cottage,” he offered, half-apologetic, half-resigned. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

“We’re not sharing.” The words came out sharp, too sharp, not because she meant them with venom, but because anything softer might have trembled.

He raised both hands in a placating gesture, brows lifting like she was the unreasonable one here. “We’ll just make a barrier. Pillows. Blankets. An anti-collision charm if you like.”

And so, ten minutes later, Rowan found herself standing at the edge of Linden’s too-small bed, tucking a bolster into position like it was a live grenade.

The sweater he’d given her was warm, and it smelled like him, and she hated that she liked it.

Hated that she liked this , too: the faintly ridiculous, faintly domestic absurdity of it all.

A pillow fort. A grown-ass woman and her inconveniently hot ex constructing a chastity wall out of upholstery.

“This is the worst idea in the history of bad ideas,” she muttered, adjusting a velvet cushion with more force than strictly necessary.

“You once used a sentient vine to break into the Council archives,” Linden pointed out mildly, arranging another pillow with the practiced ease of a man who had

definitely made forts like this before.

Probably for injured dryads and anxious familiars.

Probably with the same quiet, devastating tenderness.

“That was strategic ,” Rowan hissed, turning to fluff a pillow with extreme prejudice.

“This is madness .”

“It’s just a bed, Rowan.”

But it wasn’t. It wasn’t . Not with him.

It was the ghost of every night they'd once spent tangled together, breathless and laughing and a little bit wild. It was the echo of whispered spells in the dark, of shared warmth and dream-slick limbs and stupid promises they’d almost believed in.

It was memory pressed into linen and mattress, a time capsule of everything they’d had and lost and still hadn’t let go of.

It was not just a bed . It was a trap. And she was walking into it willingly, wrapped in his sweater and cradling the dregs of the tea he’d made her like a love spell in a cup.

She finished placing the last pillow with grim determination, then turned to face him. “This means nothing,” she said, even as her body betrayed her with a shiver, not from cold, but from the unbearable nearness of him.

“Of course,” Linden said solemnly. But his eyes, stars and soft moss and ruined worship, held a different story.

They climbed into the bed from opposite sides like diplomats entering a delicate

treaty, each moving with the stiff caution of people trying not to touch what they wanted most. The pillow wall stood between them, absurdly fluffy and completely useless against the way heat bled through fabric, against the fact that desire had never needed permission to reach across divides.

Rowan lay on her side of the bed, staring at the ceiling, rigid as a statue. “This doesn’t mean anything,” she whispered again, softer this time.

“No,” he said, and the word felt like a promise broken in advance.

She squeezed her eyes shut. But of course, that only made things worse.

Because now there was no visual distraction, only sensation.

The lingering scent of him: green, earthy, rain-slicked.

Loam and elderflower, moss and old pine and something darker beneath, like salt wind over still water.

The rise and fall of his breath. The occasional creak of the mattress when he shifted ever so slightly, as if careful not to intrude on the uneasy détente.

Time blurred.

The minutes stretched out, soft and endless and soaked in stormlight.

Then, some time deep into the hush, past midnight and well into danger, her traitor leg moved.

She shifted without thinking, slipping sideways in her sleep, a loose, half-conscious reach for warmth. Her foot slid past the border of bolsters and cushions and blanket

walls. A breath later, it landed against skin.

A calf. Warm, solid, familiar.

Her eyes flew open. Linden went still.

He didn't speak. Didn't even breathe, not at first. As if afraid that one exhale might break the spell or tip them over into something they couldn't come back from.

Rowan's foot should have jerked back. Should have fled across the border of decency and sense and self-imposed restraint.

But it didn't. Because it was warm. Because it felt like safety in a world that had been anything but. Because his skin under her toes felt like the pulse of something old and half-forgotten, something sacred.

The contact was nothing, really. Barely there. A whisper of a connection.

But it thrummed. Gods, it thrummed.

It was a magical feedback loop of longing: the harmonic pulse of two bodies with history, aching to sync again.

It traveled up her leg in a flush of heat, curled around her hip, twisted low in her stomach like ivy unfurling in spring.

And beneath it all, the ache, that quiet, brutal ache behind her ribs that she had never quite been able to banish, not in ten years, not with spellwork or sharp words or the steady passage of time.

Something shifted then, a thread being pulled loose, or a lock beginning to turn.

Something small and trembling and irrevocably new took root in the stillness.

Rowan lay there in the dark, eyes wide, lungs too full. Linden, just on the other side of a few insubstantial inches, didn't speak again. But she could feel his awareness like a palm pressed to her spine. Could feel the fact that he was just as awake as she was. Just as aware.

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Rowan woke in the faint blush of pre-dawn, tangled in the blankets, limbs frozen in place like she'd been trying to avoid breathing too loudly all night. Which, honestly, wasn't far from the truth.

Her foot had strayed once, traitorous and warm against Linden's leg, and the echo of that touch lingered like a spell that hadn't been fully broken.

Linden hadn't moved. Not away, not closer. Just stillness, deliberate and quiet. She'd half expected him to speak, to say something soft and damning, like he always had a knack for doing. But he'd said nothing.

Now, the air in the cottage smelled like early rain and toast. Linden was already up, probably making breakfast like they weren't embroiled in magical ley line triage and forced magical intimacy.

Rowan sat up and immediately regretted it.

Her body felt like it had been turned inside out emotionally, and she hadn't even had her first tea of the day yet.

The glade for the second harmonic rite was silver with morning mist, glistening as if the whole forest had exhaled into itself overnight.

Moss lay thick beneath their feet, sponge-soft and furred with dew, and something with wings stirred now and then in the branches overhead, just beyond sight. The

world was holding its breath.

And Rowan hated it.

Not because it wasn't beautiful. It was, in that fey, unsettling way of things untouched by human fuss. But, she knew exactly what beauty like this meant. It meant ritual. Vulnerability. Compulsory closeness disguised as spiritual necessity.

And she was not in the mood for a feelings-based trust fall in the woods.

She hovered at the edge of the clearing like a sulking cat, arms locked tight across her chest, her whole body strung with tension. The ley line beneath her boots pulsed lightly, a sensation like a heartbeat against the soles of her feet.

Across the clearing, Linden waited by the ritual stone. He looked like something painted in soft pastels: dawn-light on skin, his hair caught with mist, a faint golden thread of power coiling idly at his wrist as he centered himself. Calm. Composed.

Rowan scowled. "Forehead-to-forehead chanting?" she muttered as she approached. "The Witch Council really is into performance art these days."

Linden didn't rise to the bait. He rarely did, which made Rowan more annoyed. "We only have to match breath," he said, the words as gentle as spun flax. "Not verse. Keep it simple. Intent, not complexity."

She narrowed her eyes. "I swear, if this makes my magic explode again, I'm kicking someone into the river."

He only smiled and offered his hand. Open and quiet and maddeningly kind.

Rowan stared at it like it might bite her. Or like she might bite him. Her jaw worked,

resisting the pull of it, but her traitorous magic leaned forward.

She grudgingly took his hand as if it cost her blood. The ley line surged beneath them the moment skin met skin. Not aggressively. Not dangerously. Just... in welcome.

“Oh no,” Rowan muttered. “That’s worse.”

Linden didn’t laugh, but his eyes crinkled faintly, and that was worse too.

He drew her forward, their joined hands a quiet tether, into the circle of stones etched with runes that shimmered faintly in the mist. The glade wasn’t loud, exactly, but the silence felt inhabited . Like the forest was watching.

They turned to face each other.

Rowan’s heartbeat lurched as Linden tilted his head down, slow and unhurried, and rested his brow against hers.

That was it. Just the soft press of skin, the warmth of breath shared in the narrow space between mouths. His fingers didn’t grip hers. His body didn’t lean. He was there , fully and devastatingly present, and it was too much.

Rowan squeezed her eyes shut. She could feel everything: the smooth column of his throat as he swallowed, the hint of mint and rosemary in his breath, the steady throb of the ley line vibrating up through the soles of their feet and into their joined palms.

It was impossible not to remember every other time her magic had gone wild. Her power was a weapon she barely controlled, and here she was, forehead-to-forehead with the man who knew exactly how breakable she really was.

He began to chant.

The sound was low and resonant, threading through her like smoke, ancient syllables spun in a dialect older than this grove, older than names. Not power-heavy or showy. Just true . Root-deep and leaf-soft.

Rowan tried to join in. Her voice snagged on the first word, choked with resistance, pride, panic.

But then... something shifted.

It wasn't like the other times. No flashbang of magic erupting from her chest like a star detonating sideways. Just... warmth.

Steady and golden. Like sunlight on honey. Like a river choosing to carry her instead of crush her. Her magic, her stubborn, battered, traitorous magic, relaxed .

She gasped.

It felt like the forest exhaled with her. The ley line surged again beneath their feet, not in warning, but in gratitude. The moss brightened. The mist caught light. A single bird trilled, brave and tentative.

Tears stung her eyes, furious and uninvited.

Her voice faltered. The chant wavered.

Linden didn't stop. He adjusted nothing. Just stayed with her, brow to brow, quiet and sure and devastatingly patient.

Her magic sang . For the first time in over a decade, it didn't hurt to be powerful. Rowan bit the inside of her cheek to keep from weeping like a child.

Eventually, Linden stepped back. Slowly. Gently. His hand slid from hers, a parting she felt down to the marrow.

The clearing was brighter now. Sunlight dappled the stones. Birds dared to sing. The ritual stone at the center glowed faintly, touched with gold. Balanced.

Rowan stared at him, throat raw with things she'd never say.

Linden, of course, said nothing either. Only murmured, "Thank you."

And gods, that hurt .

That hurt worse than power surging wild. Worse than tears. Worse than magic that had never fit. Because there was no mockery in his voice.

And Rowan, prickly, furious Rowan, had no idea what to do with that.

Night had crept into Linden's cottage on velvet paws, soft and silent, curling itself into the crooks of the ceiling beams, the corners of the hearth, the folds of Rowan's freshly washed robe. Smoke from the fire sighed upward in lazy ribbons, scented faintly with birch bark and rosemary.

Outside, the forest had gone hushed and reverent. Inside, the only sounds were the occasional pop from the fire and the soft, snuffling snores of Mottle on his chosen moss bed beneath the window.

Rowan sat cross-legged on the hearth rug, still-damp hair clinging to her neck.

Her body was clean, for once. Warm. Relaxed in the loose-limbed, dangerous way

that only came after a bath too good to be trusted.

The tub had been steaming when she'd found it.

Spiced with herbs. A charm tucked discreetly in the soap dish to ease tension.

And Linden hadn't said a word, which, frankly, was suspicious as hell.

She didn't hear him return from the kitchen until he was right behind her, moving with that uncanny quiet that made her want to punch him and write him poetry. He knelt down slowly, not touching her, just a calm, steady presence at her back. A wooden comb rested in his palm.

"May I?" he asked softly.

Rowan went still. Every part of her locked up like a startled cat.

But then, something in her unwound. Just a little. Not trust, not quite. But something tender-adjacent. She nodded once.

Linden didn't thank her. He didn't make it "A Moment". He simply gathered a small section of her hair at the ends, and began combing.

He was infuriatingly gentle. Not tentative, he wasn't afraid of her, but precise, like he was brushing down a spell.

The comb slid through knot after knot with quiet patience, never tugging.

When it snagged, his fingers followed, warm and broad and work-rough.

He teased out the tangles with the reverence of someone untying a charm woven from

thistle and silk.

Rowan stayed perfectly still, the firelight painting her face gold and shadow. Her breath had slowed without her realizing, deep and even, and her heart thudded like it was trying to perform a mating dance behind her ribs.

“Gods,” she murmured, mostly to herself. “If you start massaging my scalp, I’m marrying you out of spite.”

Linden chuckled. Low and warm and very close to her ear. “Noted.”

It shouldn’t have felt so intimate. It wasn’t a kiss. Wasn’t even a caress. But still, her skin buzzed beneath his touch. Her knees had gone faintly useless. She wanted to lean back into him, let her head rest on his chest, hear the rhythm of his breathing up close.

He finished detangling and slid the comb into his pocket, then began to braid her hair into a crown. The rhythm of it was almost meditative. Over. Under. Smooth and gentle and maddeningly steady.

“You used to wear it like this,” he said quietly, fingers threading the memory into her hair.

Rowan snorted. “I was twenty. I also used to wear velvet cloaks like I was the main character in a tragic operetta.”

“I liked the cloaks.”

“Of course, you did.”

He tied the braid off with a strip of green thread. A protection knot woven into the tie,

she noticed. Old magic. Subtle. Familiar.

She didn't move. Couldn't.

There was a stillness to the space between them now, thick and golden and humming like the moment before a kiss or a spell. Her skin felt too small for her body. Her heart ached with something she didn't have a name for.

"I cleared a room for you," Linden said, voice low. "Just down the hall. Thought you might want your own space."

Rowan turned. She met his eyes, searching for any sign of disappointment, of expectation, of pressure.

There was none.

Only him. Steady and warm, as if her silence didn't scare him. As if the way she held herself together with brittle will and sarcasm wasn't a thing he feared, but something he understood.

Something he would wait for.

Gods, it was unbearable.

He stepped aside, motioning down the hall, and she followed him like a tide pulled by gravity.

The room he'd made for her was small but intentional.

The walls were strung with dried herbs and soft light.

A handmade quilt in her favorite stormcloud grey lay folded at the foot of the bed, like it had always been waiting.

A shelf housed tiny jars of salves and teas and bath salts, all labeled in tidy handwriting.

The window was cracked just enough to let in the sound of the wind threading through the trees.

It was a refuge.

She stood in the doorway too long, hands at her sides, throat clenched tight.

“Thanks,” she said, barely louder than breath.

Linden didn’t press. He only nodded. “Sleep well, Rowan.”

He left with no more ceremony than that.

She shut the door behind her and leaned against it, one hand rising automatically to press over her heart.

It wasn’t thundering now. Just... humming. Low and certain. Her magic curled beneath her ribs like a cat in the sun.

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The dream unfurled slowly, the way old memories sometimes did: half-sweet, half-dangerous, all too real.

Rowan was back in the Nine Grove.

Not the ruin it had become, overgrown and half-forgotten, choked with nettle and regret, but as it once was: alive, lush, golden with midsummer magic.

The trees stood sentinel around them, ancient and watchful, their leaves whispering spells in a dialect older than sorrow.

Honeysuckle curled through the undergrowth like ribbon, and the air was so thick with the scent of green things that it felt like breathing incense.

The ley line pulsed beneath her bare feet, steady as a lover's heartbeat.

Linden stood beside her. Close enough to touch. Close enough to hurt.

His hand was in hers, their fingers threaded with the same instinctive ease they'd had at twenty, like the spaces between her knuckles had been carved with his name.

They stood together before the ritual pool, its surface still as glass, catching the light of a hundred floating motes that shimmered like stars fallen too low.

Sunlight poured through the branches overhead in rich, dappled shafts, gilding his hair like threads of honey and fire.

She remembered this.

Sort of.

They had kissed here, once. Brief and startled, like the breath before a confession.

He reached for her like he remembered the shape of her soul.

Cupped her face in both hands, thumb brushing her cheekbone in a gesture that was at once reverent and aching familiar.

His eyes searched hers, steady, solemn, loving in a way that made something crack open beneath her ribs, and then he kissed her.

Slow and deep. Like he had all the time in the world and intended to use it.

She melted into him with a soft, desperate sound she didn't recognize in her own throat.

Her hands found his chest, broad and warm under the thin fabric of his tunic, her fingers curling against his heartbeat as he pressed into her.

The kiss deepened, and her lips parted to meet the slow, sure slide of his tongue.

Her spine bowed with it, a prayer in motion.

Magic rose between them like smoke to a flame.

Her magic pulsed in rhythm with his touch, a soft golden thrum beneath her skin. Where his fingers brushed her collarbone, light bloomed. Where his palm splayed against her waist, heat spread.

She gasped.

And the magic cracked open like a seed in sunlight.

It poured through her, viscous and golden, trailing the path of his hands as they mapped her with gentle, unhurried worship.

Her breasts ached under her dream-dress, nipples stiffening as his thumb swept the curve just beneath the fabric.

Her thighs clenched, slick with want, every nerve alight with the unbearable sweetness of being touched.

He whispered something against her skin, a word in the old tongue that made her shiver like wind through birch leaves.

She didn't catch it. Didn't need to. His mouth was at her neck now, teeth grazing the hinge of her jaw, and her fingers tangled in his hair as her hips arched toward his without shame.

He laid her down on the moss with aching care. Like she was sacred. Like she was something made of light.

The ground was soft beneath her, cradling. The air hummed with magic, and when he pressed his body between her legs, she let out a sound she couldn't have made in waking life. Not without breaking. Not without falling apart.

His mouth trailed the neckline of her dress, open-mouthed and hungry. His teeth caught on the swell of her breast, and her hips lifted helplessly in reply. Pleasure and power braided through her, rising in tandem, neither overpowering the other. Her magic didn't fight. It sang. It purred .

Every cell of her knew him. Every aching beat of her body welcomed him home.

And when he sank into her — slow, thick, deep — she cried out from joy.

The joy of being opened. The joy of being touched and touching back. The joy of a magic not laced with shame, but threaded through desire, humming along every inch of her like it had been waiting for this. For him .

She clutched him tight, thighs trembling as he moved within her, not frantically but with purpose, with connection, their bodies locked in a rhythm that was both new and ancient, sacred and wildly carnal.

His hand found hers on the moss, fingers tangled, and golden light burst from between their palms like sunrise.

“Rowan,” he murmured, his voice breaking open on her name. “You’re... gods, you’re...”

She came with a shuddering cry, light tearing through her like a psalm, like truth.

And she woke up with a gasp.

The cottage ceiling came into focus, pale wooden beams blurred by sleep. Her sheets were twisted around her legs, damp with sweat, and she was breathing like she’d run miles.

Her body still trembled.

She was slick between her thighs.

Rowan slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the involuntary sound she made, a

soft, utterly incriminating whimper, and tried to sit up without drawing attention from the rest of the cottage.

That was when she noticed her hands.

Glowing.

A faint, unmistakable gold shimmer pulsed in her palms, as though the harmonic magic from the rites had seeped into her skin and decided to live there now. Her magic was no longer chaotic or burning. It was soft. Gentle. It felt...sated.

Rowan clutched the sheets tighter, heart thudding.

This was not fine. This was the opposite of fine. Her magic had responded to a sex dream. With Linden. From ten years ago. Except now.

“Gods, I’m broken,” she whispered. “Or cursed. Or tragically and erotically hexed.”

Mottle gave a faint snore from the chair across the room. Useless.

Rowan flung the quilt off and padded to the door, trying not to feel like she was about to be caught with her hand in the honey jar. Her legs were still unsteady. Her thighs ached.

She cracked the door open. Peered into the hallway. No sounds except the whisper of the hearth fire.

Then she saw him.

Linden was in the main room, back to her. Shirtless.

Of course he was shirtless. Because the gods were laughing at her.

He was crouched in front of the hearth, feeding in a few sprigs of rosemary and sage from the drying rack, and the firelight kissed every inch of him like it had a personal grudge against her composure.

Broad shoulders, lean muscles dappled with the faint shimmer of old magic marks, those curling vine-like sigils that had always appeared when his power was near the surface.

His hair was still damp from some ungodly early morning rinse, and the curve of his neck was so lovely she nearly walked into the wall.

He shifted slightly, murmuring something under his breath as he stirred the coals, and Rowan watched the lines of his back flex, the shadow of his hipbones where his soft drawstring trousers hung dangerously low...

Nope.

Nope, no, absolutely not. She was not going to combust like some kind of virgin in a ballad.

She ducked back into her room like a thief, palms still glowing faintly, heart hammering so hard it might break her ribs.

Her body remembered him. Her magic wanted him. And she was in so much trouble .

She leaned against the closed door, forehead pressed to the wood, eyes squeezed shut.

You can't want him. You can't do this again.

Rowan decides she needs to fix the Hollow's leylines quickly before she becomes even more entangled with Linden.

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Rowan returned to the aberrant wardstone near the old well to investigate it further. The leyline beneath it pulsed like a bruised heartbeat: off-rhythm, off-color, off-everything.

She crouched beside the ancient wardstone, the cold seeping up through her knees despite the layer of protective sigil-chalk she'd scrawled on the ground. The air smelled sharp and brittle. Her fingers, still trembling faintly from that gods-damned dream, curled against the stone's jagged edge.

She hadn't even had time to scold her own subconscious.

The sex dream still clung to her like pollen, her skin betraying her with phantom heat and remembered touches.

Her hands had glowed. Glowed. And now here she was, barely a morning later, trying to solve a magical sabotage mystery while pretending she hadn't woken up slick, dazed, and feral with yearning.

"Sabotage first. Emotional spiral second," she muttered, brushing back a lock of windblown hair with ink-stained fingers. "Get it together, Rowan."

Mottle, perched atop a broken fence post, squinted at the stone with froggy disdain. "You're absolutely radiating composure. Like a cat in heat trapped in a greenhouse."

"Thanks for that image," Rowan said through clenched teeth, tapping the wardstone.

It responded with a thin whine, like a tea kettle boiled too dry.

The usual thrum of ley resonance was absent.

In its place was something...hollowed. Not frayed, not simply decayed, but interfered with. Cored out like fruit.

And in its crevice, woven behind a dusting of moss, was a sigil.

It had been hidden beneath a layer of camouflage warding, clever and cowardly. But the signature was unmistakable: the knotting was tight but off-center, the runes shallow and angled with a kind of desperation. She pressed two fingers to the outer ring.

A pulse shot through her wrist like an electric slap.

Rowan hissed and yanked her hand back, cradling it. Her fingertips sparked gold and then died out again, magic retreating with a skittish snap.

“I hate to say I told you so,” Mottle said, “but this seems exactly like the kind of thing someone should investigate with backup . Or at least with better shoes.”

“I have perfectly adequate... oh bloody nettles,” Rowan muttered as her boot squelched into mud. The ground had turned soft and strange, seeping from beneath the wardstone like it had been weeping.

“I’m calling this whole outing a magical crime scene with a side of wet socks,” Mottle declared.

Rowan blew out a breath and started sketching an unweaving sigil in the air. Rough, but functional. A brute-force unravel. She wasn’t in the mood for finesse.

Which, of course, was the exact moment a soft voice behind her murmured, “You

really ought to warn a leyline before manhandling it like that.”

She jolted violently and nearly dropped her chalk. “Linden!”

He stood a few feet away, all tall serenity and wind-ruffled hair, cloak brushing the dew-slicked grass like he belonged to the Hollow more than its hills did. His smile was infuriatingly gentle. Rowan’s stomach did a slow, traitorous swoop.

“Did you follow me?”

He lifted his hands, palms up. “I felt something off through the ground. You’re not exactly subtle when you poke the ley threads. They ripple.”

“Oh, well, pardon me for disturbing your moss communion.”

He stepped closer, kneeling beside her, the earth softening under his knees like it wanted him there. His presence disrupted everything: her concentration, her pulse, her sense of coherent narrative.

She wanted to crawl into a hedge and stay there for a week.

Instead, she gritted out, “There’s a sigil tucked under the moss. Wrong sort. Defensive at first glance, but it’s more like...a tripwire?”

Linden’s brow furrowed, serious now. He leaned in to examine it—close, too close, she could smell the faint trace of rosemary on his skin. His shoulder brushed hers and her magic jumped like a startled hare.

“I see it,” he said, quiet. “Someone laid this deliberately. It’s tuned to the leyline’s current. If it destabilizes enough...”

The ground surged beneath them like a wave.

Rowan had just enough time to curse.

The trap sprang.

A flash of light, high-pitched and searing, split the clearing. A shimmer of sigils spiraled outward in a net of sharp magical thread, reaching for her ribcage like hungry fingers.

And then Linden was there.

Not just there , but around her.

He moved faster than breath, wrapping his arms around her and dragging her down just as the spell cracked the air above them like a whip. She felt the pull of it catch his shoulder, Linden grunted, but his body shielded hers completely, dragging her flush against the warm, firm line of him.

They hit the ground together in a tangle of limbs and tangled breath. The net of magic fizzled overhead, sizzling out like a thwarted match.

She couldn't move.

Because she was under him .

Rowan's entire body screamed in sensation.

Linden's chest pressed against hers, solid and hot, the beat of his heart a desperate thunder between them.

She could feel every contour: the firm line of his thigh between hers, his breath shuddering against her ear, the weight of his hips grounding her like an anchor.

His hair tickled her cheek, and gods, his hands — one cradled the back of her head, the other splayed across her ribs, fingers splayed like he was mapping the shape of her safety.

“Are you alright?” he asked, voice hoarse with adrenaline, like the question had scraped its way out from under his ribs.

Rowan opened her mouth. Closed it again. Thought about nodding. Considered biting his shoulder instead.

Because how do you say yes when your pulse was still synching itself to the rhythm of someone else’s heartbeat? When the world had narrowed down to the weight of him over you, the cradle of his arms, the heat blooming between every inch of accidental skin-to-skin contact?

So she smirked. Because that was safer than honesty. Smirking was armor. Smirking was better than I dreamed about you touching me and now I don’t know what’s real anymore .

“I’m fine, leafboy.”

A flicker, barely a breath, moved across his face. Not a smile, not quite. But his eyes softened, went bright and unreadable all at once, like moss catching morning light.

And then the pad of his thumb moved. Just once. A slow, careful stroke over the side of her ribcage, right beneath the curve of her breast. Gentle. Protective. Almost reverent.

She wasn't sure he even knew he was doing it.

But her body did. Her body absolutely did .

Magic flared behind her sternum like a match, singeing the edges of her composure.

It pulsed golden and stupidly tender against her spine, lit up her nerve endings with a dozen memories her mouth hadn't asked for: him pressing her down into grass, into dream, into velvet-dark impossible pleasure.

She hated how much she didn't want him to move.

And then, damn him, he did. Slowly. Like he didn't want to break the moment, or maybe like he was giving her time to gather up all the shattered versions of herself she'd dropped.

He rose with a grace that felt obscene in the aftermath of something so intimate, cloak falling back around his frame like a curtain closing on a stage she hadn't realized she'd stepped onto.

He offered her a hand.

Said nothing.

She took it anyway.

Her palm slid into his like it had been waiting there. Like the space between them had never really been empty. Magic sparked again, soft this time. Gold and warm and unbearably familiar, like a home you'd abandoned and then dreamed about for a decade straight.

She didn't look at him because if she looked at him, she might say something dangerous.

And then, of course, because the gods were petty and Mottle had no sense of tone, came the voice of the toad.

"Well, that was very dramatic. Would've been better with a kiss, though."

Rowan startled so hard she nearly dropped Linden's hand.

"I hate you," she said without venom.

"I'm the voice of the people," Mottle replied smugly, flexing his webbed toes like a man who'd just orchestrated a coup.

She shot him a death glare and turned, finally, back to the clearing.

The silence there had teeth now. Something lurked just beneath it, like a second pulse under her own, shadowy and thudding.

They moved together, a breath apart, toward the site of the triggered sigil.

The air shimmered faintly, warped by lingering magic that hadn't quite dissipated.

Rowan crouched, plucking a half-burnt scrap of parchment from the tangled roots of a nearby birch.

The runes etched into it bled oily green into the paper, the tethering glyph corrupted at the base like it had been deliberately twisted.

She turned it in her fingers, frowning. "This isn't leyline rot. It's a sabotage weave.

Someone's hijacking ley flow. Splicing in decay magic where the current's weakest."

Linden crouched beside her, his jaw tight, eyes darkening to deep moss. "This kind of work... it's not someone untrained. It's deliberate. Precise in its own twisted way. "

She whispered, "I should go back to my shop and see if I can find clues in my journals."

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The apothecary still smelled like mugwort and scorched thyme, like longing and failure baked into the walls.

Outside, dusk was softening the Hollow's cobblestones to burnished gold, the kind of light that turned even moss into something holy.

But inside... inside was ruin. Cracked shelves leaned like old bones, bottles overturned in sticky puddles of long-spilled intentions.

Threads of ash spidered up the walls, shadows of spells gone wrong or unfinished.

Dust motes danced in the air, glowing faintly with the residue of old magic, like ghosts clinging to the rafters out of spite.

Rowan stood in the middle of the wreckage, barefoot, soot-streaked, her breath a little too shallow, her magic a little too loud beneath her skin.

It was thrumming like it was stretching beneath her ribs for something it had been denied too long.

She'd come here under the noble pretense of salvaging her old journals, of digging up some long-forgotten notes that might make sense of the cursed sigils carved into the wardstones. And maybe she had meant to do that.

But it was hard to think with her body still echoing the sex dream that had ruined her sleep and her sanity and any pretense of self-control. Harder still with Linden across the room, watching her with those warm hazel eyes and that maddening quiet, like he

knew.

And gods, he probably did. The bastard had always been able to read her magic before she could. And right now, her magic was damn near writing sonnets about the shape of his collarbone and the memory of his hand on her ribcage.

Mottle, of course, was not helping.

The toad perched on the sagging edge of a half-melted jar of pickled eyebrights, smug as sin. “If either of you starts humping on that table, please aim away from the hawthorn tonic. It might burst.”

“Out,” Rowan said, flat and sharp, without turning her head.

Mottle snorted. “Fine. But if you break the bed this time, I’m not helping you stitch the sheets. My hands are metaphorical, you know.”

With a wet-sounding plop, he hopped off the counter and waddled into the back room with the air of someone who definitely planned to eavesdrop through the floorboards.

Silence fell, thick and buzzing.

Rowan exhaled, sharp through her nose. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides.

She could feel Linden not just there , but present , like gravity.

That calm steadiness he wore like a second skin.

That scent, rosemary and loam and storm-kissed pine, curling around her like a memory she’d buried and now couldn’t stop breathing in.

She didn't dare look at him. Didn't dare trust herself if she did.

And yet, his presence was in her blood now. In her teeth. The air between them vibrated, too full, too charged, like a thunderstorm coiled behind her ribs.

She wasn't going to make it to the journals. Not with her skin still remembering his hands. Not with her magic pulsing golden against her collarbones like it wanted out. Not with ten years of aching want bottling up behind her teeth.

So she gave in.

Three steps. That's all it took.

Three decisive, reckless, utterly doomed steps across the room, and Rowan yanked him down to her.

She kissed him like he was water and she was parched, like hunger and heartbreak and ten years of silence were burning behind her teeth.

It was not gentle. Her fists curled in the loose linen of his tunic, dragging him closer, anchoring herself with the same desperation she hadn't let herself feel since the night everything shattered.

Linden made a sound against her mouth, low, hoarse, stunned, and then he melted into her. No hesitation. Just a sound like surrender breaking in his throat as he kissed her back.

His hands cupped her face as though she were something sacred, thumbs stroking under her jaw like he was afraid she might dissolve into light if he held her too loosely.

But there was nothing soft about the way their mouths clashed, about the way she bit his lip just enough to taste the gasp it pulled from him.

He tasted like rosemary and mint. Like summer spells and stolen chances.

He kissed her like he remembered every time she'd let herself almost love him and every time she'd walked away instead.

"Rowan," he breathed between kisses, her name cracked and reverent and wrecked.

And that , gods, that nearly undid her. That soft, sacred ruin in his voice. Like saying her name was a prayer he hadn't dared speak until now.

She groaned against his mouth, cursed under her breath. "You smell like damp dirt and feelings, Thornling."

He laughed, low and shivery, before kissing her again so hard her knees buckled.

Then she shoved him backwards. Into the nearest shelf. The brittle wood gave a creaking protest as his back hit it, and the whole thing exploded in a cascade of dried chamomile and spell-thread and a single jar of bath salts that burst like glittery shrapnel between them.

Neither of them noticed.

He caught her around the waist, lifted her like she weighed nothing, and her thighs wrapped around his hips on instinct, friction dragging a sound out of her she couldn't blame on magic or potions.

The table was behind her now. Somehow. Probably because Linden had half-carried, half-fumbled her there in between kisses that stripped air from her lungs and sense

from her skull.

They landed in a crash of glass vials and rolled parchment. Her skirts bunched up around her waist, his tunic already halfway off. She yanked it the rest of the way with a growl.

“Gods,” she whispered, her fingers splaying over the planes of his chest, the slope of his shoulder, the faint silvery scar near his hipbone. “I hate how good you look.”

He grinned against her throat, voice rough and golden. “I missed you hating me.”

And then he bit her just beneath the ear, and Rowan moaned, bucked, clawed at his back because godsdamn him , he knew exactly where her weak spots lived.

Her magic pulsed, wild and golden, from her skin to his, and his flared in answer, a deep green glow like moss and moonlight. It braided with hers like ivy winding around thorn, seamless, aching.

They were unmaking each other by inches.

And gods, it had never felt so good.

The table beneath them groaned in protest, whether from age, magic, or the sheer ferocity of the kiss, Rowan didn't know.

Didn't care. Her whole body was lit from within, magic licking under her skin in lazy, golden arcs.

It pooled at her fingertips and curled around her spine, like her desire had bloomed into spellfire.

And Linden, gods, Linden , was glowing.

His skin shimmered faintly where her fingers dragged over him, trails of green-gold blooming like moss in sunlight. This was his magic singing back to hers, answering every greedy touch with reverence, every scrape of her nails with blooming devotion.

He tugged her bodice loose, careful but unrelenting, and she arched into him, mouth dragging along the line of his throat, her breath coming fast and ragged.

“You’re too gentle,” she gasped, pressing her thighs tighter around his hips, her voice threaded with irritation and longing and want. “I’m not glass, Linden... I burn. ”

“Good,” he rasped against her skin. “Then let’s burn.”

And oh, they did.

He pushed up her skirts, hands reverent and rough all at once, callused palms sliding over bare thighs like he was mapping his way back to her.

She made an utterly filthy sound when his fingers found the heat of her, slick and already aching.

Her magic sparked in response, flaring golden and wild, and the shelves behind them trembled.

“You’re already... gods, Rowan...” His voice caught, hoarse with wonder, fingers slipping through her with aching slowness. “So ready for me.”

“You took too long,” she said, and then whimpered as he curled his fingers just right, a moan catching low in her throat. “ Ten years, Linden. Ten fucking years.”

“I’d wait ten more,” he whispered against her breast, kissing the soft skin above her heart. “But I’d rather not.”

And then he was undoing his trousers, his breath stuttering as she palmed him through the linen, teasing and demanding all at once. He was hard and hot in her hand, and the sound he made when she stroked him was indecent, like something primal and reverent all at once.

“Now,” she demanded, and gods help him, he obeyed.

He pressed into her slowly, agonizingly, with a reverence that made her eyes sting. Like every breath was a return.

Her head fell back against the table, curls tumbling into crushed lavender and glass dust. “Linden...”

“I know, Ro” he said, forehead pressed to hers, voice shaking. “I know.”

And then they were moving together, breath to breath, body to body, magic slipping between them like liquid light.

Her thighs locked around his hips, and every thrust sent sparks of golden magic crackling up the walls.

Candles flared. Bottles shattered. Something in the ceiling cracked and rained down a single, shimmering cobweb of dust.

But Rowan barely noticed.

All she could feel was him — in her, around her, with her. The heat and stretch and rhythm of it. The unbearable sweetness of being touched by someone who knew her

magic like he knew her breath. Like he knew her.

And maybe he did. Maybe he always had.

He leaned down, kissed the hollow of her throat, and whispered, “Come with me.”

She did.

Her magic surged up her spine like wildfire, bursting in a wave of golden light that made the windows rattle in their frames. Her body arched, clenched, broke open around him, and then he followed, groaning her name like it was a spell, spilling into her with a deep, shuddering cry.

They collapsed together in the wreckage, breath tangled, hearts racing, magic humming low and satisfied in the air around them like a storm spent.

The apothecary pulsed with golden light, the air thick with the scent of sex and the slow drip of crushed moonseed syrup from a shattered jar.

Her body trembled in aftershocks, and his arms came around her with the bone-deep instinct of someone who’d never really stopped holding her.

Later — gods, much later — they somehow ended up in his bed.

She didn’t remember how. Only that the walk was slow and clumsy, a blur of laughter and bruised kisses, of him carrying her into his cottage with a possessive arm under her thighs and a growl in his throat every time she wriggled against him.

The bedroom was all old quilts and pressed herb bundles, a place that smelled like cedar and longing and rain.

He laid her down like she was the center of a ritual and then took her again with quiet reverence, slow and aching, until her name fell from his lips like prayer.

Again.

And again.

And again.

No spell could match the way he moved inside her like he belonged. Like her body had been a locked door all these years, and his was the only key that had ever truly fit.

When she could no longer speak, when even gasping felt like too much effort, he kissed her brow and tucked her beneath the covers, limbs entangled, skin damp and glowing faintly gold.

He held her until the world softened into velvet and the stars began to pale.

He held her until dawn broke against the windowpane like a secret kept too long.

She woke with her cheek pressed to his chest, warm and safe and held .

One of his hands rested in her hair, still, fingers half-curved in the soft curls at her nape as if even unconscious, he couldn't let her go.

And Rowan, brilliant, broken, terrified Rowan, stared up at the ceiling like it might hold answers if she just glared hard enough.

Shit.

She did what she always did when something felt too big to name.

She moved.

Carefully, slowly, like she was trying not to crack the fragile spell of morning light between them, she eased herself out of his bed. Her bare feet kissed the floorboards. The air was cold against her skin, and the ache between her thighs was sweet and cruel all at once.

Her blouse lay discarded at the foot of the bed. She tugged it on with shaking hands. Her hair was a mess, wild and snarled, full of rosemary leaves and moonlight.

Her boots were nowhere in sight.

Typical.

She didn't dare look for them. Her body hurt too much and her resolve was already splintering.

Her thighs trembled when she stood, the press of their joined magic still humming inside her, like a soft purr under her skin.

Her core throbbed, wet and well-used, and the memory of his voice, low and hoarse, saying her name like it meant everything, burned behind her ribs.

She paused at the door, her hand on the frame.

Looked back.

Linden didn't move. His golden hair was tangled against the pillow, his lips parted just slightly, breath slow and even.

Beautiful, calm, endless.

Good. Then, she slipped out. The door closed behind her with a soft click.

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Rowan Blackthorn was a coward.

That much was obvious even to Mottle, who didn't exactly rank high on the spectrum of emotional subtlety. He took one long look at her, cocooned in yesterday's dressing gown, hair a tangled bird's nest of remorse and residual lust, and sniffed.

"Shall I knit you a blanket for the pity party, or will you be sobbing directly into your knickers today?"

Rowan hurled a pillow at him. It exploded midair in a delicate detonation of lavender buds, crushed stuffing, and something that might've once been a button shaped like a frog.

She didn't dignify him with an answer.

She had bigger problems than a sass-mouthed familiar and a thoroughly cursed pillow.

Her apothecary, once the chaotic, fragrant heart of her work and her life, lay in a state of undignified disarray.

The air inside hung limp and listless, like a spell gone stale.

No flicker of candlelight danced in the potion flasks.

No impatient burble from the singing salves.

Even her enchanted scales, which usually clicked with the fussy precision of a judgmental grandmother, had fallen uncharacteristically silent, though Rowan swore they glared at her whenever she passed by.

Sticky tinctures clung to the counters like old guilt.

A bowl of goat's rue sat abandoned and moldering, half-ground and forgotten, the scent of rot curling faintly through the air like the ghost of her good intentions.

The mortar and pestle, enchanted for convenience, now refused to budge unless she apologized. Profusely. With flowers.

And her magic — oh, her magic was being petulant. Hurt. Unmoored.

It no longer flowed but prickled angrily at the tips of her fingers like nettle rash.

Behind her eyes, it pulsed like a migraine on the cusp, too faint to wield, too loud to ignore.

She tried to draw it into shape and it spat sparks at her, fizzled like a damp firework, then slunk away, wounded and sullen.

Even the ley lines beneath Briar's Hollow had turned volatile in her hands. They beat against her senses with a low, rhythmic throb, not unlike a toothache. She could feel them in her bones, in her jaw, in the hinge of every word she refused to say.

But still, she did not go next door.

Instead, she lingered by the windowsill in the attic room, wrapped in her shame and linen and the too-thin gauze of denial.

Her fingers curled in the lace curtain like roots searching for softer soil.

She told herself she was just looking at the garden.

Not at him . Just at the lavender, which was flowering late.

At the tomatoes, which had taken on a smug, bulbous shine. Just the garden.

But every morning, like clockwork and heartbreak, he was there.

Linden Thorn. Barefoot in the dew-damp grass, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, hair curling from sleep and summer.

He hummed to the seedlings, whispered to the foxglove, stroked the leaves of a particularly needy zucchini plant like a lover's cheek.

And gods. Gods. He was still being himself.

He didn't come banging at her door. Didn't demand answers or apologies. He just left things . Bundles of herbs, folded gently into linen like offerings. Bound in twine like promises. Tucked just so on her doorstep, where even her most cowardly self couldn't help but notice.

There was always a note. Always. Scrawled in that gently slanted hand that made her chest ache.

For strength when you're bone-tired.

For peace when your thoughts race like hares.

For whatever hurts and won't say so.

And Rowan... Rowan didn't respond.

She couldn't. Her hands itched to reach for him, her mouth longed to say his name, to taste the vowels and consonants again like sweet fruit. But if she reached, if she so much as stepped , she knew what would happen.

She would fall.

Hopelessly. Hungrily. Completely.

And gods help her, she wasn't sure if she could survive the landing this time.

Not when he'd already made a home inside her without asking, just by being kind.

Not when her body still remembered how he touched her like she was a sacred thing and a storm all at once.

Not when her magic still sparked to life at the memory of his hands, of his voice, of the soft, unbearable way he'd said her name when he came undone.

Rowan Blackthorn was a coward. But cowards knew a terrible truth that heroes often forgot.

Falling was easy.

What came after... that was the danger. That was the ruin.

And she was already so, so tired of bleeding for what she loved.

By the fourth day, the ley lines cracked.

The air in Briar's Hollow turned thick and strange, too sweet and too sharp all at once, as if the land had forgotten the proper rhythm of breath.

Bees lost their sense of direction and began circling the wrong blossoms in confused, furious loops.

The rain, when it came, fell upward in a fine mist, pooling against the clouds with the slow horror of a child's first reversed heartbeat.

Elder Thistle's orchard birthed peaches the size of cauldrons, flushed pink and obscene on their bowed branches. The fruit dropped with the thwump of cannonballs and shattered at the roots, releasing perfume so potent it knocked out three squirrels and gave a pair of hedgehogs temporary visions.

And one of the Wren twins, no one ever remembered which, slipped on a rogue blossom and swore with such vehemence that the milk in every pantry curdled in unified protest. Several chickens fainted. A weather vane attempted to file for early retirement.

It was chaos.

Beautiful, whimsical, completely untethered chaos. The sort of magic-born strangeness that made the Hollow what it was, but wrong, this time. Tilted. Strained at the seams.

Rowan tried to fix it.

She really did.

She stood at her worktable in the hollow hush of her apothecary, sleeves rolled, jaw clenched, fingers trembling above the carved rim of her ritual bowl.

The runes etched into the wood blinked weakly — flickered once, like the dying pulse of a candle — and went dark.

Her magic, already temperamental to begin with, slipped from her grasp like a frightened animal.

It hissed from her skin in fine trails of steam, not wild enough to wield, not still enough to gather.

A half-spoken incantation fell from her lips, and the words dissolved like ash before they hit the air.

She redrew her sigils with chalk. Then with blood. Then with tears, though she would never admit it.

None of them held.

The heat in her chest flickered. Guttered. Went cold and still, she refused to speak the truth aloud.

That she couldn't do this alone anymore. That maybe she never could.

Not without him.

Not without the strange, impossible resonance that sparked between them like flint and dry kindling. Not without his hands grounding her, his voice harmonizing with hers, his presence coaxing the chaos back into rhythm like they were instruments in the same broken song.

From the windowsill, Mottle gave a long, theatrical sigh.

The kind that suggested he'd had just about enough of her tragic heroine routine.

“You gonna cry into the daisies,” he said, dry as bone and twice as brittle, “or actually tell your leaf-touched ex-boyfriend you miss his stupid face?”

Rowan didn't look at him.

Didn't speak.

She just moved .

Fast. Breathless.

A sound burst in her ears like thunder underwater, and then she was gone, down the stairs, out the crooked front door, across the riotous threshold of her failing wards.

Her bare feet kissed the overgrown path, her skirts tangled around her thighs, and the wind surged behind her like it knew where she was going. Like it had waited for her to run.

Linden was in his garden. Of course he was.

Bare feet buried in the soil like roots. He was humming, some old lullaby from the Hollow, the kind woven from moss and cradlewood and soft, long-forgotten spells. His fingers brushed over a tomato vine like it was something sacred, like coaxing fruit from stubborn stems was an act of reverence.

It made her want to cry. It made her want to scream. It made her want to run straight into his arms and sob until her bones turned to honey.

She stopped at the garden gate.

The wood was warm beneath her palm, the metal latch rusted from years of Briar Hollow's damp summers, and her breath wouldn't come properly.

Her lungs were full of bees, buzzing and frantic, stinging from the inside out.

Her magic pressed against her skin in great aching waves, pulled like a tide toward him.

"Linden," she managed to finally call out to him.

He turned. And smiled .

"Rowan," he said, and her name in his voice was everything. A knife to the ribs and a kiss to the soul.

She pushed open the gate, heart hammering so loud it hurt. Stepped onto the sun-warmed path and let it shut behind her with a snick of finality that echoed like a vow.

"I can't keep doing this," she said. Her voice cracked. Shattered on the air like glass.

Linden set down his trowel with careful grace, wiped his hands on the thighs of his trousers. He didn't speak. Didn't move. Just waited . Like she was a storm cloud ready to burst, and he'd chosen to stand still and let it wash over him.

"That morning, I... I left," Rowan said, and the words came suddenly, jagged and hot and real .

“After everything. I left... Because it felt too good. Because it worked . Because I knew it wouldn’t last, and I couldn’t...

” She swallowed hard. “I... I know I couldn’t survive breaking again. Gods... I barely survived the last time.”

Linden tilted his head. Still silent. Still listening . Gods, he always listened .

“You weren’t there... Ten years ago.” The memory rose like bile, uninvited and choking.

“When everything fell apart. When the ley lines cracked and the wilds bled and the covens splintered... When my magic went wild. I looked for you. After the Shattering. I was broken and when I woke up, I looked ... I needed you... And you were gone .”

The wind caught her hair, tangled it around her face like ivy. She pressed her fingers to her sternum, as if she could keep the rest of the confession caged inside.

But it spilled out anyway.

“I needed you, Thornling.” Her voice shook. “And I hated needing anyone. I wanted to be strong enough. Whole enough. To fix it myself. To be enough . And... And for ten years... ten years, I tried so hard... I struggled to live with myself... And then you just come back and I...”

Her throat closed. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t look away.

“You came back,” she whispered, “and you were still kind . Still you . Like no time had passed. Like I hadn’t broken into pieces and stitched myself up all wrong.”

The admission stripped her bare. Her heart beat like wings in a cage.

“And I... I can’t touch you,” she said, voice barely audible, “without my magic singing . Like it remembers something I’ve spent ten years trying to forget.”

Shame rose up inside her, thick and cloying, metallic on her tongue.

“I hate that I want that,” she choked. “I hate that part of me still lives in you.”

And there it was. All of it. Her hands shook. Her knees wanted to give out. The hollow behind her ribs echoed with everything she’d carved away just to survive.

Please say something , she didn’t say. Please see me. Please don’t leave me again.

The silence that followed was unbearable.

And then Linden moved.

Three long strides across the garden. A sense of urgency finally seeping out from his patient and calm demeanor. Like she was the center of his orbit and he was finally coming home.

He reached for her with a gentleness that undid her completely.

No dramatic speeches. No demands. No sudden kisses or declarations of fate-bound longing.

He just... held her .

Gathered her into his arms like she belonged there. Like he remembered the shape of her grief and carried no fear of it. His skin smelled of sun-warmed soil, his tunic

rough beneath her cheek, still damp from the garden. She could feel the steady beat of his heart.

Rowan collapsed into him.

She didn't mean to. It just happened . Her knees buckled, and her fingers curled in the fabric at his back, and her tears soaked the soft patch of his collarbone.

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She didn't know how long she stayed like that, curled into him.

Her hands fisted tight in the rough linen of his tunic.

Her face pressed to the space just beneath his collarbone, where his heartbeat pulsed steady and warm, like the roots of a tree holding fast through storm.

She hadn't cried like this in years, hadn't let herself break open like something tender and still green inside.

But in his arms, the grief unspooled like thread from a worn spool, and he held her as though her softness wasn't a flaw but a kind of quiet miracle.

When she finally pulled back, her breath still hitched, his hands didn't let her go.

They only moved, slowly, reverently, sliding from the curve of her shoulders down to her wrists, to the backs of her hands where her pulse fluttered.

His thumb brushed the soft skin there, and it felt like something sacred.

Like a promise whispered in the language of touch.

She looked up.

He was watching her the way plants watched the sun. Not hungrily, not with any demand but with a kind of bone-deep yearning. Like she was both necessary and dangerous. Like he'd been waiting for this moment without ever expecting it to come.

"Come with me," he said softly.

No command. No pleading. Just Linden Thorn, steady as the tide, warm as spring soil after the thaw.

Rowan nodded.

She didn't trust her voice. Didn't trust her hands to stop shaking. But she followed him.

They didn't speak as he led her through the winding garden path, their feet brushing against lavender and mint, the scent rising in startled clouds.

Fireflies floated lazily above the herbs, the world limned in a soft kind of magic that didn't demand anything from her for once.

Just witnessed. Just held. Moonlight spilled across the stones in broken rivulets.

Somewhere nearby, a nightbird sang low and sweet.

The arched glass of the greenhouse stood ahead like a cathedral of green things, domed and veined in ivy and memory.

When Linden pushed the door open, it creaked like something ancient giving way.

Warm, damp air spilled out, thick with the perfume of night jasmine and soil, ripe figs, marigold sap.

It wrapped around her like a shawl, clung to her skin with familiar weight. A breath. A welcome.

Inside, the glow of fae-lanterns blinked like starlight caught in glass. Vines curled from the rafters in lazy spirals, their tendrils reaching down like hands. Ferns rustled as they passed, as if recognizing him. As if forgiving her.

Linden led her to a seat in the center of it all, beneath the hanging moon-vine and ironseed blossoms. Her heart rattled inside her ribs like a trapped bird, fluttering hard enough to bruise.

The air felt too full to breathe, and yet she breathed him in anyway.

Loam and rosemary and crushed rosehips and Linden.

He moved past her without a word, struck a match, and lit a few beeswax candles along the shelves.

The firelight caught on the curve of his cheekbone, the soft braid of his hair, the small gold leaf pinned at his collar.

There was no need for the extra light, not with the enchanted glow that already filled the space, but somehow, it felt necessary.

Ritualistic. As though he were laying down softness before breaking something open.

He turned to her, knelt in front of her. His eyes were pools of earth after rain.

“I need to tell you what happened. Why I left.”

Her throat worked. She tried to speak, but the words caught behind her teeth like thorns. She could only nod.

His voice, when it came, was low. Not hesitant, careful. The way a man might speak

while digging through dense, ancient roots, trying not to damage anything still living.

“That night, after we fought...I went into the woods. Just for a little while. Just to clear my head. You were so furious. I’d never seen you that angry. And I... I was ashamed. I’d made you feel small. Like I didn’t believe in you. And gods, Ro, I did . I always did.”

She looked at his hands then. They were shaking. Just faintly. Enough to undo her a little more.

“I only meant to stay a few minutes. To breathe. But the Hollow...” He swallowed.

“It was already changing. I felt it the moment I stepped past the last witchlight. The ley lines had started to tear, and the wild magic... it was like a beast uncaged. Hungry. Directionless. When your power flared, when the sky went white, I felt it. I saw it. I saw you.”

His eyes flicked up, searching hers.

“I saw the light crack. I saw you fall. I heard the screaming. I tried to run to you, but I couldn’t move.

The forest held me. Its claws sank deep into me.

Roots through bone, thorns through magic.

I couldn’t even call your name. I couldn’t do anything.

I just watched, paralyzed, as they carried you back. ”

He took a breath like it hurt to take in that much air.

“I’m so sorry, Ro. I couldn’t save you. I couldn’t save us . It took me months and most of my power just to pry myself free. And when I did... the Hollow was broken. You were broken. And I... I couldn’t protect you. I couldn’t save you.” He stopped, voice cracking like dry bark.

Rowan’s lips parted. Her voice came out as a whisper, a breath, a spell with no incantation. “You didn’t leave me.”

He nodded. “I was trapped.”

“And after?”

“I wanted to come back. Every day. But I wasn’t ready. Not like that. Not full of rot and rage. I had to understand what happened. I had to learn to listen to the land again. To tend what had been torn. And I needed to be someone you could trust again.”

"You left," she said. Her voice was paper-thin but razor-sharp.

"Yes." A beat. “And I hated myself every day for it.”

He leaned his head close to hers. Not reaching. Not taking. Just being there. A steady flame that never asked her to burn.

“I came back for you, Ro. I never stopped loving you. When the Council sought my help, I said yes because of the Hollow. But mostly...” He exhaled, eyes full of bare-souled truth.

“Mostly because of you . If there was even a sliver of a chance to help you, to earn your forgiveness... I would’ve walked through flame. ”

The words hit like soft thunder. Like rain breaking through drought. Her breath

hitched. Her knees went loose.

All her fury, her walls, her stubborn bitterness — cracked like old clay in drought. She had hated him, yes. Had built entire altars of rage in his name. But she had also missed the steadiness of him, the quiet warmth. She had mourned him like he was a limb she'd lost and learned to limp without.

But now, he was here. And something was growing in her again. Something reckless. Something alive .

“You idiot fae boy,” she breathed, the words tumbling out on a sigh that didn't quite know if it was grief or relief or some terrible, beautiful in-between.

He smiled. The kind of smile that reached into her chest and snapped the last of her anger in two. A smile like hope returning to a place long left fallow.

And something inside her just...broke. Like a dam releasing. A surrender to gravity. A breath she hadn't known she'd been holding for ten long, hungry years.

She surged forward, caught in that smile, caught in him , and threw her arms around his neck, crashing their mouths together. Not with fury this time, not like before, when she'd kissed him as if it could punish and forgive him all at once.

This kiss was something else.

This kiss was slow.

Worshipful.

Her lips parted for him like a flower unfolding to the sun, and he kissed her like she was something sacred, something half-wild and wholly his.

His hands framed her jaw, thumbs grazing her cheeks with reverent care, like she might slip from his grasp if he wasn't gentle.

There was no haste. No heat demanding to burn.

Only the low, golden glow of something older than time.

Their magic threaded together in soft braids. Gold and green, light and loam, weaving like ivy through stone. Humming like two parts of the same spell rediscovering their shape.

He pulled back only enough to rest his forehead to hers, and gods, she could feel him shaking.

"Stay," he whispered.

"I am," she answered, breath warm against his lips.

And then he stood, pulling her gently with him, fingers laced through hers.

He led her to the wooden bench beneath the hanging moonvine, where plush blankets lay waiting like they knew this moment had been years in the making.

The air was honeyed with the scent of lavender and crushed rosemary, and the light from the fae-lanterns above danced across the curves of her face, catching the tears drying at her temples.

When Linden laid her down, it was like a prayer. A sacred rite. A return.

He undressed her with slow, careful hands. Tunics lifted. Laces loosened. Fabric whispered away from skin. Each inch revealed was touched like a blessing. He kissed

the inside of her wrist, where her pulse skittered like a hummingbird. Her collarbone, where magic used to gather like stormlight.

She trembled with anticipation. With the terrible, aching relief of being seen again.

He murmured to her in the old tongue, low and lovely and full of meaning she could only half-remember. Words like wind through trees, like loam beneath bare feet. Words that said you're mine, you're safe, you're loved.

When he moved between her thighs, she gasped, soft and broken and hungry.

His mouth was devotion. His tongue, worship.

He held her open like a secret, not just her body but her heart , and she gave it to him, trembling and raw.

Her magic unfurled like ivy climbing toward morning, no longer jagged with mistrust, no longer bristling with fear. Just...safe. Just hers. Just his .

And when he slid into her, slow and deep and right , she cried out from the sheer rightness of it. It was not like being claimed. It was like being met . Like coming home after a long, long winter.

They rocked together in a rhythm that felt older than either of them. Like tides learning the shoreline. Like wind learning the shape of leaves.

He kissed her jaw, her temple, the soft hollow beneath her ear. He whispered her name like it was a secret he'd carried too long and could finally speak aloud.

“Rowan,” he murmured, again and again. “Rowan, my love. Rowan.”

She came with a sob, burying her face in the crook of his shoulder, magic cresting through her like wind through treetops. She clung to him as if he were the only solid thing left in the world, and maybe he was.

When he followed, when he spilled into her with a gasp that sounded like breaking and healing all at once, she wept. Quietly. Without shame.

Tears slipped down her cheeks and into the hollow of his throat. He held her face in his hands and kissed each one away, lips soft against salt.

“Shhh, love,” he murmured, voice thick with everything he’d never said. “You’re safe. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

And gods, he did. She didn’t have words for what filled her. Only breath. Only heat. Only the golden hum of her magic where it nestled against his, purring like a contented beast.

He held her through the aftershocks. Through the tears. Through the quiet unraveling.

Held her until her shaking stilled. Until the old, crumbling walls inside her gave up their long war. Until there was only Linden.

And above them, the stars blinked gently through the greenhouse glass, like sentinels returned to their post, like hope slipping back into her sky.

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Rowan smelled the rot before she saw it.

It clung to the edges of the old willow grove, acrid and wrong.

Her boots squelched in soil that pulsed faintly with residual magic.

The corrupted ley node sat like an open wound in the earth, its wardstone cracked through the center, weeping a viscous thread of green-tinged light that should never have existed.

Linden crouched beside her, fingertips hovering just above the damage, his face grave and oddly calm. Rowan stared at the ruined circle, bile rising in her throat.

“Third one this week,” she muttered, rubbing her arms against the chill. “This is certainly escalating.”

Linden didn’t answer immediately. His hand dropped lightly to the dirt, and golden threads flickered between his fingers, tracing the shattered lines. “Someone’s redirecting the flow,” he said softly. “Not just cracking them, rerouting them. Siphoning.”

Rowan’s stomach clenched. “Like draining a blood vessel.”

“Or damming a river and catching the overflow.” He looked up at her, eyes steady. “They’re harvesting the ley lines.”

Mottle croaked loudly from his perch on her shoulder. “Excellent. That’s just what

we needed. Sabotage and theft. Why not throw in a demon goat while we're at it?"

"Clove's innocent," Linden said, deadpan.

"Clove's a menace and I'll say it to her face," Mottle huffed, puffing up like a self-righteous fungal loaf.

But Rowan wasn't laughing. Her throat was dry, her palms cold. Something about the ley flow here felt familiar. Sharp, echoing. A magical signature she hadn't felt since...

"Cassian," she said aloud.

Linden looked up. His expression didn't change, but she saw it in his shoulders: a slight tightening, like a storm tightening its grip on the horizon. "You're sure?"

"I didn't want to be. But..." She knelt beside him, running her hand over the sigils half-buried in the mossy stones. Her magic flared instinctively, protesting the interference. "It's mimicry. That's his favorite trick. He never had resonance, so he learned how to fake it."

Linden frowned. "The Council let him go years ago."

"Not far enough." Rowan stood, clenching her fists. "He was always insecure of his lack of inherent power. And he despised you." She glanced sideways at Linden, her voice brittle. "You... resonated with the land. With everything he wanted and could never touch."

"He wanted power," Linden said quietly.

Rowan's laugh was dry. "Well, he found a way. He's feeding off the ley lines. Gods

know what that's doing to him."

A gust of wind rustled the grove, and the air around them shimmered. Subtle, but real. Like someone, or something, was watching.

They traced the siphoned magic back through the woods, down a winding root-path that should have been impassable.

Rowan kept pace beside Linden, her fingers occasionally brushing his as they followed the trail of distorted magic.

Each contact was small, accidental, but she felt every one of them echo through her chest like a bell.

The old greenhouse on the edge of Briar's Hollow was half-collapsed, all ivy-covered glass and rusted hinges.

It hadn't been used in years, left to the rot after its former owner, Elder Moss, vanished mysteriously during a mushroom misidentification incident.

Now it pulsed with residual magic so sharp it felt like teeth.

Inside, it was colder. Wrong.

The walls shimmered faintly, layered with illusion wards. Some clumsy, others disturbingly elegant. Rowan pressed a hand to one pane and whispered a countercharm. The wards flickered, and reality bent inward.

Hidden within the greenhouse's shell was a makeshift sanctum.

Spellwork lined the inner walls: mimicry circles, ley-tether constructs, siphon jars holding sloshing, glowing liquid magic.

Essence stolen straight from the ley lines.

In the center of it all sat a sigil-carved pedestal, and on it: a black mirror, its surface rippling.

Rowan took one look and said, “I hate that.”

“I think it’s watching us,” Mottle muttered.

It was.

The mirror shimmered and Cassian Vire’s reflection stepped forward.

Not physically. Not yet. But his image sharpened, like a knife catching light.

He looked the same and utterly different. His once-pristine robes were darker now, lined with thread-thin runes. His hair was longer, unkempt, his eyes glowing faintly silver, a borrowed glow, unnatural. And his smile, sharp as ever, made Rowan’s stomach turn.

“Well,” Cassian drawled. “Isn’t this quaint. The broken witch and her living security blanket.”

Linden didn’t flinch. “Cassian.”

“Thorn.” Cassian’s gaze slid to Rowan. “Rowan. I must say, you’ve aged beautifully. Trauma suits you.”

“Go rot,” she snapped, too shaken to find anything cleverer.

Cassian tilted his head. “But why rot when I could consume ? The ley lines don’t care who draws from them. They sing to anyone who knows how to listen. All your precious ‘resonance’ and rituals? Sentimentality dressed up in ceremony. I’m just tapping into its power.”

“You’re bleeding the Hollow dry,” Rowan hissed. “You’re destabilizing everything.”

“The Hollow is already broken,” he said. “You broke it. I’m just using the pieces. I deserve a piece.” His voice cracked, his composure slipping. “You all left me scraping for scraps of magic while you danced with golden light in your veins.”

“And now you’re a parasite,” Linden said evenly.

Cassian’s image crackled, glitching slightly, rage leaking through. “You’ll regret interfering.”

“I already regret seeing your face,” Rowan snapped, then reached forward and slammed her palm against the pedestal.

Magic surged. The mirror shattered with a scream.

The room plunged into silence. Dust curled in the air. The siphon jars trembled and one exploded, coating the wall with glowing ichor.

Linden grabbed her wrist and yanked her back just before a feedback loop cracked the pedestal in two.

Later, back at Elder Juniper's cottage, the hearth crackled low and sullen in its stone cradle, as if even the fire had been subdued by what they'd found.

The Council had gathered, filling the parlor with the damp tension of held breath and too many half-spoken fears. The air was thick with old smoke and older memories.

Elder Juniper moved like something rooted to the earth itself.

Slow and deliberate, every step carrying the weight of decades.

Her fingers, ink-stained and callused, tugged down a dusty tapestry from the topmost shelf of the archives cabinet.

The cloth unfurled with a hiss of disturbed enchantment, ancient threads catching in the firelight like veins pulsing beneath a living thing's skin.

It was beautiful, in a way that made Rowan's throat go tight.

The tapestry depicted a great and gnarled tree, its roots reaching so deep they curled into themselves, spiraling in a triple knot.

Around the base, three concentric rings of figures danced hand in hand: witches, fae, shadow-kin, and humans interwoven without distinction, lit by starfire and song.

Magic stitched in gold and mossy green curled across the fabric like mist, alive even now.

Juniper's voice, when it came, was a stone dropped in a still pool.

"The Heartroot," she said, her gaze never leaving the tapestry. "Where the first pact was woven: blood to blood, vow to vow. Beneath Briar's Hollow. Hidden for a

hundred generations. It may be the only place strong enough to anchor a final reweaving.”

Final.

The word tasted like ash on Rowan’s tongue. She crossed her arms over her chest, warding against the chill that had crept in since sundown.

“Final?” she asked, though she already knew. Knew by the way the elders stood too still. Knew by the ache in her bones that always came before something irreversible.

Juniper turned. Her silver braid coiled like a spell over her shoulder, heavy with silence. “This ritual won’t be like the others. It will require absolute resonance. Harmony.” Her gaze flicked from Rowan to Linden. “And intimacy. Of the old kind.”

Something low in Rowan’s belly went molten.

Juniper’s voice softened, but it did not lose its weight. “Sacrificial and binding. A joining not just of bodies, but of power. Of trust. If you perform it, you will not come out the same.”

There was a moment when no one moved.

Then Linden’s hand found hers.

Just a brush. A touch at the edge of her fingers, reverent, trembling slightly, like he couldn’t believe he was allowed.

Rowan didn’t pull away.

Instead, she turned her hand and laced their fingers together, palm to palm. Felt the

heat of him seep into her, steady and grounding.

The Council murmured, but their voices faded. The room blurred at the edges, the fire humming in her blood, the tapestry still glowing faintly with its stitched promise. Beneath them, the ley threads stirred. Waited.

Rowan looked at Juniper, chin lifting.

“Then we’ll go,” she said, her voice low and unshakable. “To the Heartroot.”

And beside her, Linden, quiet Linden, always full of sunlight, said only, “Together.”

Their joined hands pulsed with a shared heat that had nothing to do with the hearthfire.

And the house, ancient and listening, exhaled.

That night, back at Linden’s cottage, Rowan sat in front of the fire while Mottle snoozed grumpily on a cushion. She felt raw and restless, like her skin didn’t fit.

Linden sat beside her. Not too close. Not pushing.

“You alright?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said, then leaned against his shoulder anyway. “But I trust you.”

His arm came around her without hesitation, warm and steady.

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The path to the Heartroot began in loam and shadow, in the breath of the grove's deep memory, under arching hazel branches that had stood since the Hollow was first named. Rowan stood at the edge of the old grove, the hem of her cloak damp with morning dew and nerves.

The entrance had been hidden, woven into a thicket of brambles and elder leaves, sealed by the kind of spell that smelled like starlight and tasted like old promises.

Elder Thistle had opened it with three drops of blood and a whisper that curled through the roots like smoke.

Then she'd stepped back. "Only the bonded may pass. "

Rowan had expected something more dramatic, possibly with glowing glyphs or a choir of whispering ancestor ghosts. Instead, the ground simply breathed once, like an old sleeper stirring, and parted in silence.

Now, with Linden beside her, Rowan descended.

The tunnel was narrow, carved into earth and root.

The walls glistened faintly, threaded with luminous lichen and ancient runes that pulsed when they walked past, as if recognizing them or warning them.

The air was cool and smelled of petrichor and moss and something sweet beneath it, like the memory of honeysuckle.

Their footsteps echoed in the hush, two heartbeats moving toward something vast.

Rowan's magic itched beneath her skin. She flexed her fingers, grounding herself in the rhythm of the descent.

Linden's hand brushed hers.

She looked over, ready to deliver something cutting.

A little deflection, maybe, something about the suspiciously theatrical lighting or how this entire descent into the belly of the world felt like a metaphor the universe was being a bit too on-the-nose about.

She opened her mouth, perfectly prepared to mutter something about overgrown drama caves.

But the words dried up the moment she saw his face.

Because Linden was looking at her the way he always did.

The way he had ten years ago, in the shadow of summer oaks and youthful dreams. The way he had in the greenhouse, hands gentle and reverent as he touched like he was still discovering the shape of her.

Like her soul was an orchard and he had all the time in the world to tend it.

He was looking at her like he would wait forever, if she asked. Like every cracked step in this crumbling spiral path was worth it, because she was beside him.

It was too much.

Too much and not enough.

"You're quiet," she said instead, softer than she meant it, voice tugged down by the weight of the place and his eyes and the blooming ache in her chest.

"I'm listening," he murmured, words gentle as moss.

She blinked at him. "To what?"

He tilted his head slightly, moonlight in his hair, calm as a sun-warmed stone. "To you. To the magic." His smile tilted just a little, crooked and knowing. "They're not so different, you know."

Her heart stuttered, her fingers twitched, and her sarcasm rose on reflex like a shield. She looked away sharply, cheeks heating. "Bloody leafboy," she muttered under her breath.

It wasn't clever. It wasn't even particularly insulting.

But he grinned anyway, like it was the best thing he'd heard all day.

They walked on.

Down and deeper still, past arching roots so thick and knotted they might have been carved from old bone, past runes that shimmered as if they remembered names long since forgotten. The air was sweet with damp loam and lavender, laced with the pulse of something living. Ancient. Waiting.

And then, without warning, the path widened.

They stepped into the first chamber. A hollow within the roots, where the earth gave

way to a soft golden light, thrumming through gnarled wood and delicate green-veined moss.

The ceiling arched high overhead, a dome of interwoven roots glowing faintly, as if kissed by sunlight from within. It pulsed gently.

And it knew they were here.

Rowan's breath caught. Something in her chest pinched, tight and fast, like a memory trying to surface.

She stepped forward and stumbled. Her boot caught on a stone. A slight trip, a brief lurch. Her palm smacked into the chamber wall, bracing herself.

And her magic... surged.

It was wild, molten, trembling. A burst of aching heat that hit her low in her belly and all along her spine. A gasp wrenched from her throat as light crackled at her fingertips, her pulse stumbling in kind.

Too much. Too close.

She could feel the Heartroot pulsing back. Responding. Like the ley recognized her, and wasn't quite sure if it trusted her.

"Rowan?" Linden's voice was soft, worried.

And then his hands were on her. Steady and warm. One palm at her lower back, the other brushing lightly against her wrist. No pressure. Just presence.

A quiet anchoring.

Rowan swallowed hard. Her heart was doing stupid things. So was her magic. Her whole body was betraying her, leaning toward him like ivy to a sunbeam.

“I’m fine,” she said, too quickly. Her voice brittle around the edges.

Linden didn’t argue.

Didn’t ask her to be more than she could.

He just waited. Holding her hand like it wasn’t trembling. Letting her magic shiver without fear. Giving her that impossibly gentle patience that made her want to scream or cry or melt into the curve of his neck and beg him to never stop.

She hated how much she needed it. Hated how good it felt to be... allowed.

Allowed to lean. To falter. To rest.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she muttered, still not meeting his eyes.

“Like what?” he asked, thumb brushing along the inside of her wrist.

“Like I’m some soft thing you want to wrap in silk and keep in your pocket,” she mumbled.

His smile was slow and warm and utterly unrepentant. “You’d be a very grumpy pocket witch.”

“You’re not wrong.”

They moved on. Hand in hand, breath and bone.

A rhythm born not just of footsteps, but of something deeper, like roots slowly threading together beneath the soil.

No need to speak now. Not with magic whispering along the walls, in the silver-veined stone, in the hush between heartbeats.

The deeper they went, the quieter the world became.

Even their thoughts seemed muffled, wrapped in moss and stillness and time older than names.

The stone beneath their feet had changed. No longer rough-hewn or broken, but smooth as water-worn riverbed, veined with the lifeblood of the land, silver like moonlight on skin, green like fresh sap, and red like a wound that would not close. Like the memory of pain. Like promise.

Rowan's breath began to fog in front of her lips, though the air was not cold. Not exactly. It was more like the atmosphere of the deep ocean, thick and pressed close around them, expectant. Every step down vibrated in her teeth.

Her magic thrummed low and hot in her belly. A warning, or maybe a welcome. A kettle just below the boil, ready to sing.

And then they reached the edge.

The final descent was a spiral of old stone worn smooth by time and reverence. It bore no marks of chisel or tool, just the silent authority of something meant to be .

Rowan stepped onto the first stair, and the glow around them brightened. From forest green to gold... and then deeper still, to something older. Root-deep. Heart-true. The color of blood and honey and everything buried.

At the bottom, the chamber waited. It was intimate.

A circle of standing stones, their faces weathered and vine-kissed, ringed a shallow basin of rich earth.

Soft and fragrant with loam, moss, and the hum of growing things.

Twining ivy glowed faintly, curling like lazy serpents over the stones in ancient spirals, their leaves lit from within.

The ceiling above shimmered with memory , an aurora of half-seen things that brushed the edges of Rowan's senses: a mother's lullaby, the ache of her first spell, the exact sound Linden made when he laughed too hard and forgot to be careful.

At the center stood a low stone platform, shaped not for display but devotion. It bore no throne, no altar. Just a place to kneel, or lie, or open yourself to something larger. The carved symbols along its edge pulsed in rhythm with Rowan's heart.

Which was when she realized: so did the vines. So did the stone. So did Linden.

Everything in this place was attuned to her and it terrified her.

She stopped.

Magic snapped taut in her chest like a bowstring, her skin too hot, her stomach turning. Her mouth was dry. Her bones too full of electricity. Of choice.

Linden's hand was still in hers.

He paused when she did. Didn't speak right away. Just turned to her fully. The way he always did, like she was the axis around which the world spun.

“It’s all right to be afraid,” he said, quiet as a vow.

Rowan laughed, and the sound cracked. Brittle. Barely held together. “I’m not afraid. I’m just...”

“Yes, you are,” he said. Gently. Not accusing. Just truth, soft and terrible. Then he reached out and cupped her cheek.

“This will change us,” she whispered, like a confession. “If I let it. If I let you.”

Linden’s thumb traced the edge of her jaw. His eyes, green as spring rain, never left hers. “If all that I am — my essence, my power — is to be bound to someone,” he murmured, “I’m glad it’s you.”

Rowan made a sound and crashed into his chest. Her fingers curled into the soft linen of his tunic like claws, holding on like she might fall through the earth if she let go.

And Linden held her. She let herself stay there for one breath. Then another. Then one more, for courage. And then she stepped back.

She looked at him. Really looked. Saw the man who’d carried her pain without asking. Who never once reached for her power like it was owed. Who had waited at the edge of her walls and never demanded to be let in.

Her voice trembled. But her eyes did not.

“Take me,” she said. “All of me.”

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The air changed as she stepped onto the stone platform.

The warmth wrapped around her like a cloak pulled from sunlit air and there was a deeper resonance that stirred her bones, that whispered down her spine in a tongue older than words. The magic here was listening.

The stone platform pulsed beneath her bare feet, each symbol glowing soft and steady like a heartbeat answering her own.

She could clearly feel it now, the pull of the ley lines, not just beneath but within her.

Veins of light and power running under the earth, through the trees, through him , through her.

Linden stepped up behind her, silent as breath. He didn't reach for her. Didn't presume. Just waited. Always choosing her without urgency or demand.

Rowan turned.

He stood still, open, every line of him unwound. His tunic was loose at the throat, hair falling like wind-tossed branches around his face, and in his eyes was that look — that impossible look like she was every star he'd ever wished on, and they were all saying yes.

“You're sure?” she asked.

She needed to say it, needed to hear it out loud because words could be ritual, too,

and she wanted the shape of this moment etched in more than memory. Even as her magic had already begun to wind toward him like a living thing, half-formed and half-desperate, aching to be let in.

Linden smiled. That same smile he always wore when she doubted herself: soft, unshaken. The kind of smile you could lean against in a storm.

“I’ve been sure of you for a very long time,” he said. “Take everything, Ro. I’m already yours.”

She exhaled like it was the first breath she’d allowed herself in years and then she reached for him.

Her hands moved without hesitation, steady as ritual, reverent as worship. She undid him with her fingers like she was uncovering something sacred. Layers peeled away, linen and leather falling in soft murmurs to the moss-softened stone.

He was golden beneath, in a way that had nothing to do with the light.

Skin kissed brown by sun and forest, freckled like fallen leaves across his shoulders, muscle smooth and lean like something carved by wind and time.

Her fingers traced him with unspoken wonder: the rise of his collarbone, the taper of his ribs, the soft arch of his hips.

He didn’t flinch, didn’t try to make himself more or less. Just stood there and let her look.

Let her have him.

Each place she touched, his magic responded.

It breathed under his skin, root-scented and honey-warm, thick as midsummer, slow as thunder rolling in over trees older than kingdoms. It kissed her back with every brush of her hand, not grabbing or demanding, but welcoming.

Her magic stirred in answer, unspooling with something like relief, something like awe.

Rowan let her own robe fall to the stone.

The air greeted her with cool, earthy fingers, and her skin shivered from the exposure. Vulnerability, stark and holy. Her magic surged, rising in a trembling tide, heavy in her blood, bright behind her eyes. It was too much, almost, and yet she didn't want it to stop.

She stepped forward. Laid her hands on his chest.

Linden gasped.

His breath caught like wind in a harp string, a sound born of pleasure and surprise, maybe even wonder.

Rowan felt it beneath her palms. A soft convulsion of magic, a sudden brightness that bloomed in his chest like light through leaves.

His skin flushed under her hands, warm and pulsing, and the echo of her power rushed into him.

Linden opened his arms, every inch of him an invocation. "Let me feel you."

And Rowan did. Gods, she did.

She pushed him back with gentle hands, steady as the tide.

Guided him toward the center of the stone platform where the ritual symbols now glowed with breathtaking clarity, each one alive with the language of the land.

They were not just decoration, not merely old carvings etched by long-dead druids.

They pulsed with meaning, with ancient agreement, with promise.

Gold for the sun-bound bond of trust. Green for the heartwood root of loyalty. Crimson, for blood, yes, but also for choice. For will. For wildness.

Rowan pressed him down into that magic and Linden went willingly, beautifully, like a man who had never doubted that she would lead him true. His back met the warm stone, and he looked up at her as though she were made of starlight and soil, moonlit mercy and sacred ruin.

She straddled him slowly, reverently, her thighs shaking with the pressure of magic curling inside her, twin to the ache blooming low in her belly.

Her skin was radiant with it, her breath uneven.

She could feel her own heartbeat echoing in every part of her body, her fingertips, her mouth, her womb.

It was like a spell waiting to be spoken aloud.

Linden's hands rested at her hips, the barest touch. Anchoring her. Offering himself up for the choosing.

And gods, she chose.

Rowan braced herself on his chest, palms splayed across the strong, golden line of him, and then — slowly, deliberately, utterly without apology — she sank down onto him.

The world shuddered. The air fractured. Time folded. Magic detonated .

It exploded out of her in a wave of incandescent heat, as if every ley line in the valley had been holding its breath for this moment. The chamber bloomed with it. Power unraveling like a scream, like a symphony, like light breaking through cloud.

She gasped. Linden groaned, his voice torn from somewhere raw and real, and still she moved. Rising and falling over him in an ancient rhythm she did not remember learning but somehow knew. Deep in her bones. In her womb. In the tidal pull between their bodies.

And around them, the ley lines came alive They were visible now . Tangible. Ribbons of color unfurled from the stone, from the air, from the sacred dark between roots and stars.

One was molten gold, pure and searing. The color of devotion given freely and without condition. It pulsed like sunlight caught in deep water, lighting their bodies in liquid fire.

Another came green, rich, living, thrumming like forest breath. It smelled of pine needles and spring moss, of earth giving up her secrets. Grounding her. Inviting her to root.

The third thread, crimson threaded with violet, was wilder, darker. It shimmered like bruised moonlight, seductive and untamed. It coiled around her thighs, her wrists, her throat like a promise whispered in wicked delight.

They circled Rowan and Linden in great luminous arcs, wreathing them in a braided crown of elemental magic. The ribbons danced in time with her body, spiraling faster each time her hips rolled forward, each time Linden whispered her name like a prayer.

Rowan couldn't breathe. She didn't want to breathe.

She only wanted this.

The pulse of magic pouring through her. The way her body knew his. The sacred fit of them, not just skin to skin but soul to soul .

Linden reached up, palms framing her hips but not controlling, just anchoring. She looked down at him and saw the awe there, the worship, the utter devotion.

She rolled her hips and his breath caught. Magic spiked between them, a flare of light that sent their shadows dancing along the chamber walls like spirits in ecstasy.

Rowan cried out, not in pain, not even in pleasure exactly, but in power. The sensation of everything she'd held inside finally finding the space to sing.

And Linden, beneath her, whispered, "More."

Not as a command. As a prayer.

She gave it to him.

Rowan moved over him like she was casting a spell with her body, and perhaps she was.

Every shift of her hips was a call. Every gasp, an invocation.

Her thighs burned. Her magic howled. And Linden...

Linden met her with a stillness that was anything but passive.

He offered up his body as altar, his breath as prayer.

He met her without demanding. Matched her not in force, but in faith.

The ley lines pulsed faster now, as if stirred by her pleasure. They wound around one another, tighter with every movement, until she couldn't tell where she ended and he began.

Their bond was no longer something imagined or metaphorical. It was visible.

It ran from the crown of her head to the base of her spine, tethering her to him with cords of glowing power. Each pulse drew her deeper. Each breath cracked her wider open. Her body hummed with it, so full of sensation she thought she might unravel.

And still Linden's gaze never left her.

"You're glowing," he whispered, voice reverent and wrecked. "Rowan... gods, look at you."

She couldn't reply. Her tongue was thick with need, her lungs too full of him, of this. But she looked down at herself and saw what he meant.

Her skin shimmered, lit from within as if her veins were filled not with blood, but starfire.

Her breasts were flushed, her thighs slick and shaking, her magic pouring from every pore.

She felt huge in her body, like she could take up all the space in the world and still not be enough to hold what she felt.

Linden's hands slid up her sides, gentle even now, even like this, when the world was coming undone.

“Take it, Ro,” he breathed. “I’m yours. Everything. ”

And gods help her, she did .

She reached for the bond. Felt its core, a thread like spun lightning, and pulled with full trust, full surrender.

Linden cried out . His back arched beneath her. Their magics surged together and broke .

The ley lines howled.

Light spilled across the chamber in great sweeping ribbons: gold, green, crimson, violet, all converging above the stone platform in a corona of elemental fire. The roots overhead quivered, the stones beneath them vibrated, and Rowan's body, her whole self , shook with the force of it.

It wasn't just pleasure now.

It was transcendence.

She felt Linden inside her, not just in the visceral way, but in the eternal one. Felt the moment he opened completely, utterly, to her. No walls. No protections. He gave her the raw heart of him, bare and burning.

She took it like breath. Like truth.

Her body began to crest, pleasure unfurling in hot, aching waves. Her magic coiled tighter, threw her head back, her body taut, every nerve alight.

The climax rushed toward them like a wave, like a storm, like a holy thing finally given form.

The light hovered, suspended in the air around them like the breath of the land itself had been caught mid-sigh.

Rowan basked in it, drenched in sweat, magic, and something more elusive.

Peace , maybe. Home. Her limbs trembled where they sprawled over Linden's chest, boneless with release, her breath coming in soft, stunned gasps.

And beneath her, he was still. Warm. Alive. Radiating magic like the sun after stormlight. His fingers moved slowly through her hair, reverent and dazed.

It was over. No. Not over. Changed.

The bond between them had settled now, a slow, molten pulse that lived beneath her skin. It moved with her breath. Matched the beat of her heart. And when she focused, she could feel his heart too. Its rhythm syncing with hers like the soft call and response of summer crickets in the hedgerow.

Rowan lifted her head and looked at him.

His hair was a mess. His lips parted. His eyes were so full. Her throat ached with something too big to name.

“I feel like I’ve been taken apart.”

“You have,” he whispered, stroking her jaw with the backs of his fingers. “So have I. And look...” He brushed his thumb along her collarbone, where a vine-shaped mark shimmered just beneath her skin, gold and green and crimson. “We’ve been put back together again.”

Rowan’s eyes stung. “It’s done.”

“It’s begun,” Linden corrected gently. “This was the joining. But what we build from it, that’s the rest of our lives.”

The words sank into her slowly, like roots into earth. And still, she didn’t move. Didn’t want to.

But the grove around them was no longer still.

The ley lines had quieted, but the land was waking.

All around the chamber, new shoots pushed through stone and moss.

Flowers that had not bloomed in generations opened in colors she had no name for: deep twilight blue, blushing dusk, veined silver.

The vines above them shimmered and grew, reaching for the center where Rowan lay curled against the body of the man she had claimed.

The man who had claimed her in return.

And then... A pulse. Soft. Gentle. Like the heartbeat of the land.

Rowan gasped as she felt it inside her, not just around, but through. The magic of the Heartroot accepted them. Claimed their bond as sacred. Sealed it. Somewhere in the distance, she thought she heard bells.

Linden's arms came around her, pulling her close as he rolled them gently onto their sides. His breath was a slow exhale against her temple. His voice, when it came, was a rasp against her skin.

"Does it hurt?"

"No," she whispered. "No, it's... gods, Linden, it's good. It's so good I don't know what to do with it."

He chuckled softly, burying his face in her hair. "You don't have to do anything. Just be here. Just be. "

Rowan closed her eyes. Let herself feel it: the hum of magic through her bones, the imprint of his body against hers, the slow, certain unfurling of something new. Something rooted.

They were bound now. By more than magic. By choice. By love. By trust.

And though the world would come for them again, because it always did, right now, in this moment, she was safe. And she was no longer alone.

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The magic was... quiet. For the first time in ten years, the Hollow hummed .

Not crackled, not shrieked through shattered sigils or burbled like a potion left too long over fire. It purred . Low and content. Like the ley lines had curled up under the town's roots and fallen into a long-overdue nap.

Rowan stood at the edge of the Heartroot grove, bare feet in the loamy moss, watching the Hollow wake.

Sunlight poured golden and thick over the cottages, catching on ivy-draped roofs and the glittering dewdrops that clung to every petal and leaf.

The entire village had gone technicolor.

Flowers burst open in cascading glory, bees zipped through the air in tight, drunken spirals, and somewhere in the near distance, someone had started playing a fiddle with frankly suspicious enthusiasm.

It was all too much.

She squinted up at the sky. "Are you high?" she asked the universe. "Is that what this is? Did the Hollow eat a special brownie?"

Behind her, Linden's laugh rumbled like warm wind through trees. "No, love. It's just... happy."

Rowan turned.

Gods, he looked happy too.

Tunic rumbled from where she'd definitely ripped it half-off last night, the bondmark, a tangled vine in gold, green, and deep blood-crimson, visible just above his collarbone.

Sunlight kissed his cheekbones. He had moss on his elbow and a flower she hadn't noticed tucked behind one ear. Of course he did.

He stepped up beside her, arm brushing hers. "May I?" he asked softly, eyes flicking toward her hand.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't pull away. "You've already seen me naked and full of ley-fire. What's a little hand-holding?"

Still, her fingers curled into his like muscle memory. The bondmark on her own skin warmed faintly. Pulsing, alive, and wholly hers. Theirs.

"I can feel it," she murmured. "The ley. All of it. No longer just ripping through me like a drunk banshee but... singing."

Linden nodded. "It's re-rooted. In you. With you."

"Ugh," she groaned, tipping her head back. "You're going to keep saying sappy things like that, aren't you?"

"Forever," he said cheerfully.

By the time they made it back up to the village proper, the celebrations were in full

swing.

Someone had conjured streamers that sparkled like stardust and smelled faintly of baked apples.

Tables appeared out of thin air, groaning under the weight of pies and stews and dubious bottles labeled Moonberry Reserve – Consume with Shame .

Children ran shrieking through the square, pursued by butterflies that appeared to be enchanted and mildly sarcastic.

“Tell me this is a hallucination,” Rowan muttered. “Tell me we didn’t accidentally trigger a seasonal festival orgy.”

“You say that like it would be a bad thing,” Linden said, eyes twinkling.

And then...

“WELL, IF IT ISN’T THE POWER COUPLE OF THE CENTURY!”

Rowan didn’t even have time to brace before she was enveloped in a blur of flower-scented chaos. Marigold on one side. Briar on the other. Identical grins, identical glitter-stained aprons.

“You did it,” Briar cooed, pinching Rowan’s cheek.

“I did something ,” Rowan muttered.

“You unleashed sacred erotic energy into the root of the Hollow and saved the entire town , darling,” Marigold said brightly. “Don’t be shy.”

They shoved a massive wicker basket into her arms. It was filled with what appeared to be: six aggressively phallic carrots, a pie that radiated post-coital contentment, three tiny heart-shaped jars labeled Stamina Jam , and what might have been a carved figurine of her and Linden mid-bonding.

“Oh gods,” Rowan croaked.

Linden peered into the basket. “Is that...?”

“An anatomical cake of your backside,” Marigold confirmed with delight. “Fae buns included,” Briar added.

Rowan seriously considered hexing her own eyeballs.

“I told you they’d be perfect together,” Briar stage-whispered to her sister. “You could feel the UST from the bakery.”

“Unresolved Sexual Tension and Unstable Spell Turbulence,” Marigold agreed, nodding sagely. “Both resolved now!”

Rowan turned slowly to Linden. “You made me come in a sacred ley chamber. In front of the town’s ancestral ghosts. I hope you’re proud.”

“I am,” he said serenely, wrapping an arm around her waist. “Very.”

Briar and Marigold shrieked in unison.

They escaped back to the apothecary with the basket, the figurine (Linden insisted on keeping it), and a trail of flower petals that may have been sentient.

The shop was... different. The air inside felt sweeter, the shelves sturdier, and the

herbs thrumming . Her mugwort hummed. Her thyme practically pulsed . Even the despair had been replaced with something that smelled suspiciously like hope.

“I think it’s alive now,” she said faintly, touching one of the shelves.

She turned to him.

And then she did something she’d never done before. Not without panic. Not without biting it back with a bark of sarcasm.

She leaned in. Rested her forehead to his. Let herself exhale.

“I feel...” she started. Her voice caught.

“Soft?” he offered gently.

“Yeah.”

“Scary?”

“No,” she whispered. “Not anymore.”

He smiled. Kissed her forehead. Kissed her temple. Kissed the corner of her mouth and said, “You’re allowed to be soft, Rowan. Especially with me.”

She kissed him back.

Mottle leapt up onto the apothecary counter, adjusted his tiny spectacles, and stared at them both with deep judgment.

“You reek of bonded magic and questionable decisions,” he grunted.

Rowan sighed. “Some things never change.”

But Linden’s fingers were laced with hers, the bondmark pulsed gently at her collarbone, and her magic sang inside her like sunlight through trees.

And Rowan Blackthorn didn’t flinch from the joy.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and said, “Alright, Thornling. Let’s see what peace tastes like.”

He smiled, warm and rooted and golden.

And the Hollow bloomed.

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The apothecary smelled like summer now.

Not the choking, too-sweet kind that clings to you like humidity and bee stings, but the kind that crackles with green things growing and sunlight through leaves and the thrum of magic that no longer clawed at Rowan's skin when it stirred.

She stood behind the counter of Thorn & Blackthorn , because of course Linden had insisted on the double-barreled name, and of course she'd muttered something deeply romantic like, fine, but mine comes last so it sounds like I'm hexing you , and watched her herbs sway slightly on their hooks.

They responded to her now. Not with flares of pain or spite or little explosive tantrums like they used to, but gently. Goldenroot curls to the left when she walks past. Juniper sings under her fingers. The valerian doesn't bite anymore.

Rowan Blackthorn, once the Hollow's most volatile magical fire hazard, had a thriving apothecary again. And she didn't hate it.

"Oi," came a familiar croak from under the counter. "If you're done gazing lovingly at dried weeds, I'd like my sunlamp turned on. I'm old. I need heat. Also, you're glowing again. It's disgusting."

Mottle, the world's most ungrateful familiar, blinked up at her from his stone saucer like she'd just tracked mud over the sacred floor of existence.

Rowan crouched stiffly. Her back had started doing this annoying creak lately, she blamed Linden's alarmingly vigorous affection and not the thing growing inside her,

thank you very much. She flicked the toad's heat crystal on with a twitch of her fingers. "There. Go bask and judge someone else."

"Can't. You're the closest warm-blooded disaster," Mottle said, settling smugly into the warmth. His warted belly made an unfortunate plap against the stone. "Also, your tits are bigger."

"Do you want to be turned into a paperweight?" Rowan deadpanned.

"Just saying. Witch procreation is an abomination and I, for one, will not be babysitting."

Rowan rolled her eyes, but a grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. Damn it all. She smiled too easily now. It wasn't natural.

The bell over the door chimed. She felt him enter before the door even swung shut.

"Your parsley's wilting again, Thornling," she called without looking. "If it dies a third time this week, I'm going to start charging it rent."

Linden laughed, low and warm, the kind of sound that settled in her bones and made everything in the room feel... more alive. "It's just shy," he said, placing a basket on the counter. "I told you it likes music."

"You already sang to it," she said, finally turning to him. "You cradled a potted plant like a colicky infant and sang lullabies in Old Faerean."

He shrugged, utterly unbothered, barefoot as ever and dressed in a loose moss-green tunic that still had bits of clover clinging to it. He smelled like his garden, rain on loam, crushed rosemary, sun-warmed thyme. "It liked it."

Rowan tried to scowl. She really did. But then his soft eyes found hers and her mouth

betrayed her. Again. She smiled.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she muttered.

“Like what?” he asked, stepping closer.

“Like I hung the moons and your favorite basil patch.”

He cupped her face with one hand, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. “You did,” he said simply.

Gods. He meant it.

Rowan’s knees threatened mutiny. Again.

She let him kiss her, slow and sweet, his thumb grazing her cheek like it was made of something holy. Their magic sparked softly between them, not flaring, just... humming. Warm. Familiar. Home.

When he pulled back, her hand caught his, pressing his palm flat to her stomach.

Linden blinked. Then blinked again. “Rowan?”

She raised her brows, nonchalant. “Well. You remember that little magical implosion we had during the ritual at the Heartroot? All the vines and glowy bits and spiritual fusion and, oh yes, me screaming your name loud enough to make the mushrooms blush?”

His mouth opened. Nothing came out.

“We’re pregnant,” she said flatly.

Still nothing.

“Oh gods, don’t faint,” she added quickly. “Or do, but not on my rug. It’s new.”

Linden’s eyes, stars bless him, shone . He didn’t scream or panic or faint, though she did see his knees wobble. He dropped to the floor, wrapped his arms around her hips, and pressed a reverent kiss to the small swell of her belly like he was worshipping at a shrine.

Rowan felt something in her chest crack open. Not in the bad way. In the soft way. The terrifying way. The way that meant she might actually be happy.

“A baby,” Linden whispered. “Rowan, love, we’re...”

“...incredibly irresponsible,” she finished, voice dry. “I mean, a magical pregnancy after a ley line ritual? With our trauma? That child’s going to have sarcasm in its blood.”

Linden just laughed, still kneeling, still holding her like she was something sacred and not a cranky witch with commitment issues. “They’ll be perfect.”

“You’re biased,” she said, but her voice shook a little.

“You’re glowing again,” Mottle muttered from his saucer. “Gross.”

Rowan flipped him off without looking away from Linden.

Later, they lay in Linden’s bed. The vines on the headboard pulsed faintly, mimicking the rhythm of their bondmarks. Rowan rested her head on Linden’s chest, fingers splayed over the place where his heart thumped like the roots of the Hollow itself.

“You ever think,” she murmured, “how close we came to losing this?”

“All the time,” he said, kissing the crown of her head.

She shifted, placing a hand over her belly. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” he whispered. “But I’ll be here. Always. With you. For them.”

She looked up, eyes gleaming. “You’re too good for me, Thornling.”

He smiled, brushing her hair from her face. “No. We grew for each other.”

Rowan snorted. “That’s disgustingly on-brand. You should embroider it on a tea towel.”

“I will,” he said, utterly serious.

And somehow, she believed him.

Outside the window, the apothecary garden bloomed. Lush and wild, full of life and strange beauty. The ley lines purred beneath them, steady and healed.

And inside, a burnt-out witch and a cinnamon roll fae lay wrapped in each other’s arms, bondmarks glowing soft on their skin, with magic humming between them like a lullaby. Rowan let herself believe not just in magic, but in joy. In roots that held. In love that stayed.

Even if it sometimes sang lullabies to parsley.