

“Better! Much better, just a little bit more firmly now.” Rowena gushed, ecstatic for Mairi as she managed to successfully perform her first Stunning Spell with some small issues though, “Can’t have your own wand go flying when you’re trying to disarm your opponent, can you?” They were in a small clearing in the Dark Forest, the sun just peaking through the trees. The tent where the former captives were staying sat on the outside edge.

“Néalic.” It was enlightening to learn that young future founder didn’t use the pseudo-Latin that made up the entirety of spellwork in his own time. *Instead, it’s something closer to bastardized Gaelic or Norse. And even then, it’s only meant as way to help visualize and direct the will of the magician until they can do it with the force of their will alone.*

Of the twenty-three they’d brought from Inverness, including Mairi, thirteen remained. Seven had been too far gone, zealots with the priest’s poison dripping from their tongues. They’d taken their memories, locking them behind strong barriers before sending them away. Three more decided to find their families believing, right or wrong, that they’d been stolen by the church rather than given to it.

Harry and Rowena didn’t intend to keep anyone against their will and so had given those three leave to go. *Hopefully they don’t come to regret it.* Most of the thirteen that remained were from across the British Isle. Two were from Wales, Caerwyn and Aelwyn, a boy and girl both with dirty brown hair though not related. One from Ireland, Tadc, another from the Orkneys, Rorik. Two from the lowlands of Scotland, Donal and Culen, both boys of eleven years. The oldest was Haeddi, a young woman of sixteen from Northumbria. Three more were from Mercia, Halig, Goode, and Esla. Of course, then there were Mairi and Euan. The most surprising though was one Frankish girl of thirteen, Adela. Taken when the Danes went Viking, the church bought her from the raiders two years before when they traded near St. Andrews.

All and all, they made for quite the ragtag bunch. *But better a ragtag bunch here, safe and free than languishing away in Inverness.* Sitting on a large boulder, Harry watched as Rowena taught four of the kids. Esla, the youngest girl that they’d taken from the dungeons of the monastery, sat next to him, playing with the fingers on his right hand. She’d taken a liking to him in the two weeks since they’d been to Inverness. *Easier to trust the person who removed your shackles.*

“That’s good, very good.” Rowena complimented as Haeddi managed to rip the stick she was holding from her hand, “And once we get you a proper wand of your own, it’ll only get easier.” The Saxon girl beamed at her new teacher.

There was rustling from the trees, and Halig, Rorik, and Euan came in with a deer tied to a stick between them. Harry stood and helped the boys, easily able to heft it himself, “Looks like your hunt went well.” Moving over, he set it down on a nearby table to skin it.

“Aye, took us a damn sight longer than we thought it would though.” Euan smiled as he cracked his back. He stopped and blushed when he noticed Adela looking at him. Harry smirked but didn’t say anything as the young man scurried away. *Doesn’t seem to matter what time you’re in, young men still get tongue-tied when they’re around a girl they fancy.*

“I think that’ll be enough for now, kids.” Rowena told her four eager pupils, “Looks like there’s some other work needs doing.” They all nodded excitedly and went to help prepare the lunch.

Esla stuck to his side like a shadow as Rowena came over to them. Harry couldn't help but smile at the joy that seemed to be emanating from her, "You're a natural you know."

Blushing slightly, Rowena replied, "I'm doing my best. But it would help to develop a bit of structure. You know, make sure that there's a curriculum depending on their ages. There are certain things that Mairi simply isn't ready for that Heiddi is. I'll have to write it down, make sure that they're all well taken care of. You might have to teach certain things that I can't, and vice-versa. You seem to have a knack for combat magic, after all and..."

Harry chuckled, "There's plenty of time for that, Row. We'll figure it all out, I'm sure. And you know that I'm always happy to help."

Esla giggled as Rowena stopped, looking a little embarrassed. He did so enjoy it when she got going and couldn't seem to stop, "I know, my minds just been racing. I want to do right by them, but there's just so much to think about."

"The important thing is that they're safe," Harry reminded her as he started sliding a blade through the belly of the deer, "They're no longer captives destined only to hate and destroy the very thing that they are. And the more we can teach them, the less likely it is to happen again in the future."

The beautiful brunette had a fire in her eye that very nearly took his breath away, "Never. I won't allow it." She'd quickly developed a fondness for the younger magicals, some more than others though. Mairi in particular was quite a quick wit, and had become a favorite of hers because of it, "And I've been thinking... that was just one monastery in one town in the north of Alba. How many are there like it? And what are they like in places like London? Or Winchester? Inverness is tiny in comparison."

The same thing had been on his mind, every night before sleep finally took him. For everyone they saved there were dozens more who suffered. *Either turned into zealots or killed when their usefulness is at an end.* "More than I want to think," he said softly, squeezing her hand comfortingly before returning to his work, "Even one is more than there should be."

"Exactly!" She agreed vehemently, "There must be something we can do."

There will be. The voice whispered softly in the back of his mind. It was almost eager, waiting for something but what it was, he couldn't say. At least to some extent, he knew what the founders did. *Or might've done now.*

Hogwarts was the obvious testament to it, but he also knew that in the end it was meaningless to the well-being of magicals. *If anything, it only made us more vulnerable, congregated with no influence or connections to the rest of the world. We were seen as the demons the church portrayed us as because of it. Though, they couldn't have known that.*

"You're a brilliant witch, Rowena." He told her, not noticing how much the compliment pleased her as he went about skinning the deer, "We'll think of something."

"We will," Rowena squeezed his shoulder, fingers lingering there. Harry turned and gave her a smile, but that brief distraction resulted in him making a bad cut with the knife.

Esla squeaked then as a bit of blood spurted from the dead deer, staining her cheek. Trying to contain her amusement, Rowena offered the girl her hand, "Let's leave Harry to it. Don't want you covered in blood because he's gotten clumsy."

"Hey, you're the one who was distracting me." He never minded her being a distraction, but he wasn't going to tell her that when she was teasing him.

"Funny," Rowena snickered over her shoulder, "I must have overestimated you. I was certain you'd be more than capable of doing two things at once." Knife still gliding beneath the skin of the deer, he pulled his wand and sent a weak stinging hex toward her bum.

With a little yelp, she jumped and turned back to him with rosy cheeks and a fierce scowl. He just threw her a cheeky grin, "Look at that, I guess I can do more than one thing at a time."

"You're not funny." She struggled to keep a straight face though, especially when Esla giggled next to her.

"I think you've just been outvoted two to one, Row." He winked at the young girl which only made her giggle more.

With a roll of her eyes, she kept heading toward the kid's tent with a soft smile on her lips while he just went about cleaning the deer. The process was quick enough. A bit of magic and it was drained of blood and ready to eat. He handed the meat off to Adela and Rorik. The young lady was a hell of a cook, while Rorik had some impressive knife skills.

As those two went about cooking the meal, Euan came over to him where cleaned up on the other side of the clearing. He looked... uncomfortable with whatever he needed to ask, "Harry... I was wondering if I could get a bit of advice." He glanced furtively in Adela's direction, and he had a feeling he knew where this conversation was going.

"Right... what do you need?"

"Adela... I quite like her."

"Really? I didn't notice." He told the young man, unable to hide his amusement.

"Not helping." Euan replied with a frown, "I just don't know how to tell her."

Harry resisted the urge to outright groan. *Of all the things I would've expected to be doing in the past, giving relationship advice wasn't one of them. I was bad enough at getting a girl when I was at Hogwarts... and famous. I don't have any idea how people do this sort of thing in the tenth century.*

Running a hand through his hair, he could only shrug his shoulders, "Tell her you like her. You don't have to make it complicated."

"Is that what you did... with Rowena?" Euan asked anxiously.

Harry quirked an eyebrow, "I... have no idea what you're talking about." While he could easily acknowledge that the young woman was gorgeous, they certainly weren't together.

"She's your woman." The younger wizard said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"She isn't."

“Nonsense!” He sounded almost offended, “She’s clearly your woman, there’s no reason to lie to me about it.” That’s when he noticed the look on Harry’s face, “You’re serious?”

“Yes. Rowena isn’t my woman.” Something about saying that felt wrong, like there was a lingering, unsaid ‘yet’ just at the end. But that wasn’t something he was going to dwell on it with Euan there.

“But... but, you two are so comfortable together! Everyone knows you’re together! You both sleep in the same place!”

“In different rooms,” Harry pointed out, “in one that was built specifically for me.”

Euan just waved that off, “You do nearly everything together! And then there’s the way that you look at each other.” For some reason, that brought him up short, “Which only seems to happen when one of you thinks the other isn’t looking... now it makes sense.”

“I don’t look at Rowena when she’s not looking.” He denied quietly, aware that they might be overheard. Though, a part of him knew that wasn’t true. He’d caught himself doing it more than once, but he didn’t think he’d ever been so obvious in his appreciation that their new arrivals would notice.

Euan scoffed, “You’re talking absolute shite!” He said it loud enough to get the attention of a couple of the others. Rowena even popped her head out from the tent looking concerned.

Harry swatted him in the back of the head, “Say that louder next time, won’t you?”

Glancing around the rest of the little encampment, he whispered, “Sorry...” They got more than one curious look before everyone went back to what they were doing.

Heaving a sigh, Harry struggled with what else to tell him, “Tell Adela how you feel. Get her a few nice flowers when you do it. There’s plenty in the forest. Women tend to like that sort of thing.” He clapped Euan on the shoulder, “If she likes you back, it really is that simple. If not, it’s best to know so you can move on.”

He was silent for a long moment, brow furrowed in thought, “It’s just that easy?”

“It can be.”

“Right... so, what about you?”

I’m out of my time by a millennium and smitten with one of the most famous witches in history. So, I don’t think things are quite that simple for me. There was no way he was going to tell Euan that though. With a wry chuckle, he told him, “Nothing with me is ever simple, lad. I’ve just gotten used to it.”

“Sounds like an excuse to me.”

Harry stared at him unnervingly. The intensity of his emerald gaze made him squirm before he finally said, “I’ll keep it in mind. But maybe I just need you to show me how simple it really is.” He gave Euan a small smile and one last squeeze of his shoulder, “Sometimes it’s easier to give advice to others than to follow it yourself.”

With a nervous nod, he accepted that and headed over to Halig. Harry was lucky enough not to be left alone with his own thoughts for too long as they were called for a lunch a few short minutes later.

The fifteen of them sat in groups, of threes and fours. As had become their habit, Harry found himself sitting with Rowena. Esla and Mairi were with them as well. Between bites of venison, Rowena asked him, "So... what happened with Euan?"

"He wanted some advice... on Adela." Harry told her softly, which made Mairi snicker.

"Oh... he's in love with her... or at least he thinks he is. It wasn't just his magic that got him thrown down into the dungeon but his distraction with her."

Rowena ruffled the younger girl's hair, "Well he's allowed. He's not the first person to be in love, and he's certainly not the first person to think it. There's every chance it'll happen to you someday, too."

Mairi scrunched her nose up in distaste, "It won't."

"Your brother probably said the same thing when he was younger. And look at him now." They all turned to see that her brother was casting furtive glances in Adela's direction, who seemed none the wiser as she spoke with Heiddi.

"So... what did you tell him?" Rowena asked, curious.

"Tell her."

"And the yelling?"

"He didn't think it was that simple. And he let me know... loudly." It was only half a lie, and he wasn't going to tell her the real reason with Esla and Mairi right there. *Or ever for that matter.*

"Right..." Something about the way that one word was said made him think she didn't really believe him. Esla's giggle only confirmed it to him, but she let it go anyway.

The meal was nearly done, when Harry felt something just on the edge of the wards to the south. *More than one something, in fact.* He'd set them up himself. After years and many opportunities to practice in his own time, he considered himself quite skilled at it. Noticing his distraction, Rowena asked, "What is it?"

"There's something in the forest, on the edge of the wards." He told her. While he didn't know for sure, his mind went straight to danger. *They were bound to come again at some point. It wasn't just Bishop Oran that wanted her but the King and Bishop Cellach as well.*

That sent her into action, "Everyone, into the tent." The wards alone should be enough to keep them covered, but the tent could be completely hidden on top of it. One by one, they filed into the magically expanded space before they tied the tent behind them. With that done he then disillusioned the tent as well.

"Show me." Rowena commanded. Together, they moved through the trees to the edge of the wards. What they found there was not what either of them expected. Trudging through the forest, there were men, women and children all. Very few of them looked like warriors, and those few didn't look ready for a fight. Some of them were limping, others were covered in soot and all of them looked exhausted.

There was one man, older than the others, with salt and pepper hair and a long beard. He was missing a few teeth, and the ones that remained weren't in the best shape. There were fine furs around his

shoulders and a red tunic with gold embroidery. The red did a good job of hiding the blood that stained the tunic from a gash in his side. While it was still cool in the north of Scotland, Harry thought it looked much too warm.

"I know him, Gamelin." Rowena said, sharing a look with Harry, "He is toiseach in the southern part of the Dal Riata. My father would meet with him..." She saw another man younger but in the same sort of fine clothing, "So does he, but further east. Inan, is his name if I remember right. They're both good men."

He had every confidence that she did, "What're they doing here? And in that state?"

"I don't know... but I think we should find out." Without any further warning, she stepped out of the ward line. Seemingly from nowhere, she appeared before them. A child yelled and woman shrieked. Swords were drawn by the beleaguered warriors, but they didn't look like they had the strength to wield them and they relaxed when they saw it was a lone woman.

Inan and Gamelin stepped forward and quieted their kinsfolk as Rowena spoke, "What are you doing here?" The older man's breathing was labored, and as he brought his fingers away from his wound they came away stained with blood.

So, it was Inan that answered the question, "You don't know? Bishop Cellach has been preaching at St. Andrews for the last two weeks, calling every able-bodied man to arms. Arms against the heathen highlanders that refuse to embrace their god."

"They... they say..." With a wave of his wand, the open wound knit itself up. Gamelin didn't look surprised by the casual use of magic. If anything he looked relieved. *The Statute of Secrecy won't be enacted for another seven hundred years. These people might not know of the intricacies of magic but they must know it's there. All their legends must have come from somewhere, after all.*

"Thank you." His voice was still raspy as he continued, "They say the pagan witch that lives deep in the highlands, hidden with the trees and shrouded by the devil himself, committed a great slaughter at Inverness. And that it should be met with a great slaughter of its own. "

Fuck. Someone survived. Someone that made it back to St. Andrews. Neither he nor Rowena reacted outwardly, knowing that the situation could be volatile if they admitted the truth of the matter. It didn't change the fact that Rowena was incensed, "Why attack you though? They know where I am, they were welcome to come and find me. It wouldn't have been the first time that they tried."

"Because they blame it on all heathens that still stain this land." Inan spit out the words, "Your crime is our crime, and they mean to make us pay for it. People that have traded with us, who have shared in our harvest and our festivals took up sword against us. They burned our homes and killed our people."

White hot anger bubbled in Harry's chest. *The bastards.* Furious as he was, it was tinged by no small amount of grief and guilt because he knew that had they not razed the monastery to the ground, there would have been no slaughter. There were mothers without children because of them. **Mothers lose their children every day. It is the way of things. Many more will be lost before it's over.**

Harry didn't expect such a direct response from the seemingly ever present voice. *Am I any better than Tom? My own actions have led to the death of magicals... same as him.*

You needn't lose as he did. And you didn't do it out of vanity or pride, but out of a need to protect your own. You aren't the same. The voice spoke clear and without doubt. It did more than a little to assuage his own doubts.

He could feel Rowena's magic cloying against his own, her anger making it push against the surface. It was enough that even the mundanes could feel it. Both toisech standing before them swallowed nervously as the two magicals' eyes glowed bright and eerie. The young witch calmed herself enough to ask, "Why come to me?"

"We didn't." Gamelin rasped, "We mean to make for Varrich on the northern coast. The fortifications still hold, and we don't believe they would pursue us so far north. With time, we might return south. If not, we will join with the people on the coast."

"You can't just concede your homes! They've done everything in their power to take our gods and our stories and now they want the land your fathers and their fathers called their own!"

"What would you have us do?" Gamelin sounded every bit a broken man.

"I would have you fight!" Her voice echoed through the forest.

"With what men?!" Inan gestured behind them, "Do these men look like they are fit to fight? How many more will follow behind? They will not stop! And even if we did find the men to fight the mob, Causantain need only make the call and we'd be against every Christian in all of Alba. All Cellach need do is whisper it in his ear and we'd find ourselves facing down an army. And should we win by some twist of fate, what comes next? Aethelflaed? Edward? They wouldn't let the loss of a Christian kingdom stand!"

Rowena looked like she wanted to scream in frustration, unable to argue against the weight of his loss or reasoning. But she knew that she was watching the slow, steady victory of the church as they chipped away those of the old religion piece by piece. *And now in one great swoop.*

It was only then that Harry spoke up, "The Norse-Gael, in Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, the Isle of Man, would they not fight? They are heathen, too."

That brought both Gamelin and Inan up short. But then the elder shook his head, "They wouldn't fight. The Danes and the Northman do nothing unless they have something to gain."

Voice dark, tinged with some small hint of her magic, Rowena told them, "No, my uncle serves the Jarl of the Hebrides. Should I go, he wouldn't abandon me."

"The Hebrides alone wouldn't be enough." Inan waved her off.

"With them will come others, maybe even Fairhair." Rowena argued.

Inan made to argue but Gamelin put a hand on the younger toiseach's arm, and contemplated her for a long moment, "Do you truly believe you can do it?"

"Yes." That single word came from somewhere deep in her soul, and it seemed enough to convince him.

He nodded and stepped closer to them, before asking, "Did you do what they claim?"

“We did.” Harry stood straight, waiting for the anger to come. When it didn’t, he explained, “They captured and indoctrinated children gifted by Freyja or the Dagda or Lugh, whichever you prefer. We couldn’t allow it.”

There were tears in his eyes as he thought on the dead. The people that might still be alive if not for their actions. When he spoke his voice was soft and wet, but there was conviction there, “Perhaps...” Gamelin looked to Inan, “Perhaps there is a touch of fate about this. Perhaps, we should fight for our people and the beliefs of our forefathers”

Inan looked between him and Rowena, before he finally spoke up, voice hard as iron, “I would rather die on my feet than hide away until my last day knowing that my beliefs die with me. We’ll go to Varrich and gather any other Highlanders that are still alive. If you succeed, we’ll wait for you there.” With that the two toiseach led their people through the wood. Once they’d all passed them by, Harry and Rowena remained.

For what felt like ages, the pair stood there with nothing but the singing of birds and the rustling of leaves between them. Finally, Rowena spoke up, “Harry, did we just start a war?”

“It does look that way, yes.”

“Right.” She looked at him with those big blue eyes, and a second later she threw herself into his arms and hugged him with all her might. All he could think to do was squeeze her back.