

The noon day sun hung high in the sky as he washed himself in the Black Lake. Splashing himself in the face, he breathed the clean air deep as the droplets of water cascaded down his body. He was only some fifteen feet from the edge of the lake, just deep enough to cover his lower body. For a month he'd been in this beautiful, serene place. There was a simplicity to his life in these days. No pressure, no school, no Tom and no Inquisition. *And still trying to figure out why this is where I was meant to go.*

There were no answers from the voice, only silence. It seemed content with where he was for the moment, and he had a hard time disagreeing.

Something fluttered around his ankles as a ripple of water disturbed the calm surface and then there was a firm yank that sent him tumbling in with a yelp. There were more gripping little hands a second later. *Feckin' grindylows. They usually stick to the weed beds at the bottom of the lake.* Harry didn't even bother summoning his wand. With a thought the water demons let go of him as though they'd been stung by electricity. Finding his feet again, he watched as some ten of them went scurrying back into the deeper reaches of the lake.

An amused giggle at the shore grabbed his attention. Rowena stood there, trying and failing to get her laughter under control, "The grindylows finally decided to say hello, did they?" The days were growing ever warmer, and she'd traded the heavy dress he'd first met her in for a lighter one of shockingly soft wool that was a light green with intricate embroidery of Celtic style knots around the collar and the sleeves.

Water dripping from his hair, he could only smile back at her, "They're ruddy little menaces."

"They keep to themselves most of the time and learned a long time ago to stay away from me." Rowena told him, "They must have thought you'd be an easy bit of prey."

"Well, they were wrong."

"I'm very impressed," She said with false sincerity, "Great wizard like yourself managed to take on some wee water sprites. You have no equal, I'm sure." They just looked at each other for a brief moment before they both burst out into laughter.

Padding his way back closer to the shore, the water sat just above his hips. Her eyes darted across his body, making note of more than one of the scars that dotted his skin and rested briefly down on his abs, but he tried not to bare that any mind, "No trouble in the forest?"

"None," she shook her head slightly at his concern, "Just like yesterday, and the day before that. Have you always worried so much?"

Giving a shrug of his shoulders, he couldn't help but worry. He'd seen far too many people suffer or die because of a false sense of security. He knew full well she could take care of herself, but that didn't stop him from worrying, "The first time I met you, you were getting attacked in the woods. Only seems right to check."

Rolling her eyes, she turned away from the shore and headed up toward the keep. As she called back to him, he could hear the smile in her voice despite her protests, "I'll have food ready in just a bit if you want to join me."

Finally stepping out of the water, he moved to his clothes at the shore. They were a far cry from the ones that he'd arrived in. Rowena made him some proper clothing for the time. The shirt was soft, more like cashmere than wool and clean white. The trousers were laced in the front and made of linen, they were a sable brown. His trainers had been replaced by a simple pair of cloth boots, but they were far more comfortable thanks to the magic that seemed to have been sowed right into them. She'd gone about doing it the day after his arrival.

Much as she claimed not to trust me, she was very kind. Walking his way up to the keep, the smells reached him before he even stepped through the door. There was fresh bread baking in the clay oven and bone broth with fresh herbs from a little garden steaming away in pot as it was kept warm by a spell. The most delicious of smells came from a sizzling piece of game, a deer that had been caught and killed the week before, cooking away over the fire. *One of the many advantages of magic is that it takes gross stupidity to let our food spoil.*

While there were certain comforts missing so many centuries before his time, magic largely mitigated it. Taking one big whiff, he sat down as Rowena ladled some broth into a bowl, "Looks delicious as always, Row." He'd taken to calling her by the shortened name about a week into his time there. She never made any complaint about it, "But one of these days you're going to have to let me cook for you."

"You're still a guest here, Harry." She told him. It was the same thing she told him every time he brought it up.

"After a month, I'd say that I'm a boarder at this point." He gave her a little smile, "You know I'm more than happy to help."

"I let you, where I need it." She turned around and handed him a bowl with half a hunk of bread on it, "but, I don't need it on this." A knife sliced into the deer meat of its own accord and strips of it dropped onto a plate levitating beneath.

Harry didn't think there was much of anything that she **needed** help with. She'd grown accustomed to living on her own and it showed, "The offer still stands."

"I'll keep that in mind." Though, he knew she was unlikely to ever take him up on it, "But you do plenty enough to help as it is. You've paid for your stay a dozen times over simply with some of the improvements you've made around here."

The biggest of them was the piping. She'd been gathering buckets of fresh water herself, but a bit of magic made it easy to solve that little problem, "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing." Rowena corrected him fiercely, "And don't argue with me." The future founder was a fierce woman and Harry found it fun to rile her up when he had the chance.

Harry chuckled, "Of course, why would I ever want to do that?"

"Because you find it funny, obviously." She pointed a chunk of bread at him accusingly.

"Maybe," he admitted. Shaking her head at him, she rolled her eyes at his cheek. They sat in comfortable silence as they ate. When they were both finished, she took his bowl from him. She moved over to what was essentially a sink that he'd installed and cleaned away what little remained.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she said, "There's a quarry not far from here... deeper into the highlands, I want to retrieve some stone. I could use your help."

"Alright."

"You're not even curious why I want the stone?"

"No," She huffed, and he hid a smile, "Just because you like to know **everything** you possibly can doesn't mean that I'm the same."

Finished with the bowls, she turned to him with a scowl, "You're insufferable at times, you know that?"

Harry snorted out a little laugh, "I've been told."

Rowena rolled her eyes and turned to hide the slight upturn of her lips, "Well even if you're not curious, I'm going to tell you anyway."

"Funny," Harry stood then and went to scratch the top of Aerna's head, "it's almost like I was expecting that."

Ignoring him she continued, "Considering it looks like you're going to be staying a while longer, at least, I think it's time to expand." She looked over to him, almost shy, "We could do it with magic... But there's always the risk that the expansion could break... which could be disastrous...not that I think either of us are incapable... but it's always better to have a solid structure in a place like this, especially as the wards are connected directly to the ley line..."

Harry could only smile at her, he enjoyed watching her get lost in her own explanations, there was something... beautifully innocent about it. She noticed that he was staring at her and she stopped with a blush. Tucking a strand of her hair behind her head, she told him, "Sorry..."

"Don't be." He assured her. Aerna squawked in complaint as he stopped stroking her neck, "I appreciate it... the room." He leaned into her and nudged her shoulder, "So... does this mean you trust me then?"

Rowena arched one eyebrow and looked at him liked he'd gone mental, "Of course not."

"Tomorrow then..." She didn't manage to hide her smile that time. Ever since that first day, it'd become a little running joke between them. *Though I imagine she doesn't make a point of building new rooms in her own keep for people she doesn't trust.*

They set off northward together, away from the Dark Forest. Aerna watched them from overhead as they tread along the lush green land. There were crags rolled across the land, as picturesque in that moment as he could ever remember. They passed more than one rock formation, but none of them were the ones that they were looking for.

Rowena's mouth was opened in shock, absolutely gobsmacked, "A mountain troll? At eleven? How are you even alive?"

"Incredible luck," Harry was careful not to reveal too much, never once mentioning that any of his misadventures took place in a school that she founded... *and centuries in the future*, "And a bit of skill as well."

"It sounds more like luck than skill." She said with a little smirk.

"Considering my wand ended up lodged up the things nose, covered in its bogeys..." she scrunched her nose up in distaste at that, "I have to agree with you."

"So how did you survive?"

"Knocked the massive bugger out with its own club." Harry explained, "My friend managed to perform his first successful Levitation Charm on the club while it was taking swings at me and dropped the thing on its head."

"So definitely luck then."

"Absolutely," He knew that many of his earliest adventures were reckless. *The three of us should have been dead half a dozen times by the end of our first year.*

"And did that mountain troll give you any of those scars?" She asked him quietly, timidly even. It was a rare thing to see from the confident young woman, but Rowena couldn't help her curiosity, and she didn't want to offend him either.

There was no reason for her to worry about such things, "No, got out of that no worse for wear." He surprised her with just how easily he admitted it, "I got the first of the scars about a year and a half later."

"Oh?" He could see that she wanted to ask how and when and where, but she stopped herself.

Pulling up his sleeve, he revealed the galleon sized scar on the inside of his arm that went right through to the other side. He showed her both the entry and exit wound. It was big and smooth, the skin paler than the rest around it and raised slightly, "This one is the first."

As she reached for his arm, they stopped as she looked at it. Her hand was soft and warm as she ran her thumb along the decade old scar, "What happened? I doubt it was a spear. Magic could have healed something like that."

"Did you know many healing spells at twelve?" he asked her, a teasing lilt in his voice.

"One or two," she told him, finger never leaving his arm, "More than enough to heal a simple wound from a spear. So what was it then? A dark piercing curse or... a wound from a magical beast perhaps..."

"You knew more than I did at twelve then," He grinned, as he pulled her from the thread of thought she was pulling on, "But they wouldn't have done much good for this anyway. I killed a basilisk with a goblin-made sword."

Rowena's eyes widened in shock, "You're joking... that's... ridiculous."

"No, I'm dead serious." He pulled his arm away and made a show of what happened, "I thrust up through the roof of its mouth and one of its fangs pierced straight down through my arm."

She looked rightfully skeptical, but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, "And the venom?"

"Phoenix tears..."

“That’s... unbelievable,” She looked shook her, a picture of that disbelief, “You know that, right? It sounds like something out of legend. A twelve-year-old boy slaying a Basilisk and then being saved by a phoenix.”

“It does sound rather insane when you put it so simply, but it’s the truth.” He pointed at his arm, “I have the scar to prove it.”

There was no denying that point, “Where did this happen then?”

“Scotland.”

“Scotland?” That shocked her more than anything, “I know I’m not the most well-traveled witch in the world, but I feel I would have heard **some** story about that.”

“I’ve never been known to boast.” Rowena gave him an odd look, but let the matter drop as they reached their destination. It was a deep ravine at the foot of one of the stony crags. There was very little vegetation around and dark grey stone that looked as though it had been cut and taken before.

Taken from their conversation, she smiled down at the ravine, “Ah, here we are.” They carefully made their way down and when they reached the bottom, she removed her wand. The Cutting spell that dug deep into the stone was clean and precise. Four more followed, and it was a perfect rectangular cut that slid out with a Levitation Spell. The thing must have weighed a ton or more, and he could see that it was putting a tremendous strain on her.

With a wave of his wand the stone went featherlight and she nearly fell back on her bum as she suddenly was lifting something weightless. Looking over at him, her cheeks were a pretty rosy red, “Suppose I should have thought of that first.”

“Does make things a bit easier.” She levitated it over to herself and let it drop to the ground softly. With another wave of her wand, it shrunk down to the size of a book. Opening her bag, far bigger on the outside than the inside, she dropped the stone in.

“Alright then... get to work.” With a flourish of her wand another cut appeared. He’d seen it plenty, but this was the first time he really thought to ask.

“So, your wand, where did you get it?” He knew that Ollivander’s family was in business for more than two millennia by the time he visited Diagon Alley, but something told him that wasn’t the case for Rowena. The wand was light a light brown, airing almost to white with a single vein of blueish black that ran from the tip down to the base. The handle was ornately engraved and looked as though it’d been carved by someone with a great deal of skill.

“It was given to me by my parents when I was ten,” She told him with a fond smile down at the tool in question, “My mother fashioned it while my father carved it.”

“Ash?”

She shook her head, “Birch, taken from the banks of the lake. With a core from a Hebridean Black Dragon.”

Harry didn’t know much about dragons, but he’d heard enough from Charlie Weasley to know that the Hebridean Blacks were notoriously dangerous and territorial, “How’d she come by that?”

“My uncle, her brother, lives in the Hebrides. She once told me he managed to slay a dragon in its sleep and made a gift of its heart for her and me.” Rowena gave him a little smirk, “But then she also told me she didn’t believe that for a second and that he either bought it, or managed to take it from one of them that passed naturally.” She shrugged her shoulder, “Either way, it’s a brilliant match for me and has always served me well so, I thank him for it.”

“He lives in the Hebrides?”

“I did say my mother was Norse-Gael.” She gave him a smile and looked down at his own wand, “What about yours?”

“Elder wood with a thestral’s tail hair.”

She quirked an eyebrow at that, “Quite odd isn’t it.”

“Quite unique from what I understand. One of a kind even.”

“Seems appropriate then,” she gave him a little smirk, “After all, not many people have slain a Basilisk, and even fewer did it at twelve.”

It didn’t take them terribly long, maybe half an hour. The walk was far longer than the process that was certain. They could have apparated, he knew, but there was one small problem with that idea. *I have no idea if apparition is even a thing at this point in history.* He’d been waiting to see if Rowena did it at any point, but she hadn’t as of yet.

They cut away some dozen slabs of stone each, all of them of relatively equal size. As they made their way out of the ravine, the sun was starting to near the horizon. The walk back to the south was peaceful, and quiet, until Aerna screeched overhead.

Then they heard it, just on the other side of another of the hills, “Help! Please... help!” it was faint echoing across the serene green expanse of the highlands. Rowena and Harry shared a look before they hurried to the top of the hill.

There was a girl, no more than twelve, struggling at the foot of it. She slipped on the dewy grass and struggled to her feet as they saw what she was running from. It was a large, incensed hippogriff. Its feathers were an inky black, and its razor-sharp talons were half a foot long and looked sharp enough to cut through dragonhide. Every gallop of its clawed feet left an impression in the soft ground as charged toward the young girl.

Reacting on simple instinct, the elder wand shot into his hand. The ground between the hippogriff and girl suddenly shifted and the beast lost all its momentum. It struggled, wading through quicksand as the ground slowly swallowed it. When its legs were fully submerged, Harry let the spell end, leaving it trapped beneath dirt and stone.

The hybrid screeched violently, snapping its cruel, grey beak in the direction of its prey, but failing miserably. It beat its wing helplessly, doing everything it could to break free, but the earth was unyielding. The girl struggled to her feet and hurried in their direction. She hid behind Rowena as Harry walked calmly past her and toward the struggling beast.

“Quiet now,” He said drawing closer, “Quiet.” He stopped far enough away that he was out of reach of the beak and looked down. A simple, colorless Calming Spell left his wand and hit the hippogriff. Its haunting orange eyes that’d been almost black returned to their normal size. Finally, the beast caught his gaze and, remembering his old lessons, he gave it a bow.

He could feel the hippogriff’s judgement, but he stood his ground. Then, after a long tense moment, he received an incline of its head in return, “Now that wasn’t so hard was it.” Leaning down, he ran a hand along the dark, soft feathers and tried to comfort it, “Relax now, I’m sure this was a big misunderstanding.”

Rowena approached with the girl and Harry turned to look at them both. The girl had mousey brown hair, a sharp chin, and bloodshot, brown eyes. She looked about ready to cry after her ordeal so it was understandable, “What happened?”

“I... I was flying... I... I”

“Calm down,” he told her and gave her arm a squeeze, “Deep breath, then try again.”

“I... stole my mum’s broom.” She admitted not looking either of them in the eye, “One second I was just sweeping over the trees, having some fun... and then... it was chasing me.” Looking fearfully down at the hippogriff, she forced herself to continue, “I don’t know how long I flew but... it managed to scratch me, and I crashed...”

“Probably a nesting mother.” Rowena concluded, “They only have one egg at a time and they’re very fragile. It makes the mothers **very** protective.”

Harry gestured for the girl as he continued to soothe the restless beast, “Come here.” She took his hand slowly and he pulled her toward the hippogriff, “Bow, show her respect and try not to be afraid.” The young girl didn’t blink but did as he directed.

The hippogriff ruffled its feathers and howled furiously once. He could feel the young girl shiver in terror, but she held her ground. After a tense moment, the beast returned the bow, and Harry guided her hand to the feathers, “There now. Everything is better.” He gave the girl a smile, “What’s your name?”

“Mairi.” She told him, eyes wide as she stroked the hippogriff.

“And where are you from, Mairi?” Rowena asked her gently.

“Outside of Inverness...”

“You flew a long way.” Rowena rested a hand on her head, and patted her reassuringly, “Don’t worry we’ll get you home... but I’m afraid it won’t be until tomorrow. I’ve never been to Inverness, so we’ll have to get there one of the longer ways.” She offered Mairi her hand and the younger girl happily took it. The two started walking away leaving him alone with the hippogriff.

“If I let you go, you’re not going to be cross with me, are you?” The hippogriff looked at him with intelligent eyes and clicked its beak once, “Alright then, nothing funny or I’m putting you right back in the ground. And I won’t be letting you out anytime soon if I have to do it again.” The beast huffed and nodded its head in understanding.

With that he waved his wand and the ground pushed up from below. In just a few seconds, it was standing above him, looking menacing. The hippogriff snapped in front of his face three times, but he just stared at it unimpressed, "You have more important things to do than try and look tough for me. Stop putting on a show and head home, why don't you. I'd say that Rowena was right, and you have an egg to look after."

The hippogriff huffed at him, seemingly annoyed at his lack of reaction and turned on the spot. Making sure to knock him with her tail-feathers, she galloped away and took flight some twenty paces later. Within seconds, she was soaring over the highlands and back south toward her home.

Jogging to catch them, Harry made his way to Rowena and Mairi. The younger girl was holding the broken remains of a gnarled and beaten broomstick. *Now that is a far cry from the old school broomsticks, let alone my old Firebolt.* There were tears in her eyes, but she just nodded as Rowena assured her, "It'll be easy enough to fix, don't worry. We'll have it good as new before you're back home."

"Run! Everyone run! They're here!" There was panic all around. It made no sense. They were supposed to be safe. They'd been there for three months without a hint or sign of the Inquisition. Deep in the Forbidden Forest they'd hidden, beneath stone and wards in a cave far removed from the castle.

There was fire at the mouth of the cave as they poured in one after the other. He watched in horror as Fred Weasley screamed in agony, blood gurgled from his mouth as he tumbled to the ground. His body was severed from his clavicle half-way to his navel.

Harry heard Ginny's anguished cry, George's roar of fury, but he couldn't worry about that. He could only worry about the man coming toward him. The spell that left his wand was an ugly purple. It smashed into his assailant's chest and sent him writhing on the ground. He died screaming, his cries only adding to the din of battle.

They'd stopped using the Latin spells over a year before. Many magicals learned the hard way that the Inquisition had enacted a Taboo on some of them. No one knew for sure which were safe and which were jinxed, and so all were avoided like the plague. All Harry could think was that someone slipped up.

He didn't have time to contemplate it though, as his world focused down to that terrible moment. The heat of battle and the stink of death. He could feel the Anti-apparition ward that had been layered on top of their old one. Another man came toward him, this one had no wand but wore armor made of silver. It was goblin-made and spell resistant because of it.

A metal spike emerged from his wand and shot straight toward the hulking brute of man bearing down on him. It rent the metal and there was a meaty thud as it pierced deep. There was a squirt of blood as the man spit up blood. He tumbled to the ground heavily and knew no more.

Out. I need to get out. *Harry knew he couldn't save everyone, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to help those that he could. He grabbed his invisibility cloak. It'd seemingly grown of its own accord in recent years. There was a scream from behind him and he fired a spell that saved Luna before the sword stroke could reach her.*

He gestured for her to follow, and she came to his side as he covered them both with the cloak. Four more he managed to save in the face of their oncoming death. There was Neville and Draco both fighting side by side but surrounded and outnumbered. Something he never would have thought to see in their days at Hogwarts.

Katie was bleeding from her left arm and her right looked as though it was dislocated but she shuffled along beneath the cloak. Then there was Ginny bleeding from the back of her head with someone else's blood covering her jumper.

*They headed toward the mouth of the cave but were cut off at every turn. Worse yet, he could see that it was guarded by five of the Inquisition's zealots. **Up! We can go up.***

Aiming at the ceiling of the cave he gouged at it with an almighty spell that tore through rock like it was dragon through a sheep. All around them the rock came tumbling down, but he deflected it away as enemies and friend alike were caught in the collapse. Pointing his wand upward, he extended his magic. Bolstered by the Elder Wand, he tore through the Inquisitions wards.

"Out! Now!" Harry took hold of Katie, knowing that she was in no state to apparate. With a pop, he disappeared away from the chaos and death.

UP! UP! With a start, Harry awoke, pulled from his tormented dreams. The voice in his head resounded loud and clear, enough that it made his ears ring. For the first time in weeks, he felt its presence. **Go to her, now!** There was a pitter-patter of light rain leaving, the clouds leaving the keep bathed in a consuming darkness.

Jumping to his feet, he wore nothing but his pants as he bound across the small keep and threw open the door of Rowena's room. His wand cast a bright light and shadows across the room. There was a little bed, one that Rowena had conjured for Mairi, except that the young girl wasn't in it. No, she stumbled away from Rowena's bed clutching a dark, jagged stone close to her chest as she stared up at Harry with utter terror in her eyes.

Rowena snapped awake and looked at him with her midnight blue eyes, alert and afraid. She wore just a light shift, and her hair was bedraggled. Her eyes went from him to the rest of the room, and that's when she saw Mairi cowering in the corner. Voice like steel, she asked, "What is going on?"

"I think we need to ask her." Harry gestured with his wand to the young girl.

"Mairi," The girl shook her head, trying to deny that she was even there, "what's going on?"

"He... he promised... that if I did this... my brother," The girl sobbed and tears streamed down her face, "my brother and I would be free to go. Please... please don't make me go back... I don't want to be like the others... like the older ones... " She desperately thrust the jagged stone toward her, "Just take it please... take it... if you take it... we'll be free."

Harry summoned the rock but didn't let it touch his skin, "Who? Who sent you here?"

"Bishop Oran at Inverness..." She looked lost as she glanced between the two of them, "He wanted me to send her back... with the magic... something about the King and Bishop Calleach."

Harry felt white hot rage well up in his chest. *Seems they've never changed. Always the same miserable bastards.*

Rowena managed to maintain her composure far better, though he could hear the strained calm in her voice, "Mairi, I'm not going to Bishop Oran, at least not the way he would like." She moved over to the girl and wrapped her in her arms. He could see then the caring nature of the teacher she might become, "But in the morning you're going to tell me the whole story and then... then we'll go and get your brother and all the rest."

She hid it from the young girl, but in the low light, Harry saw the cold fury in her eyes. It promised a response and he had a sense that the other shoe was now dangling by its laces, about ready to drop. And for some reason, deep in the back of his mind, there was satisfaction.