

Founders Story

by Pyttan

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I want to thank my beta, Amylouise65. Thank you!

Founders Story

She was listening to the discussion around her with growing dismay. Rowena's idea had sounded so lovely. At least it had when it was first presented, and Helga had pictured a safe haven for the growing number of magical children in Britain. A place where the children could learn about magic without running the risk of being corrupted by rogue magicians or hunted down by irate and frightened Muggles. A place where they could develop and learn.

And then, with Merlin's arrival, everything had changed. This miserable, ongoing debacle had started.

She was so disappointed to discover that none of her friends was willing to yield an inch. It was even more disappointing that they were only interested in the children most resembling themselves: Godric only wanted the brave; Rowena, the clever; and Salazar, the pure of blood. Now they were fighting among themselves, and Helga sat silent, trying to swallow the aching lump in her throat, wanting to cry over the school that wasn't to be, after all.

She gazed out over the people that had come to Hogwarts Castle hoping to find a place for their children. Some of them dressed in wool so fine that she could see the cloth reflect the candlelight in the room. Then there were the others, dressed in nothing more than rags and the dirt on their bodies.

If her friends got to decide, almost all the well-fed and well-dressed children would get to stay. The rest, the most vulnerable, would be shown to the door and forced to leave.

She looked at one boy, small and skinny, with hair the same colour as dry pine needles in the autumn, who was sitting with his mother a bit away from all the others. They were both eating, wolfing the food down, as if they were afraid that someone would snatch it away again if they didn't finish fast enough. The boy caught her looking at him and moved closer to his mother, seeking her protection.

How could one expect a boy like that to be able to show courage? And how would he be able to display cleverness, when the food he ate was barely enough to keep him alive?

The woman was even more emaciated than her child, with a sallow face and black, dirty hair pulled back from her face. When she caught Helga looking, she pulled her boy closer to her side. And she was a Muggle. One of those who most needed help in guiding a child born with magic. And she was also one of the Muggles desperate enough to dare come when summoned to the castle. And now she would not find protection for her child after all. Helga wondered how far she had travelled. Very far if the

state of her and the child were anything to go by.

And the families had been summoned to the school far too early. She didn't understand why the Council had chosen to do such a thing. So ill-advised. So ill-planned.

"And one keeps her tongue," said Merlin, his words startling her out of her thoughts. He was looking straight at her, smiling. The look he gave her made all the hairs on her body stand on end. He scared her witless, and he had done so from the very first day he had arrived.

Merlin the powerful. Merlin the ancient. Merlin who, by rights, should have been dead a very long time ago or, at the very least, be very old and feeble. He was neither, and he was the one who had been sent by the Elder Council to oversee the creation of the school.

But he wasn't sent, not really. It was far more likely that he, for reasons of his own, had ordered the Council to send him. They would grant him anything he wanted.

The bickering trio fell quiet at his words and turned to look at her. So did everyone else in the room. The highborn as well as the low.

At that moment she hated Merlin.

The urge to cry evaporated, and instead she wanted to climb over the table and strike him. And when she looked at him, seeing the expression in his face, the smirk, the amusement, the knowledge tumbled over her: He had known, the horrid old man, what would be the result when he asked how they would choose the students for their school. What they would demand in the students and what was the most important trait in them.

He had created this situation on purpose.

Helga swallowed hard and met Merlin's steady gaze.

"What do you consider the most important quality, little one?" he asked. "We have heard the others, but what about you?"

His question made it dawn on her why she had wanted to cry and what was now making her angry instead. When her so-called friends described what made someone worthy to learn and use magic, every single trait they had picked had left her among the unworthy.

"Several things," she said, and to her own surprise her voice didn't quaver as it usually did when she was forced to speak in front of others, and especially when she was forced to address Merlin.

Merlin made a deliberate play at looking surprised. And she could see Salazar's smirk, Rowena's amusement and Godric's crooked smile.

Her stomach turned over with another kind of disappointment.

"Several, indeed. Why don't you enlighten us?"

"Would it do any good?" she asked. She heard it herself: She sounded clipped and cold, much to her own surprise, and she saw her friends' smiles...the friends who didn't feel like friends anymore...falter.

Salazar's eyes narrowed, Godric looked confused, and Rowena looked worried, probably understanding that something was wrong. That the mellow, malleable little Helga had, most surprisingly, taken offence to something that had been said.

Merlin's eyes gleamed in the candlelight, and his tongue slid out of his mouth, moistening his lower lip, like he was hungry. Like he had spotted something delicious that he wanted to eat.

Helga shivered. He often looked liked that when watching her. And he often looked like that in the face of opposition.

"What if I said I would let you choose, little one?" Merlin asked, leaning forward, lifting his goblet and drinking, never losing eye contact with her. "What would you be willing to sacrifice to be the one to decide?"

"He's setting a trap for you," a voice in her head whispered.

She lifted her own glass to sip the wine, choosing to wait rather than act.

"You could choose to have the brave or the clever or maybe the pure-blooded."

He thought her stupid. Springing a trap so easy anyone could spot it.

"He underestimates you. A good thing, all things considered," said the voice to her. And a very pragmatic voice it was.

"Tears. I'm willing to sacrifice tears. Maybe even blood. But only if I knew the choice would be mine alone, without restrictions or limitations."

A pretty, tinkling laughter rang in the room. Rowena.

"Clever, Helga," she said, her voice carrying a note of surprise.

Helga wondered if Rowena was even aware of the insult she had just dealt out.

Merlin was annoyed. She could see it in his eyes, even if he was laughing together with the others.

"You thwarted him," the voice in her head said. *"He doesn't like that."*

She waited.

"Would you be willing to fight for the right to decide, little one?" asked Merlin.

"He wants you," the voice said. *"And he's setting another trap now."*

"I'm willing to fight," she said, taking care to sound calm and detached. "But I'll only fight one of them. Not you. After all, the school is ours."

A slow clapping sounded in the room.

It was Salazar of course. Handsome Salazar, sprawling in his chair, clapping his hands.

"Well done. Didn't I say it? Purity of blood shows."

She would have ripped his heart out over those words and danced on his bleeding carcass, if she'd been able to.

Salazar assumed too much. He always did.

She was a witch, and she was powerful, so he assumed that she was a pure-blood. He had never bothered to even consider, or find out, that her father was a warrior who had come to Britain over the seas, from the north. That her father, even if born from a seer, had no magic at all. That her mother came from the green island and that she had once tried to kill Helga's father.

It had taken her Father a long time to win her Mother over. A Muggle woman, stronger both in body and spirit than any witch she had ever met. She was born to a Squib Father and a Muggle Mother, and neither one had been neither impressed nor bothered by any kind of magic.

"I'm not pure of blood," she said loud enough for the people around to hear. She glanced at the crowd and saw the woman straighten her back and pull her boy closer. "I'm born of Muggles and Squibs."

Helga didn't acknowledge Salazar any further. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

The Great Hall was quiet now. Only the crackling of the fire made any sound as it shot glittering sparks up in the chimney and out on the stone floor, where they cooled and died.

Merlin ignored Salazar too and drummed his fingers on his right hand once...from his pinky to his forefinger...on the table top.

"You forget yourself, little one. I'm Merlin. I decide if you get your fight, and I require a boon to give the right to you."

"What boon do you ask?" she said, her voice quavering this time.

Merlin was pleased to hear it. She could see that.

He leaned back in his chair, lowering his lids hiding the expression in his eyes. It didn't matter; she was sure what she would have seen there anyway. And that tongue, damp, pink and nauseating, once again touched his lower lip.

"I have to think of it, little one. If you want your duel, you need to trust that the boon I require isn't too odious. And I expect you to give it to me willingly."

Her chest constricted with sadness once again. Her chances to win in a duel where the opponent was one of her friends was slim, maybe non-existent. But she would duel anyway. Because if she did and won, she could make a difference.

"I will let you have your duel. If you will grant me the pleasure of your company for one evening of my choice," Merlin continued to say.

A vision of people dancing around fires rose in her mind.

"He wants you for Bealtuinn," the voice said, the warning evident.

Helga swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Even swallowing hard, it still rose so high she felt a bitter tang in her mouth.

She drank from the wine. One sip. And then she nodded in agreement.

Merlin's laugh boomed in the room and others joined in. She didn't look at any of them. "We will have a duel then," Merlin said. "The first one who draws blood wins. The only question that remains is: Who I will choose as your opponent?"

His tongue slithered out of his mouth again. Helga was amazed that the others didn't see what a two-faced creature he was.

"Should I pick Rowena? It would be fair. A woman fighting a woman," he said, sounding thoughtful, nodding to himself. "Or maybe Salazar, who is such a strong duellist? Would that be acceptable to you, little one?"

"He won't pick either," the voice said. *"He wants to make a statement."*

Merlin leaned back in the chair and smirked.

Helga said nothing. She already knew who he would pick.

"No. Since the price you will be rewarded if you win is so high, it's only fair that you duel the most experienced one. You'll duel Godric."

So Merlin knew, even after everything she had done to hide her feelings. And now he would use Godric to bring her to his own bed. It was a statement indeed, and again she felt the urge to cry.

She gave Merlin a curt nod, and Godric smiled in agreement. Merlin rose and held up his hands as if beckoning everyone to silence, as if the room, despite the many people present, wasn't quiet already.

"My friends, we will be witnessing a duel this night. In all friendliness, of course, even if there are boons involved." His voice carried well, and the tone of it promised more than the words did in them selves.

The crowd erupted in excited speech and laughter, and around the room people shouted and clapped their hands, relaxing now, getting ready to be entertained. Only the worn-out mother looked worried.

Merlin waved his wand, clearing the middle of the Great Hall of tables and benches. With another wave, he spelled part of the floor to rise, forming a stage where she and Godric were going to fight.

Everyone gathered around it, laughing, talking, and taking bets, while Merlin jumped up on the stage, moving and acting like the young man he wasn't. This time his beckoning for silence was real, and now he was working the crowd, enchanting them with his act. He reminded Helga of a travelling peddler she had once met. Slippery, charming, and, as it turned out, as lethal as the so-called miracle cure for the Plague he had sold to unsuspecting Muggles.

"This evening two of our best will duel. The fighters are two of the Founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, no less."

A cheer went up from the crowd, and Merlin smiled. He held a hand up in a calming motion, as he walked the length of the stage while speaking.

"The duel will mean a lot to us all." He stopped and nodded solemnly, stretching the silence, making the audience feel the importance. "This duel will settle who will get taught in this school and who will not."

The crowd was silent now, but then Merlin smiled, and with a theatrical gesture, he held out his arm and almost, but not quite, shouted, "We have Godric Gryffindor, one of the strongest wizards in all of Britain ..." And Godric climbed the stage, all fierce warrior, with his arms spread wide, walking the full length of the scene, letting the audience take him in and finishing the display by bowing for the crowd, which went wild when he straightened and smiled.

And such a big man, such a handsome man. Helga caught herself before she sighed like the smitten girl she felt like.

And then Merlin's smile changed and became indulgent and condescending.

"... and Helga Hufflepuff, the prettiest, sweetest little witch anyone can imagine."

There was more laughter than applause as Helga climbed the stage, refusing Salazar's aid, even though her skirts hampered her ascent. Merlin was by her side before she got further than the edge of the stage, and he took her hand, leading her to the middle where Godric was waiting.

Merlin placed himself between them, addressing the crowd again.

"If Helga Hufflepuff is the victor, she will have the right to choose which of the magical children of Britain gets to attend the Hogwarts. If Godric Gryffindor wins, I suppose the bickering between Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff about who gets to attend will simply continue a bit longer."

A roar of laughter went up from the crowd, and Godric let out a booming laugh of his own.

"As for me," Merlin continued. "I have hedged my bets." His tone of voice was that of someone telling a good friend a secret. "If sweet Helga loses, I will have the pleasure of her company. Alas, it will be for just one short evening, but ..." Merlin put his hand over his heart in a melodramatic gesture and turned to her with a mock expression of devotion that made the crowd laugh with pleasure and amusement. "An old man like me can't really hope for more than that. And if she wins, this old man hopes that the lady will look at him favourably, since he was instrumental in offering her this opportunity."

Merlin faced her as the crowd laughed and threw good-natured taunts at him. The smile he gave her made a pang of cold fear travel from her stomach to the rest of her body.

"Back to back now, Helga, Godric," Merlin said. "I will count twenty paces and then you will turn and fight. The first one who draws blood wins."

When she stood there waiting for Merlin to start counting, she felt Godric touch her hand.

"I'd never hurt you. You know that," he said, speaking so low she almost didn't hear.

"Good," said the voice. *"That gives you a better chance to make him bleed before you do."*

Helga could have laughed. She should have known. Her Mother's voice of course. Dead since fifteen years back, yet still with her, as pragmatic as ever. And wasn't that what Salazar had said...blood will out.

And then, Merlin started to count.

It was easy to begin with. But at fourteen sweat was breaking out on her neck.

Helga's knees were shaking as she walked in pace with Merlin's counting. If she lost she would have to leave Hogwarts castle after Bealtuinn. She would have to disappear. If the night of Bealtuinn resulted in a child and knowing Merlin, it would, the child together with Helga would be his property. No child of hers was ever going to be raised by him.

"Twenty." Merlin's voice was a roar.

She turned and threw her first hex. It was easily deflected by Godric who, in quick succession, threw several hexes, forcing her to put all her energy into a shield, leaving her no room to attack. The onslaught of spells continued, and all she could do was alternate between deflecting spells and shielding herself. And Godric was gaining ground, moving closer.

And then it came: the spell that shattered her shield. The following hex made the floor crack beneath her. From the cracks spouted long lengths of yellow ribbon wrapping themselves around her, leaving her bound, helpless and suspended in mid-air.

The crowd went wild, and after a short while of unarticulated roaring, a rhythmic chant of Godric's name took its place.

Godric lifted his hands like Merlin had before, beckoning for silence. She saw Merlin, who had been moving forward, hesitate, his indulgent smile freezing on his face. He actually hadn't realised that Godric was just as adept at manipulating a crowd as he was. Maybe even more so, since Godric didn't lure them in; he invited them to join the fun.

"I won," said Godric, his voice a deep, warm baritone that reached everyone in the room without sounding strained. "And shouldn't a conqueror be getting a better boon than the very doubtful pleasure that ..." Godric rolled his eyes heavenwards and raised his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. Then he gave the crowd his dimpled, crooked smile she loved so much. "... continued bickering gives?"

Shouts of agreement greeted his question.

"So I take it no one would hold it against me, or the sweet Lady, if I would express my appreciation for her courage and get a boon of sorts at the same time?"

The crowd agreed readily, with laughter, shouts and lewd suggestions, as Helga watched in horror. Because even if Merlin's face was blank, his eyes weren't.

His eyes were blacker than the night in the Forest outside the castle grounds, and so much more frightening.

Then Godric was in front of her, and she couldn't see anything but him any longer.

With a flick of his wand, she floated closer to him and another flick lifted her higher, until they were eye to eye. And the eyes of the man were bluer than a summer sky and surrounded with long lashes. Dark red lashes of all the odd things, matching his hair.

She so wished she could touch that hair.

"I told you I'd never hurt you," said Godric, and smiled as he touched her cheek. "But I can't let a chance like this slip me by, you understand."

And he pulled her to him and kissed her. A soft, sweet kiss, where he nibbled her lower lip, and licked the corner of her mouth, coaxing her to open for him. He didn't really have to bother. She loved the smell of him, the taste of him, and the feeling of his strong arms holding her, and she allowed herself to enjoy the moment.

"It isn't over yet," her Mother said, her voice a slow, amused drawl in Helga's mind. *"Merlin misjudged the situation. Godric won't hurt you. And first blood has yet to be drawn. And no one specified that it had to be drawn by magic."*

He would never hurt her, he had said. But his victory was going to hurt her, inadvertently. She would explain later, she decided, then sucked his lower lip into her mouth, listening to his low moan of pleasure. Then she bit down hard, listening to his shout of pain.

Godric let her go, holding his right hand over his mouth.

She fell to the floor and the yellow ribbons melted back into the cracks in the floor that closed and returned to normal.

Helga staggered to her feet and looked at Godric. Then she took out her handkerchief and offered it to him. He received it with a hesitancy she didn't want to see in him.

Then she turned to Merlin, ignoring the crowd around them.

"First blood, Merlin, is drawn."

Merlin looked at Godric, and Godric smiled, cocked his eyebrows and held up the handkerchief now stained red. "Too true," he said, and laughed.

Merlin looked back at her and smiled. All teeth and no warmth at all.

"So it was, little one."

"Are you not going to declare me the victor?" she asked, forcing a playful note into her voice.

For a moment she thought Merlin would curse her where she stood and do so in plain view of all the people present.

Merlin then turned to the crowd and smiled again.

"And we have a victor," he said to the crowd. "Surprisingly, Lady Helga won, turning out to be much more tricky than one might have assumed. That means that she alone gets to decide who will get their schooling at Hogwarts. So let us see which of your children gets to stay at Hogwarts castle and who will have to leave tonight." With a sweeping motion he beckoned Salazar and Rowena to join them on the scene. "Let us see how the victor will rule."

"Vicious, that one," her Mother's voice said. "But no matter."

Helga looked down at the floor, tired now that it was over. Sad that Salazar looked angry and Rowena hesitant. Then she looked out over the sea of faces. So different from each other in values and background.

It would never work. The school would never make them overcome their differences.

But she would do her best anyway. No one could ask for more than someone doing their best.

"I don't want the purest of blood," she said and looked at Salazar. He looked away, his whole posture expressing his anger. "Neither do I want the clever," she continued, and watched as Rowena lowered her eyes and pressed her lips together.

Then she looked at the smiling Godric, his lower lip still swollen after her bite. "And not the brave," she said and looked away from his now crestfallen face, instead looking at the crowd in front of her. "You can keep them."

"Keep them?" asked Salazar, catching on like she'd known he would.

"Yes, keep them. To each his own. Within the school we will take care of our own. And you have chosen already, haven't you?"

Salazar's smile was a pleased one, and he bowed deeply to her.

"Then I thank you, my Lady, for letting me have my way."

Rowena's pout had turned into a smile now.

"I thank you too. Very wise," she said.

Godric was by her side now, standing as close as he could, within the boundaries of propriety this time.

"I would kiss you if I dared, my Lady," he said, and the crowd burst out laughing again.

Merlin's voice interrupted.

"And what kind of students do you plan to take as your own, I wonder?" Merlin's voice contained so much acid that she flinched. The difference was that this time she wasn't the only one to feel the venom. Godric's smile died, and he placed himself between her and Merlin. Salazar's right hand disappeared into the folds of his robes, and Rowena moved away from the group, placing herself at an angle from Merlin.

"Not much left worth having, is there?" Merlin asked, his sneer ageing him decades.

The gaunt mother with the little boy drew back and then started to work her way through the gathering, heading for the door and dragging her boy along with her, as the crowd started to murmur. A low hum that seemed to contain equal parts of surprise and irritation. She wasn't sure whom they supported.

She stepped forwards anyway, ignoring Godric's attempt to hold her back, and faced Merlin.

"Let me see ... " Merlin stepped closer to her. "You can chose from the vapid, the foolish and the thick...which will it be, I wonder?"

Merlin was crowding her now, towering over her. She reached no higher than his chest. She still refused to step back and cower behind Godric, no matter how willing he seemed to be to offer her protection. The murmur in the Hall was increasing.

She looked up at Merlin. She might not be safe this close to him, but she didn't care. So she smiled at him and stepped even closer.

"Yes. And I want the rest of them too. I'll teach them all. I'm sure they will try their hardest and trying one's best is good enough for me."

A roar went up from several places in the Great Hall and again a chant started. This time they chanted her name. She looked at the crowd. The mother with the frail little boy was still there. She had stopped close to the door.

"They are with you. At least the lowborns are. So get rid of him. Force him out now."

"We know what a busy man you are. Great men always are. And we know it's time for you to leave," she said. "You have done quite enough here, and we thank you for it. As I know you are needed elsewhere, I offer you our undying gratitude." She made a deep curtsy.

Merlin glanced at the cheering crowd, at her friends, and then back at Helga. Then he gave her a black look, an almost inclination of his head, spun on his heel, and disappeared.

Helga straightened. They needed to deal with this: They would need to make sure no one could Apparate in or out of Hogwarts castle. She would talk to Salazar and Rowena about it.

They were clever. They were sure to find a way.