

Peace of Mind

by Pyttan

Rowena is waiting. So are the rest of the founders.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: JKR owns them all. I just like to play with her stuff.

A/N: The story was written for the Founders Gift Exchange at LJ 2011. The lovely Diabólica helped with the alpha and beta stuff, and I'm very grateful to her.

Helga

Helga stroked the finished braid and then tied a ribbon at the end of it. She chose a green one this day.

The black in Rowena's hair was almost gone now, only a few strands remaining among all the white.

"All finished. Do you need anything else, Rowena?" Helga asked, keeping her voice steady and clear, even if what she wanted to do was cover her face with her hands and howl in premature mourning.

Rowena didn't even turn her head in Helga's direction at the question. She continued to look out the window. Helga followed her gaze.

The sky was blue and the swallows that were nesting near the roof of Ravenclaw tower dove, whirled and weaved through the air, catching insects in flight.

"Do you want me to open the window?" Helga asked.

It had been impossible to do that for a long time. After a miserable, cold winter the spring had arrived, cold and damp and, in its own way, just as bad. This was the very first day of the year that it was even possible to let fresh air into the castle without freezing. The castle was always chilled enough as it was.

"Yes, please ... I would be ... grateful." Rowena's voice was no more than a whisper.

Helga carefully let her breath out.

After being quiet for such a long time, Rowena had answered. A good sign, finally, even if Rowena was paler than ever and her eyes more sunken than before.

Helga contained herself and went over to the window and opened it, letting in not only fresh air but the sounds of spring too: birds trilling, the wind playing in the nooks between the roof and the stone of the tower and the students' voices far below.

"There. Better?"

Helga turned to Rowena's bed and smiled.

"Will she come ... do you think?" Rowena asked, her voice weaker now.

Helga forced her smile to remain in place.

Helena.

Always Helena.

Helena the pretty. Helena the bright. Helena who had been given everything from a mother's love and a father's adoration to the best of rooms, clothing and food, just to repay them all with deceit and selfishness. In the end running away like the faithless creature she was.

Helga bit back every bit of what she really wanted to say.

"Of course she'll come," Helga said and walked the small distance to Rowena's bed, sitting down on a chair beside it. "As soon as Sir Kay finds her for you. And he will find her, be sure of it."

Helga couldn't look at her. Because she thought Sir Kay, no matter how illustrious his ancestry, arrogant and unbalanced. He brooded, and she had seen him throw tantrums over the smallest things. He had even ridden down two of the village children without any discernible sign of remorse or worry.

Helga had tried to convince Rowena to send someone else and failed.

"He loves her, Helga."

And that was the crux. Sir Kay did love Helena. He loved her with the same obsessiveness a four-year-old child loved, and that was not a good thing in a man of three and thirty.

"I know," said Helga, able to meet Rowena's eyes again, since she was telling the truth now. "He'll find her. You can be sure of it."

The only thing was that Helga wasn't at all sure what would happen when Sir Kay, the denied swain, found Helena.

Rowena smiled. A smile of relief, and she closed her eyes. She slept within moments.

As she left, Helga summoned a house-elf to sit beside Rowena.

She wiped away the tears that were running down her cheeks. She did it several times as she took the stairs leading down to the kitchen. She would make Rowena something nice for tomorrow.

A soup maybe. And she needed to check on the new ointment she was experimenting with before she went to bed. Perhaps it would force the infection back.

At the very least, she knew for certain it would numb the pain.

Godric

Godric was standing in the door watching Rowena.

She slept. The house-elf beside her had nodded off.

He didn't wake it.

He hated to see Rowena like this. He had taken the damned berserker down seconds after he had thrown the cloud of fire at Rowena.

Godric had taken his head and then proceeded to take sixteen more in retaliation. The legends about them were only half true after all, because berserkers did die when hacked by a sword.

Not that it had helped Rowena. Not when the rest had been true. Not when he had been too late to help her.

He had had the berserkers' heads boiled so they would keep longer, and he had them placed on stakes along the shore. Their robes, made of bear furs with the head still attached, were placed on the stakes too.

Any ship daring to come close enough would see what happened to intruding armies magical or otherwise.

The room was chilly, and a cold draft made him realise that the window was open. He went over and closed it. It had been a warm and pleasant day. The first one in a long while, but the evening was chilly and damp.

When he turned back to the bed, Rowena was watching him.

"Have you had any word?"

The pleading note in Rowena's whispered question made him want to roar and pound at the walls until his fists bled.

If there was any justice, the cowardly chit would be punished a thousand times over.

He smiled and walked over to the bed, taking her burnt hand in his, careful not to disturb the bandages, careful not to cause her pain. The bandages were already damp and stained yellow and brown from the blood and pus leaking from the wounds.

Every day since the battle, Helga had changed them and used her ointments, trying to help Rowena. Now, he suspected, she just tried to soothe the pain.

"Not yet, my Lady. But I'm sure Kay will send word as soon as he reaches her."

She looked so unwell. Godric wished Kay would hurry back with Helena. He was an able soldier, a great wizard and a cunning one too; he would be able to convince her to return.

"You must concentrate on getting better until Helena returns, Rowena," he said.

Her fingers moved, maybe in an attempt to squeeze his hand. "Promise you'll tell me if there is ... word."

Her whisper was urgent and strained, and Godric's throat ached. He nodded and cleared it. He didn't even remember the last time he cried. He must have been a little boy then. He hadn't even cried when his father died.

"Of course I will. I'll wake you in the middle of the night, if you so wish." He bowed over her and almost touched the tip of his nose to her hand.

It stank. The sweet stench of decay and rot.

A shadow of a smile crept over Rowena's face when he looked up again.

"Godric, always ... gallant. Always ... the brave one."

Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her breathing became even as she fell asleep again.

Godric put her hand under the cover and tucked her in, making sure she looked comfortable.

He shook the elf awake.

"You need sleep, elf. Get someone rested to sit with Rowena this night."

The elf bowed, shamefaced, and left the room.

Godric hadn't meant to berate it, but he didn't have the strength to go after it and apologise.

He stroked Rowena's hair once and left her room.

He went to fetch his sword before leaving the castle. Things that deserved death were plentiful in the Forbidden Forest.

Salazar

No one noticed him lying behind the door. Certainly not Godric, never very observant other than on the battle field.

He slithered into the room the second before the door snapped shut behind Godric.

Salazar raised his head and body as high as he could and let go of the viper form, growing into a man again.

He glanced around the room. Everything was in meticulous order. The perfect order Rowena demanded but didn't thrive in. He was tempted to rumple the heavy curtains, open the books and place them in a haphazard piles, spreading them over the desk and floor.

He looked closer at Rowena sleeping in the bed. Kay had been right: she was dying.

Salazar leaned over and kissed her. Sick as she was, she was still beautiful.

When he kissed her, Rowena flinched and opened her eyes, and for a moment she looked confused.

"Salazar?" She tried to move, but he placed a hand on her shoulder, and she gave up the attempt.

"Yes. A bit of a surprise I realise, but I heard rumours that you needed to be taken to task."

"To task?"

Rowena continued to look bewildered. That more than anything made it clear to him how bad it was.

"I was told you've become lazy. Keeping to your bed under the guise of being old and feeble."

Rowena's pinched expression softened into what might be an amused smile.

"You always did call me ... lazy. All intelligence, no ... stamina."

He stroked away a strand of white hair from her forehead, then straightened his back and started to remove his clothes. He made a show of dropping them where he stood, as he always had.

"So ... untidy. Handsome ... though. Even if you are an ... old man."

Rowena's voice was almost impossible to discern.

"I snuck in here," he said, "with my life at risk. You know how indiscriminate Godric is with that sword of his. And you, you ungrateful woman, call me old." He cocked an eyebrow and smirked at her, playing the lover.

He got what he wanted, and the pang in his chest when he did made him want to massage his breastbone.

She chuckled. And she sounded just the same as she always had.

"Slithered, you mean? And now you're ... cold ... and expect me to take pity on you." Rowena's voice was stronger, not by much, but still.

He removed the duvet and crawled into the bed, ignoring the smell of decay. He carefully arranged himself next to her, putting one arm under her head and holding her close with the other.

"Of course I do. You never could keep me out of your bed. You never wanted to."

That chuckle again. The one that only he was able to coax from her. She turned her head, and he felt the tip of her nose touch the side of his neck. She inhaled deeply.

"Naughty man. Why did you ... leave? I missed you so." Her last sentence was close to a moan.

You should have come with me, woman. If you had, it wouldn't have come to this.

"I couldn't stay. You know that."

You know I couldn't stay, and you belonged to me. You should have left with me.

"How did you ... know?"

"Kay found me. He came looking for Helena."

What possessed you to send Kay, of all people? Didn't you understand how Helena would act? Didn't you realise the carnage he would cause?

"She was with you ... in Albania?"

Yes, and I tried to throw him off the trail. I failed. Like a dog seeking out a bitch in heat, he found her. I'm so sorry, my love, so sorry.

He ran his hand up her arm. She was colder than him, even though he was chilled to the bones from being in his Animagus form.

"Yes, but not when Kay arrived. She was in Italy. I sent him there. They are on their way here as we speak." He looked at her and smiled as he lied, touching her cheek, looking into her eyes.

Eyes growing more tired by the second. The bundle of skin and bones in his arms was quite willing to give up the fight.

It wouldn't take much effort from him after all, keeping her happy and content. He only needed to distract that keen mind of hers long enough and that wouldn't be long at all and she would die believing their daughter was on her way back and that she would see her soon.

Because the mind couldn't keep dying flesh alive indefinitely.

"I'm glad she went to ... you."

He smiled and kissed her. He tasted her the way he used to do, touching her face and throat.

She sighed and relaxed against him. Her breathing became even and she slept again.

Salazar listened to her shallow breaths throughout the night. He listened to the pauses between them as they grew longer.

And when the dawn came and the sky started to turn blue, he listen to the weak moan when the last remaining air left her lungs.

Then he pulled her body close, buried his face in her hair and sobbed.