



Homesick, Lovesick (Harper Valley Witch #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Ronan has a question to ask Match, but actually working up the nerve to ask it is proving harder than anticipated. He just needs the perfect moment, that's all.

Ever since the week their town was attacked by a trio of Jack Frosts, everything changed. Match has always been the best witch around, but now the rest of the world finally sees that, and they are competing fiercely for his attention. Especially as Match is still at odds with people he once called friends.

Ronan has seen the offers that Match claims to ignore and not care about. He hears the phone calls, he sees the looks of awe and wonder and more that people give him. He sees what Match does with his incredible, hard-won skills. And he starts to fear that maybe he and the town of Harper Valley are only holding Match back, and the question he so desperately wants to ask might be better left unspoken.

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Nine months was possibly a little early for an engagement ring.

On the other hand, they'd known each other for a million years as friends and apparently been mutually pining in miserable silence for much of that time.

Match was his forever after.

Ronan had known that for a long time.

He'd actually bought the ring around the seventh month mark, but had been trying to be patient.

He was still, as his uncles would say, pleased as punch with it.

What the jeweler had called a fancy vivid orange diamond, emerald cut, set in 4k gold with yellow diamond side and accent stones.

Match would probably kill him for buying something so expensive, but he was worth a ring a million times more expensive.

Ronan snapped the ring box shut and stuffed it back into his jacket pocket.

It was warm enough he didn't really need a jacket, but there was nowhere else to hide the ring that Match wouldn't immediately notice.

Thankfully, it was August.

Still technically summer, but fall came quickly up in the mountains, and by September it really would be time for a jacket.

Not that they were likely to be back home in September, though he was all for that kind of plot twist.

He climbed out of his car and closed the door, then entered the house through the back like always.

The little table by the door was piled with mail, a few bills but mostly letters and greeting cards.

Ever since Match sealed away Luna's powers, then done the same to her mother and a few others in their town, and read off the eastern council like they were bad children, the attention had been damn near popstar levels.

There were even letters, all with fancy seals and logos, in the small trashcan beneath the table.

Once it hadn't really caught more than junk mail and the odd tissue, but now it was always nearly overflowing with offers from people who wanted Match to be their witch at any cost.

Strangely, Match wasn't home.

The door had been unlocked, and it looked like he'd made tea recently as the kettle was still warm, but the tea was abandoned on the living room table, and Match was nowhere to be found.

Not even out with the pixies, where he easily became distracted because he could sit in there with them now and loved doing so.

He pulled out his phone to make certain he hadn't missed any texts, but the screen was definitely clear of any alerts.

So someone must have asked him for help with something or whatnot, and he hadn't thought it was worth texting.

Probably thought it would take five minutes, and it had spiraled.

Leaving it for the moment, he went into the bedroom to pack his bags for yet another excursion.

This time Match had agreed to help out with some particularly difficult warding.

Unusual, since wards by their nature were unique to their witch, but with such a large area to cover, and so many things large and small to account for, it would take multiple witches to accomplish it.

They'd be warding an entire sprawling territory, half of a large county, as that was easier than warding each and every property, since it was such a rural area—and treacherous on top of that, all harsh mountain and dense forest.

Rife with natural and supernatural peril.

Easy to get lost in, easy to die in.

So they would be setting up all manner of wards that would persuade various threats to stay to certain areas and keep others out of the whole territory, confine them to public land, where more qualified experts could manage things and the poor creatures would be left in peace.

Since wards had to be keyed to the person or persons in charge of the territory, Match

would build the wards himself and then spend another week at the end handing them over to the appropriate witch, a woman named Minerva.

If she had to do the whole thing on her own, it would take upwards of a decade.

Experienced though Match and Ronan were with mountain hiking, he was grateful they'd have a couple of locals with them for the days upon days of hiking they'd be doing, a week at a time before returning to rest and resupply for a few days before heading out again.

There'd be a big two week break in the middle, and then work would resume, and they probably wouldn't finish until the end of October—best case scenario.

If they had to deal with inclement weather and other unforeseen problems, it could take through the rest of the year.

And wouldn't that fucking suck, but there was nothing for it.

Match really wanted to help.

These sorts of projects were exactly his forte, and Ronan would be his paladin on the quest no matter what.

Only for love would he spend actual, real, literal months camping.

Ugh.

He'd had more than enough of that during his years and years of paladin training.

Leaving his suitcase, duffel, and laptop bags by the door, he ventured into the kitchen in search of a snack.

Benny had made them a batch of his special peanut butter brownies, and Ronan had already eaten a third of them with absolutely no remorse.

Chocolate and peanut butter and topped with ganache? Yeah, they were getting gone.

Anyway, all the hiking he was about to do would burn his calories for the next two years.

Taking a giant chomp of brownie, he rifled in the fridge for the milk, filled a large glass, then snitched a second brownie and carried it all into the living room.

Still no messages on his phone, so either Match would be back very soon, or he was thoroughly distracted by whatever he was doing.

Since his laptop was packed up, he couldn't play any of his silly games, so he instead turned on the TV—then turned it right off again when everything felt too loud and bright.

Finishing his snack, he put the cup in the dishwasher then decided to get a shower.

Maybe by the time he was out, Match would be back.

Pulling the ring out of his pocket, he stashed it in his nightstand behind all the other junk, then stripped off his clothes, lobbing them into the hamper as he went, and went into the bathroom and got the shower going.

When steam started spilling into the bathroom, he slid inside and groaned as the hot water struck his stiff body and immediately started easing the tensions of the day.

Most of it was his fault, sending his anxiety spiraling by overthinking proposing to the love of his life, instead of just acting, but...

Sighing, he turned away from the hot water pelting his face and reached for the soap—then nearly jumped out of his skin when the shower curtain was opened.

"Fuck, you scared the shit out of me."

Match laughed.

"I called your name twice, doofus. Does that mean you don't want company?"

"Get your ass in here,"

Ronan replied.

Still laughing, Match ditched his clothes with record speed and stepped inside, closing the curtain behind him and banishing all the evil cold air that had gotten inside.

"What's up, handsome. Long time no see."

Ronan kissed him, then murmured against his mouth, "You taste like bubblegum."

"Probably because I was chewing on bubblegum,"

Match said, grinning and then kissing him again.

Rolling his eyes, Ronan fetched the shampoo and set to work on Match's hair. They washed each other back and forth, easy and almost lazy, the routine comfortingly familiar. When they eventually finished and climbed out, the water was growing cold because Match sorely needed a more robust water heater.

"So where did you mysteriously vanish to? I thought you'd be here fretting over what

to pack, but you were nowhere to be found."

Ronan finished toweling off, then pulled on sweats and an old t-shirt that said CAMELOT across the front and had the crest of Camelot across the back. It was an old gift from Match, because he loved nothing more than making jokes about him and Benny being knights. Knights of the Dining Room Table and other variations on that theme were his particular favorite, and the more exasperated Ronan and Benny were, the better.

It was Match who rolled his eyes this time.

"Mrs. Carlow wanted me to investigate a 'weird noise in her basement,' but there was nothing down there except mice and her very fat cat. I think she just wanted an excuse to trap me in her kitchen and natter at me until her 'dear sweet granddaughter' got home. Like I don't know damn good and well who her granddaughter is."

He huffed, then tugged on a long-sleeved gray t-shirt and loose sleep pants in a ridiculous plaid pattern of various shades of pink.

The granddaughter in question was Maddy, the jackass coward who'd thrown Match, and decades of friendship, out of her shop just because of a toothless threat from the mayor. She'd emailed and snail-mailed apologies, and tried to speak to Match in public a couple of times when their paths crossed, but Match had assiduously avoided her and the other jerks the past few months.

He'd have to speak to them eventually, as his disconnect with Harper Valley had cast something of a pall over the town, but Ronan definitely wasn't going to push him on it. Whatever time he needed, he would get. Everyone who didn't like that could choke on it and drown in their guilt for all he cared.

He remembered far too well all the torment that had been visited on him when he'd

walked away from his parents, stopping just shy of no contact. Everyone had come down on him, but nobody had yelled at them.

So yeah, Match could do or not do whatever the hell he wanted, and Ronan would have his back.

Going into the kitchen, Match set to work making dinner. Ronan kept him company, admired as he worked, but stayed out of his way. He could cook okay, and did his share, but Match was the better cook by leagues, and much like when he was doing his witchy thing, he did not like interference.

When dinner was ready, they sat at the little table in the kitchen, a cute thing that Match had grabbed at the thrift store and cleaned up meticulously. If not for some of the deeper scratches and the patch job that made it stop wobbling, it could have been brand new.

After they'd eaten, Ronan did the dishes and tidied the kitchen while Match fed his pixies and then finished up his packing.

By the time they were done with everything and the house closed up for the night, Ronan was almost ready to just pass right out.

Almost.

Once they were in bed, before Match could turn off the light on his nightstand, Ronan pulled him over and atop him, threading a hand through his hair and tugging him down into a lengthy kiss.

"So what does a man have to do to get his boyfriend to ride him?"

Match laughed and kissed him again, then squirmed free.

"I think he would just have to get undressed."

He laughed harder as Ronan's clothes went flying to the floor in record time, sending his own right after them. Then Ronan pushed Match into the bedding and put his mouth to all that lovely skin, soaking up the moans and pleas and gasps like water on a hot day. Warm fingers glided over his skin, gripping intermittently, as if Match couldn't decide if he wanted to pull Ronan closer or push him away.

Eventually, he decided on push, shoving Ronan onto his back and straddling him.

"I believe you had a request, paladin."

He leaned over to grab the lube from Ronan's nightstand drawer, then rose up on his knees to work himself open, eyes locked with Ronan's nearly the entire time.

Ronan groaned when he finally withdrew his fingers and said, "Now."

He took hold of Ronan's cock, lined it up, and sank down with agonizing slowness, leaving them both panting and trembling by the time Ronan was fully inside him.

His beautiful tattoos shimmered ever so faintly in the muted light, and his eyes damn near glowed, his power always so close to the surface when his emotions were high, like static electricity crackling in the air.

Ronan held fast to his hips as Match began to fuck himself on Ronan's cock, lifting up and driving back down, drops of sweat racing down his skin and occasionally splashing on Ronan. His hands were slick where they held tight, his body too fucking hot as he equaled Match's movement thrust for thrust, sinking in as deep as he could go, always desperate for more more more because there was no such thing as too much when it came to Match. He had waited and pined so long for this beautiful man, and it would always leave him dizzy and breathless that Match wanted him too.

He let go of one hip to get a hand around Match's cock, stroking him in time with their movements. Match gasped out his name, clamped down tight on his cock, and they were both coming with long, deep groans.

When they could move again, Match pulled off him and rolled over to his side of the bed. Ronan got them cleaned up and then double-checked all the doors and windows were locked because he couldn't not.

Back in the bedroom, Match had turned off his light, leaving only hints of moonlight filtering through gauzy curtains. The bedroom smelled like them, warm and comforting, with a hint of fresh green from the five thousand plants around the house. Where there was a hedge witch, there were plants.

Once they were done with all the stupid traveling, Match wanted to work in earnest on the backyard, turn it fully into a proper garden, with sufficient warding, so the pixies could roam freely. It would take most of a year just for the wards, longer if work got busy, and he had to use his energy there, but the way his face lit up when he talked about it was all that mattered to Ronan.

Cuddling up behind him, he kissed Match's shoulder and settled in to sleep.

Hopefully, hopefully, this trip would go smoothly, they'd get the work done, and could come home and be done with extracurricular projects for a little while. If he was really lucky, they could also start planning a wedding.

He just had to ask the fucking question first. Surely trekking through the woods would provide a perfect opportunity. All that nature, maybe a pretty waterfall...

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Ronan looked up from the breakfast dishes he was washing as someone knocked on the back door. Before he could even move to dry his hands, Match was there, pulling it open to reveal his parents.

"Mom! Dad!"

He hugged them tightly.

It always kind of hurt, in a bittersweet way, watching Match with his parents. They loved him so much, and just wanted him to be happy, whatever he did. Yeah, he'd followed in his mother's footsteps, but if he'd chosen something else, they would have supported him.

So far as Ronan's parents were concerned, the only thing he'd ever done right was becoming a paladin. He should have focused on being a shiny, perfect golden paladin, though. Drawn his power from the sun and shit, instead of being a 'creepy' dark paladin who thrived on the night, on shadows and blood.

Ronan had never wanted that, though. He liked being a dark paladin, and anyway, it had been clear from his first day of school in Harper Valley that Benny had the whole traditional paladin thing locked down. He was made for it, loved it and thrived on it.

Even if Ronan had wanted to be a traditional, 'golden' paladin, they already had one. A Guardian team of their size didn't need two, and he was better with the goth end of things anyway. Plus, witches were also closely tied to the night, to blood, which meant Ronan had that much more in common with the ridiculously pretty witch he'd been crushing on since the first day at his new high school.

So he'd gone dark paladin, and just added it to the ever-growing list of things that made his parents disappointed in him. At least he had his uncles. They'd been better parents to him than his actual parents ever were.

"Ronan, sweetie, how are you?"

Jordan asked, smiling brightly. The last time he'd seen her, her hair had been a bright blue bob. Now it was watermelon pink and long enough she'd thrown it up messily in a neon green hair clip. Ronan had no idea what color it actually was, because for as long as he'd known their family, her hair was always some crazy color. Even in old pictures, it was dyed.

"Oh, you know, waiting with bated breath to go shit in the woods for three months."

Jordan giggled. Her husband, Darius, rolled his eyes at them. Save for the green eyes and nose he'd gotten from his mom, Match looked very much like a copy of his dad. Brown skin, black hair, even the way they stood and moved was close, though Match was also a fidgeter like his mom, where his dad was always so still.

Match poked him in the ribs.

"Stop it, you big baby."

"Hey, I said I'd do it, and I will. But after this little venture, I'm never leaving indoor plumbing again. I was not born in this century to snub such a great and marvelous gift."

"Baby,"

Match repeated.

"All right, sweetie, show me what's what while your father deals with the luggage,"

Jordan said, and off the merry witches went.

Ronan helped haul in the luggage and other odds and ends they'd brought.

Even knowing how awesome they were, it was still amazing to him they'd agree to come and stay for three whole months to cover Match's duties and take care of his pixies and plants while they were gone.

The plants and stuff the others would have been happy to attend, especially Penelope as she loved the pixies almost as much as Match, but the magic...the magic was the key.

Harper Valley couldn't go without a witch for three months.

And if things went wrong, it might be even longer than that, though gods above he hoped not.

"Really appreciate you guys doing this,"

he said.

"If I asked my parents to cover us for a weekend, I'd never hear the end of how perfect and magnanimous they are for agreeing to do it and receive an itemized bill."

"Yeah, meeting your parents that one and only time was a treat. I'm sorry they're like that."

Darius hugged him briefly, and then they got to work unpacking.

Darius handled the clothes and bathroom stuff, Ronan dealt with the food, games, and other miscellany they brought to make the house feel like their home away from home.

They'd already cleaned the place about thirteen and a half times over, though that hadn't kept Match from fretting himself to death.

Even though he kept his house neat as a pin anyway, almost religiously, since the house was such an upscale from both the small, ramshackle house he and his parents had lived in and the shitty apartment he'd been stuck with for way too long.

If there was one thing that haunted Ronan, haunted all of them, unbeknownst to Match, it was how stupidly clueless they'd been about Match's situation, and how long they'd been stupidly clueless.

He was their friend and teammate.

They should have known.

Even everything Benny had done to get him a fat check and increased pay didn't seem to make up for all the ways Match had been wronged by everybody.

Which was why the whole town could suck on it until Match felt like facing them.

When he'd finished putting the board games and blu-rays away, he tucked the empty bags into the spare closet and then returned to the living room, where Darius had brought in three cat carriers.

He opened them one by one, and from each came an imperious ball of fluff: Serena, a fluffy white menace; Salem, an even fluffier black menace; and finally the Fluff Supreme Herself, Antigone, a beautiful calico.

So named because Jordan had found her trapped in a wall as a kitten.

They looked around warily, gave him an unimpressed look, then set off exploring.

"Only three?"

Ronan asked with a grin.

"I'm sure more will find her while we're here,"

Darius said dryly.

"Thankfully, the rest of the horde didn't seem troubled about being left behind.

The young ones have plenty to entertain them, and the older ones like not being disturbed.

It's only these three that refuse to be parted.

Antigone sits in the car when we go grocery shopping. It's honestly ridiculous. Yes, I'm maligning you, cat."

Snickering, leaving them to it, Ronan went in search of his boyfriend.

Hopefully his fiancé soon, but it was way too early still to be tying himself up in those knots.

That reminded him, though...

Slipping into the bedroom, he went to his nightstand and retrieved the box, shoving it into the front of his hoodie.

The morning had proven surprisingly cool for mid-August, and as they were going higher up into the mountains, it was only going to get colder.

Three months.

He could do this.

Especially if they came across the perfect spot to propose to the love of his life.

And if Match said no, hopefully there'd be an equally convenient deep, spooky lake to throw himself into.

Ring retrieved, he resumed the boyfriend hunt, which wasn't hard.

They were, predictably, in the garden rhapsodizing over the late summer squash that would be ready for harvest any day, and the tomatoes that wouldn't stop coming.

Ronan had no idea just a few plants would result in a truly ungodly amount of goddamn tomatoes.

Match always turned all the vegetables into something delicious, though, so it was hard to complain.

Except about bugs.

Ronan would complain about bugs all day every day, especially those bastard hornworms trying to destroy his tomato plants.

Apparently once the pixies could roam freely, they'd be quite good at pest management. He couldn't wait.

He smiled as they came back toward him.

"All set?"

"All set,"

Jordan said cheerfully.

"Got the lay of the land, he's looped me into the wards, should be good to go. Hopefully everything will be quiet, but we're ready if it isn't."

"No more jack frosts ever, please,"

Match muttered.

"Nah, we're going deep in the mountains—definitely gonna get an abominable snowman."

Match glared.

"If that happens, I'm leaving you there with it."

Ronan grinned.

"Ready to go? Anything else you need?"

"Lemme say goodbye to the pixies, then I'll meet you in the car."

"Okay."

Ronan hugged Jordan farewell, waved to Darius where he stood in the doorway, and

slid behind the seat of his Challenger. It was about eight years old now, but still in great condition. The others teased him about the car being his baby, but it really was. The first real, serious thing he'd ever bought with his own money that had no ties to his family whatsoever. Painted Octane Red. All black leather interior. Enough horsepower to please the ancestors, as his Uncle Phil would say, because he was a delightful weirdo.

His car was his most prized possession, one of the few things his parents couldn't hold over his head or take away from him. Above all, it was freedom. If he had his car, nothing could stop him or hold him. When dealing with his shitheel family, that was vital to survival.

The passenger door opened, and Match slid inside, settling like he belonged. For so long, he really only got near Ronan's car when he was re-upping his protections. Otherwise, he and Benny were always on their precious deathtraps. Now, though, Match only bothered with his bike when he had somewhere to go, and Ronan wasn't around or able to drive him. They'd only been a real thing for nine months, but he was as sunk into the car as Ronan in some ways. Even now, his latest protection spell dangled from the mirror, making the car smell sweetly of herbs and flowers.

"How were the cats? They'd just been set free when I came outside."

"Two are sleeping on the bed already, and Antigone was on a kitchen chair talking to my mom while she made tea. She's amused by how much mint I keep around for you."

"I like mint tea,"

Ronan said, shrugging one shoulder.

He actually didn't care one way or another about it, or at least hadn't until that night

he'd gone to Match's apartment hoping to talk to him. Assure him that stupid love spell hadn't done anything bad. Ronan hadn't even felt all that different, just braver. But Match had seemed so despondent and self-hating. Ronan had asked for tea because it always made Match happy to have something explicit to do, and the mint was all his anxiety-riddled brain had been able to remember.

It now would be his favorite tea until the day he died.

"So five-hour drive, most of it going up. Stop about halfway for a break, should be there around six, seven if we run into construction or whatever."

"Sounds good. Let's go."

Match leaned over to kiss him, then settled back and buckled his seatbelt into place before messing with the radio.

Hopefully, a smooth start meant a smooth ride for the whole next three months.

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They arrived at just past ten o'clock on a spare tire, and Ronan did not want to fucking talk about it. But whatever asshole had dropped a box of nails from the back of his shitty F-150 and just left them scattered across the road was going to be hearing a lot of choice words from Ronan the minute he found the stupid bastard.

He also didn't want to talk about the construction, or the other stupid asshole who'd thrown a soda at his car for some imagined slight Ronan had never puzzled out. His poor car. He'd just gotten the tires changed a couple of months ago too.

"Hey,"

Match said, winding around him in a tight hug.

"We made it in one piece, mostly because you're a damned good driver. Not some insecure asshole who loses his shit over the slightest inconvenience."

Ronan mustered a smile he didn't really feel and kissed the top of Match's head before pulling away to stare at their destination. The whole project was headquartered at an old summer camp closed for the season. Apparently the cabins had been fixed up to accommodate a pair of adults in each instead of four to six kids.

They were cabin number four, and it did not look promising. Well, it wasn't like he'd been expecting the Ritz.

They were supposed to have arrived between six and seven, sat down to dinner and met the whole team. But the kitchen was long closed, and everyone was dispersed, if not asleep. The key had been left in their mailbox, though he wasn't clear why a

summer camp had mailboxes on every cabin. Summer camp wasn't really something Ronan's family did. His parents would consider that slumming it, except their phrasing would be even uglier.

"Lemme grab the key, then I'll unload the car,"

he said, trying to shove down his bad mood. They were here, the ordeals of traffic were over with, that stupid asshole would continue on to make more people miserable, and there was fuckall he could do about it.

He climbed a set of creaky steps on to an even creakier porch that featured rocking chairs older than god, and opened the mailbox—and jumped a mile up and back as a giant ass fucking spider crawled out.

"Jesus fuck this fucking day. What in the goddamn hell is that."

"What is— Oh, that's just a wolf spider. They're harmless."

"They're not harmless to my soul or sound sleep,"

Ronan grouched, leaving his beloved to coddle the stupid spider while he finally secured the key, unlocked the door, and threw it open.

Thankfully, it did not smell like young boys still learning proper shower habits. Mostly it just smelled of pine trees and some sort of cheap air freshener. Match hated those things. By tomorrow it would be cleared out and replaced with sachets made of whatever he found in the forest.

"What is that god awful smell?"

"If I had to guess,"

Ronan said, suppressing a grin, "I'd go with 'Spring Meadow.' One of the plug-in ones. Yep, right there, I see the culprit."

He strode over to the little kitchenette area, if it could be called that when it was just a fridge, a sink, a hotplate, and the world's oldest coffee machine, and reached under the half-assed sink to pull the plug-in from the socket. Because an electrical socket right beneath what amounted to a glorified bucket and a table with the middle cut out, was a brilliant idea. Forget bears and snakes and spiders; they were going to die from dubious home improvements.

"Remind me tomorrow to do some furniture rearranging and also find the breaker box."

"Noted,"

Match said around a yawn.

"Where's the shower and bathroom? Oh, wait, maybe that's it."

He opened a door at the back of the cabin, then sighed.

"The shower and toilet are outside. Like I guess technically these count as walls, but one good storm, and we're gonna be arrested for public nudity."

Ronan groaned.

"How are kids allowed to stay here?"

"I think when it's kids they probably use a communal shower, and this was all just added on for us. The plywood walls look brand new. Probably all vanish again when we're done. I'll, uh, clear out a few spiders, then you can get a shower."

Ronan whimpered and put his attention to emptying their luggage into the single dresser and the rack shoved into one corner that was all they were getting for a closet. At least instead of bunk beds or whatever, there was one large queen bed. That took up most of one wall. Near it was the door to the Shower from Hell, and opposite was the Kitchen of Electrical Fire Waiting to Happen and the dressers.

When the luggage was empty, he shoved it under the bed.

"Shower is now safe,"

Match said.

Resigned to his fate of spider jumpscare, Ronan stripped off his clothes, grabbed his towel, and went to face his demise.

The shower situation was even more desultory than promised. There were multiple pieces of plywood forming the world's most out-of-code lean-to he'd ever seen in his life. No roof. It was probably held together with staples rather than nails. One side had a toilet that hopefully had actual plumbing and wasn't some sort of white trash, hovering over a hole in the ground situation, and the other side had a shower stall that had probably been bought used and spritzed with bleach. Hopefully. The showerhead looked like the standard locker room kind.

Making sure his hair was covered so it didn't get wet, as tonight was not a wash night, he turned on the water and waited. To his enormous relief, there was both good pressure and steam. Take the win.

He showered as quickly as humanly possible, mourning that the space was too small for shared showers, then grabbed his towel and fled back to the relative safety of the cabin.

"So this is hell on earth."

"No, it's not,"

Match said as he climbed off the bed and stripped for his own shower.

"That's going to be next week when you have to shower in a freezing cold creek."

Ronan closed his eyes and whimpered.

"I'm too spoiled and entitled for this shit."

Match giggled before kissing him briefly. As much as Ronan loved having a naked Match pressed up against him, it was getting chilly, and it was nearly midnight at this point. So he stole another kiss and reluctantly let him go, then pulled on sweats and a t-shirt before locking the door and double checking the two small windows. Not that windows and a door would do much if they were attacked by grizzlies in the night, but swords and magic would handle that, though he wasn't actually in a hurry to hurt any bears. They weren't doing anything wrong in their eyes, after all.

He climbed into bed, sighing at the hard mattress. At least the blankets were nice and heavy, though they smelled of those shitty laundry beads. Another thing Match would address with vigor at some point. There'd be lavender and rosemary sachets everywhere.

"There's no heater that I can see,"

Match said as he slid into bed.

"This room is going to turn into an icebox without a heater."

"I'm sure they'll provide space heaters once the chill really sets in. Probably from the 190s with frayed wires."

Match laughed, rolling over to half-sprawl across him.

"Hopefully we'll get tomorrow to make this place a little better, so we don't dread the breaks between rounds of hiking. I'm starting with that damn fake scent."

Ronan caressed his back idly, kissing him softly, until Match drifted off with a soft sigh.

He stared up at the ceiling, where he could just see a fat spider weaving a web in the corner of a pair of rafters.

After all of this, if he didn't get to propose in front of a beautiful waterfall in a field of flowers, he was gonna burn the forest down.

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Ronan grunted in annoyance as he was rudely woken by someone knocking on the door. He peeled his eyes open, fumbled for his phone, and saw it was barely seven in the morning. What in the justified homicide?

"Got it,"

Match said, rolling out of bed and walking stiffly to the door still rubbing sleep from his eyes. He pulled it open, and the most ridiculously pretty man Ronan had ever seen stepped inside.

He had that white skin that was almost translucent, probably turned tomato red after two minutes in sunlight. Midnight dark hair that fell to his ass, and delicate pale blue eyes, the kind of sharp features that belonged to an anti-hero in a videogame. He was wearing stupidly tight black jeans and a bright blue muscle shirt.

On his right arm was the sword tattoo of a paladin, but where Ronan had the snake and star crest of his family at the base and a moon to signal he was a dark paladin at the point, Pretty Boy had a rose and thorn crest and...a moon. Great. Pretty Boy was the same specialty.

"Good Morning,"

Pretty Boy said.

"You must be John Willow."

"I prefer Match. You're Lynwood Mackenzie, right?"

Smiling like he was at a photoshoot, Lynwood replied, "That's me. Lyn is fine if you prefer. Sorry, it sounds like you had a lousy trip. We could have sent someone to drive you."

Ronan bristled.

"It wasn't the driving that was lacking. It was construction, and someone leaving nails across the road."

Lynwood shifted his gaze, and Ronan didn't think he was imagining the look of irritation that flashed across his face before he was smiling with all the life of week-old vanilla pudding.

"I didn't realize you'd brought a friend."

"I mentioned it to Minerva. She was more than happy for my boyfriend to join me,"

Match said icily.

"He's my paladin."

Smiling all nice again, Lynwood said, "My apologies, of course. I must have forgotten with one thing and another. Now you'll have two paladins along for protection. Breakfast is at eight, but I thought maybe you'd like to see some of the camp before that, since you didn't get a chance last night."

"Sure, we're awake now, may as well. Give us ten minutes. We'll meet you outside."

"Of course."

He left, closing the door behind him. Ronan huffed and threw back the blankets.

Striding over to his dresser, he pulled out clothes and yanked them on. T-shirt, his favorite zip-up hoodie that was black and covered in glow-in-the-dark stars, though they were mostly worn off and faded now, a pair of jeans that were actually functional because they weren't practically painted on.

Lacing on his boots, he shoved all his necessities in their various pockets. He fiddled with his nose ring while he waited for Match to finish gathering his things, as no respectable witch went anywhere without the tools of their trade. Match's bag of tricks was, near as Ronan could tell, unmatched.

As Match joined him by the door, Ronan drew him into a soft kiss.

"Gonna make this place smell like lavender later?"

"Of course, with rosemary and mint. Come on, let's go socialize, I guess."

Outside, Lynwood was standing entirely too close to the Challenger.

"Your car?"

he asked, barely looking at Ronan.

"Yeah."

"Nice car, but kind of useless out here."

"It did the job, and we're not gonna be driving through the woods."

Lynwood shrugged.

"True enough."

He smiled at Match.

"Come on, we'll do a quick tour, and then it's time for French toast with fresh strawberries. There's a strawberry field next door to the camp. They always do strawberry picking with the kids."

"Sounds nice. So did you go to this camp as a kid?"

"Yeah, they have one for the little kids at the beginning of summer, then one for like middle school age, and normally August would be for the high school kids, but they canceled it this year. I went almost every year since I was ten. Know this place in my sleep."

He stopped outside a large building that seemed divided in two and waved a hand at it.

"These are the showers and toilets for the camp. Feel free to use them, but I promise the temp ones installed in your cabins are better."

Ronan shook his head.

"I would freaking hate to have to get up at midnight to come all the way out here to piss. Seems like a spell for disaster."

"There are always night duty staff to keep an eye on things, escort the younger kids. Every year they say they're gonna make improvements, but..."

Lynwood shrugged.

"Money always goes to other things. Here's where we grill out most nights—too hot to cook in the kitchen. Over there is where the kids eat breakfast and stuff. Past that

fence are all the activity areas. Gate gets locked at night and the counselors take turns on gate duty because kids are stupid and high schoolers are stupider."

He grinned fleetingly and winked at Match.

"Lots of places to climb the fence without getting caught, though, and good make-out spots in the woods."

Match snorted a laugh.

"Thankfully, I'm an adult and can make out with my boyfriend whenever I want in the privacy of my own cabin."

"True,"

Lynwood said with his own laugh, though it was clearly forced.

"That cabin there is the main office and where Minerva and her husband staying. He's a werebear."

Werebears were rare. Wolves were the most common, the easiest transformation for humans to handle, though the science remained unclear why. But other shifter types did exist. He hadn't realized the bear clan would be involved in any of this. Too bad Traci wasn't here; she'd have loved to hang out with them. Maybe if this all worked out, they could come back. Benny would probably never get Traci out of the woods.

"Later, I can show you the boathouse and everything. Do you like to swim?"

Match brightened at that, turning away from a bush of red flowers he'd been admiring.

"Yeah, love to. The second the weather warms up, we spend a couple weekends a month up at the lake. Not camping, there are cabins up there."

"That were built this century even,"

Ronan said with a grin.

Lynwood gave him a sour look.

"There's nothing wrong with ours."

Ronan's grin faded.

"I was just making a joke. The cabins are fine. You're the one who commented they needed updates. My bad."

"Let's go get breakfast,"

Match said, good mood vanished from his voice. Damn it.

"Sorry,"

Ronan murmured as they walked.

"I really did not mean any harm."

Match looked at him like he was crazy.

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm annoyed with him. It's clear there's some sort of paladin dick measuring going on in his head, and if he winks at me one more time, I'm gonna lay a hex on him."

Ronan tangled their fingers together and lifted his hand to kiss the back of it.

"Hex, hmm? At least you're not up to full-blown curses yet."

Ahead of them, Lynwood's shoulders seemed tight and hunched, his head slightly down, and there was probably a scowl or pout on his face.

He led them around the side of the cafeteria or hall or whatever it was, through a door that led to a large kitchen, the industrial kind that pumped out school pizza or overcooked cordon bleu at the world's most tepid dinner party. He did not miss being dragged to those stupid things.

They continued on through a set of swinging double doors, into a small dining room that was probably for staff or something. Five people sat there: Minerva, whom he'd met when she came to see them; a man beside her who was likely the aforementioned husband; a woman who looked to be in her late teens who was probably a daughter or niece; another woman who looked a lot like Lynwood; and a young man who looked like he'd drunk lemon juice instead of coffee for breakfast.

Ronan already wanted to go back to bed.

"Shouldn't there be a lot more of us?"

"Some are still sleeping. The rest haven't arrived yet. Two of them got deathly sick at the last minute and had to be replaced. They'll be here either late tonight or early tomorrow, they weren't quite sure which yet,"

Minerva said.

"Good to see you, thank you again for helping out."

"I go where Match goes,"

Ronan said with an easy shrug, and smiled.

"Anyway, it's incredibly interesting work, even if it entails living in the woods and dealing with monster spiders."

Match rolled his eyes.

"It was a wolf spider, and more scared of you than you are of it."

"I highly doubt that."

Minerva's husband chuckled and reached a hand over the table.

"Stefan. Nice to finally meet you. This is our youngest daughter, Abigail, our eldest Cora, and my nephew Walter."

Walter. Yeah, if that were his name, he'd look sour all the time too. Ronan nodded at him, and that made him smile faintly and nod back.

"Gail,"

said the late-teens girl, and shook their hands before settling back and looking at Match.

"Mom has been talking about you incessantly. I think you're her favorite child. So why do they call you Match?"

"They're my thing,"

Match replied.

"My mom has her cats, my grandmother had her roses, and my thing has always been my matches."

Minerva smiled.

"Never met a witch who had a thing for fire starters. Not what we usually go for, but if I've learned nothing else, it's that you're unique."

Gail rolled her eyes.

"See what I mean? Favorite child?"

"No joke,"

Walter said with a laugh.

"She's gonna drop all of us from the will."

Minerva shot him an exasperated look.

"I dropped you from the will the day I found yet another lizard in my sewing room."

Walter snickered.

Ronan glanced over Gail's arms as she waved them about. No tattoos, so in training or possibly was like her father.

"He's everyone's favorite child. Even my parents, who disapprove of my everything and particularly hated that I dodged all their prestigious marriage candidates, are

slowly coming around to him."

Though that had more to do with how popular and beloved within the community they'd belatedly realized Match was. His parents were many things, and opportunistic was in the top five.

Gail finished her coffee and stood to get more from the little table in the corner.

"Why don't they like you?"

"If they were in a Dickens novel, they'd be Marley and Marley,"

Ronan said dryly.

"If I hadn't gotten out when I did, I might have become Ebenezer Scrooge."

Match laughed and kissed his cheek.

"You couldn't be Scrooge if you were enlisted for a children's play."

Gail wrinkled her nose as she sat back down.

"Yeah, one of my tutors was like that. Mom and Dad fired him real damn fast. Glad you got out."

Ronan stood and went to fix coffee for him and Match now that he was aware it was there. That got him another kiss when he sat back down.

"So what are you training for?"

"Healing,"

Gail replied.

Match whistled.

"That's impressive."

Healing was a highly specialized magic, like becoming a brain surgeon or something.

Most witches preferred to be more generalized in their power.

Someone like Match had to be, because he was the only witch for their small town.

Healers couldn't do wards or the many other magics required of Guards, so they were really only seen on larger teams, mostly in cities but sometimes, like their current situation, in rural areas that covered a whole lot of territory and so required a larger than usual Guard.

Gail smiled shyly.

"I don't have my tattoos yet, obviously, but there's no rush. My grandmother said she would do it for me someday."

"My grandfather gave me mine,"

Match replied.

It was one of the darker sides of magic, that someone had to die to give the tattoos to a new witch, but it was a sacred practice amongst witches.

Blood of the Willing, it was called.

There was no other way for a witch to come fully into their powers.

It was a final test of sorts. If nobody was willing to do that for them, they were considered unworthy. Witches were all about giving.

Versus paladins, who were all about taking.

The sword tattoo of paladins were initially done in special ink, but they did not come to life, as it were, until the paladin spilled fatal blood with their own hands.

Not just any blood, either, he couldn't just walk down the street and stab some poor bastard.

The same way the magic knew if a blood donor was willing, it knew if he killed in defense of others.

Magic had a price, and at its steepest the price was always blood and the weight of taking it.

"I'm a shifter like Uncle,"

Walter said.

"Only one on my side of the family. My siblings don't care about magic, and my mom is a witch with the group that hasn't arrived yet. She's supposed to bring my Switch."

Ronan smiled.

"So you've been training? We have a werewolf on our team.

I've never met other kinds of shifters, except a family of snotty werecats who visited from Canada once.

I was only fourteen, but I think my parents were feeling out their daughter for potential marriage. We got into a fistfight, though, and they left after that."

"What in the world did she do that you punched her?"

Match asked.

"How come I've never heard this story."

"She called me a not-nice word for gay people when she caught me kissing the gardener's son.

It was not long after that I went to live with my uncles full-time and met all of you.

Hadn't thought about that day in years.

Hope she's either grown the hell up or is totally miserable."

Across the table, Lynwood and Cora were still silent, often exchanging looks that, to Ronan's eye at least, seemed rather judgy.

But he already didn't like Lynwood, so he wasn't exactly an unbiased opinion.

God, let them not be on the same team when the hiking began.

Before anyone could speak further, the door swung open, and three people came in with serving trays loaded with food.

Plates of the promised French toast, additional plates of bacon and eggs, glasses of juice, and bowls of fruit.

Ronan's stomach growled as his was set in front of him.

He chose orange juice, and grabbed an apple juice for Match.

All remained silent as they ate, save for a brief introduction to the trio, part of the staff who'd remain at base to coordinate all the teams and, when they were there, provide food and such.

Ronan wondered which of them was responsible for the dubious home improvements, but he didn't ask.

Conversation resumed as the eating wound down.

"This French toast is awesome,"

Ronan said.

"Benny would probably commit crimes to have the recipe, though his French toast is nothing to scoff at."

"Who's Benny?"

Gail asked.

"Our leader, a golden paladin. He's always cooking. We do dinner at his house every Sunday. He made us his award-winning pot roast as a farewell meal. It was heaven on a plate."

Match gave him a fond, amused look.

"You're lucky I don't mind you prefer Benny's cooking to mine."

Ronan grinned.

"You prefer his cooking to yours, and we won't talk about my cooking."

Match laughed.

Across the table, Lynwood looked peeved, and sounded more than a little snotty as he asked, "How does a pot roast win an award?"

"Smalltown life,"

Match replied.

"There's a county fair hosted in Harper Valley every year, and if it can be cooked or baked, there's a contest for it. Can get pretty ugly. Last year, when Auntie Dina won the pie contest, there was an entire shouting match, and somebody slit her tires. Don't even get me started on the drama with the chili cookoff. The cops had to be called for that one."

Ronan snickered.

"That's nothing. There are entire blood feuds in the quilting community. It's highly entertaining so long as you're smart enough to stay on the fringes and watch. But Benny is not a stay on the fringes kind of person, and the county fair is his favorite time of year. Forget Christmas and shit, the only sacred holiday in that household is County Fair Week."

"Seems kinda lame,"

Cora said.

"Imagine putting your entire personality into making the best blueberry pie in the county. Surely there are better things to do."

Okay, now Ronan full-on hated both of them.

"I mean, it's not like attendance is mandatory, and there are lots of other things to do. It's basically a carnival slash food fair, and a lot of fun. Better than watered down aperitifs and stale hors d'oeuvres while wearing a suit and tie for at least six hours. All the other delightful things my family used to make me do."

Lynwood rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, what a fucking burden being wealthy and popular must be. I feel so sorry for you."

"That's enough,"

Minerva said sharply.

"If the two of you are going to sit here being rude, then you must need something to do. Go sort out the equipment, and have it ready for me to inspect in five hours."

Though they clearly wanted to argue with what must be a shit job, they dutifully rose and left.

Minerva turned to them.

"I apologize for them. I've no idea what's gotten into them. They won't act that way a second time."

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"It's fine. I'm sure to them, knowing not much at all about me, I do sound like a wealthy brat crying about how hard my life is while sitting on piles of cash. I have it good, and I know it."

Though he would have thought 'live with my uncles full time' would have clued the dumbasses in that there were real, actual problems with his parents, but whatever.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"We're kind of at a standstill until the rest of the team shows up."

Minerva stood and started gathering up all the dishes.

"Those two are organizing the equipment. We've got packs, sleeping bags, food, all of it for everyone. Labeled with names and everything, so if someone goes missing..."

She shrugged.

"Thankfully, that shouldn't be a concern, but it's foolish not to prepare for the worst. Once that's all ready, we'll deliver it to the various cabins. There will be room in the packs for whatever personal items and tools you want to bring. Just be careful about the weight, because the longer you go, the heavier it will feel, trust me."

"Made that mistake when I was ten, never fear,"

Ronan replied dryly. He helped gather the dishes, poured him and Match more coffee, and stole the bowl of fruit that Lynwood had ignored.

"Anything we can do to help around here?"

"Nah, we really are kind of in a lull. Relax, take it easy. The lake is good swimming if you're into that. Lunch will be around one, dinner is at seven. Snacks are always available in the office, along with sodas and stuff. If you wanted to go into town, it's about thirty minutes from here, right back down the mountain until you see the garishly red sign lit up brighter than a Christmas tree."

Match laughed.

"Saw that last night, almost stopped there until we realized how close the camp was. Trip from hell, let me tell you. If I'd had to do it alone, I'd be in jail right now after that asshole threw a drink at our car. Ronan has more patience than me."

"Not if I ever see that jackass again,"

Ronan muttered.

"It's on sight. I might go into town when we get back from our first venture to replace my back tires, since one of them got demolished by nails on the road. I'm lucky they only took out one tire. But today we'll probably just chill. If you do need help with something, just let us know."

"Ya'll rest up, we'll see you at lunch. Think it'll be various sandwiches."

They bid everyone farewell and left.

Back at the cabin, Ronan hauled his travel tool bag out of the trunk, stripped off his hoodie, and got to work making the cabin slightly less hazardous.

Rewiring electric was beyond the equipment he had with him, but he did make the

bathroom a bit sturdier and closed off the outlet right under the sink entirely.

Let someone get mad about it and put it back.

He also put a lock on the bathroom door.

Not much, just a cheap barrel bolt latch he always kept a few of in his tool bag.

Not enough to stop a determined problem-maker, but it would slow them down enough for Ronan to get to where he could stop them.

Throughout, Match made a vendetta of clearing out the shitty air freshener scent and making a few of his beloved sachets to stash around the place.

By the time they were both finished making the cabin more habitable, Ronan was slightly more confident the place wouldn't fall down around them, and everything smelled pleasantly of lavender, rosemary, and mint.

"Just in time for lunch,"

Match said.

Ronan pouted.

"That is not what I wanted it to be time for."

Match grinned.

"Later, paladin. You know I like when you get out the tools."

Smirking, Ronan went to put on clean clothes.

"Wonder if there's any laundry facilities. Jackass didn't show us anything like that."

"Probably in the same hall with everything else. I doubt he's ever done laundry a day in his life, so he probably didn't think to mention it."

"Minerva doesn't seem the type to tolerate her kids not knowing how to do the most basic shit."

He pulled on a dark green, long-sleeved shirt that said I Like Swords across the front in fancy, fake-medieval font. A gift from Traci, because she thought she was funny. All his friends were smartasses with a taste for ridiculous t-shirts.

"Doesn't mean they retained the lessons, or that they don't squirm out of it as much as possible. Do you honestly see Lynwood doing any of that?"

"Nah, he looked like he wanted to eat canapes and wine spritzers in my place."

Outside, after the door was locked, Ronan pulled Match into his arms.

"Is that the life you want, darling? I think my eldest brother just finally got approved to buy a Ferrari."

Match laughed against his mouth and kissed him, still laughing.

"Shut up. What do you mean approved to buy? Like your parents finally allowed it?"

"No, like Ferrari finally decided he was good enough to be allowed to purchase one of their cars."

"You're lying."

"Nope."

Match just shook his head.

"I like your car and only your car, though Benny's precious soccer mom SUV is tolerable."

"Soccer dad."

"No, I promise you, most of the dads drive the obnoxious pick-ups."

"I drive a pick-up,"

Lynwood said sourly from behind them.

"What's wrong with pick-ups?"

"Nothing,"

Ronan said easily.

"My uncle has one. We're just making fun of some of the more ridiculous parents Benny interacts with."

Match launched into one of their many stories of overzealous parents as they returned to the dining hall, Gail joining them halfway there. At least she found the story funny. Lynwood seemed wholly unimpressed.

As they got closer, Ronan frowned to see a whole bunch of cars that hadn't been here earlier.

Way more than would be needed by the group running late, as he was pretty sure they were traveling together over two or three cars.

This was like six, no seven.

Why would so many people show up if they weren't part of the project?

The reason was probably entirely innocuous, but his hackles were up anyway.

Match's hand gently squeezed his in reassurance, as he was always so good at picking up when Ronan was unsettled by something.

Traci and Benny were too, and his uncles of course, but otherwise people rarely noticed he was bothered by something until the problem was damn near resolved.

Inside, he could hear a lot of talking, and everyone was in the big, main room instead of the smaller room they'd used for breakfast.

A large lunch was laid out, like at least six different kinds of sandwiches arranged in fancy towers, with pieces of folded paper in front identifying the type.

All eyes immediately turned toward them, and then they were swept up in a tidal wave of people.

Well, Match was. Ronan somehow found himself pushed to the edge, staring in the center of the mess where Lynwood was now introducing Match as though they were old friends. Ronan narrowed his eyes.

Match turned to look at him, gave a bare shake of his head, and then nodded toward the table.

Huffing, Ronan nevertheless obeyed the silent request to get them food instead of throwing people around.

He grabbed himself a roast beef sandwich with an obscene amount of mustard, and for Match a turkey sandwich with extra pickles and plenty of mayo. He also grabbed them chips and iced tea.

When he went to deliver the goods, though, it was to find Match clear across the room at a table, surrounded on all sides—and that little fuckhead Lynwood on his right side, where Ronan would normally be.

Now he was starting to get really pissed.

Not quite stomping his way across the room, he leaned over the end of the table to deposit the food, not bothering to beg anyone's pardon.

"Need anything else?"

Match smiled at him.

"I'm good, thank you. Pull up a chair, handsome."

While Ronan would have preferred to pick up Lynwood and throw him across the room, he obeyed the silent request to play nice and grabbed a chair instead. If some of the others at the table looked annoyed he was crashing the party, too damn bad.

"I'm Ronan, the dark paladin in our Guard. Who are all of you, then?"

He took a bite of mustard-soaked roast beef.

"Witches,"

a woman said stiffly.

"I'm from the south end of Furrow County. There are three groups who oversee it—"

"But only one controls the other half?"

Ronan asked.

"That seems weird. Why only one guard for half the county, but three for the other half?"

"Population disparity,"

said the man on Lynwood's other side, in a tone of voice that said he thought Ronan was an idiot for not already knowing that.

"More people, more Guards."

Whatever, it would still make more sense to have two and two, given the amount of ground that needed to be covered.

Introductions were made, but Ronan didn't bother to retain the names as it was clear they were here to fawn over Match and not help with the project, even though they were basically neighbors to Minerva's crew.

And fawn they did. Ronan got up once to get more sandwiches for the two of them, but otherwise didn't do much of anything except listen as they lavished praise on Match, asked him a million questions, generally acted like they'd known him their entire lives, and talked up their territories in a ridiculously unsubtle bid to impress him.

"We don't have county fairs,"

said the woman who'd first spoken, "but we do host important statewide events. We're hosting the Nightshade Convention this year. We'd love to have you as a special guest. You'd be paid ten thousand for it, could probably convince the board to go a little higher if you insisted."

"I'll think about it,"

Match said with a smile.

"I've always wanted to attend, but I'm always too busy."

Ronan cringed inwardly. Match had never been too busy to attend the biggest witch convention on the east coast. He'd been too poor, and the mayor and his board of dumbasses had never been willing to foot the bill for him.

Now he was being offered ten bands to be a guest speaker?

Despite himself, that left him feeling very small. It wasn't a feeling he liked.

"Tickets would sell out in a minute flat,"

said another woman.

The group was four women and five men, not including Lynwood, all of them at least thirty, two of them probably fifty to sixty.

All seemed at least decently well off, and the snotty jerk offering his boyfriend piles of cash wore a diamond ring that made the ring in Ronan's duffel bag look like a dollar store trinket.

It was white and sparkled insanely, occasionally casting rainbows across the ceiling.

Maybe orange had been a stupid color.

He'd been so confident at the time that Match would love the vibrancy of orange, so much like the flames of a freshly struck match, had been certain anything described as fancy vivid was meant to be, but maybe instead of orange and yellow diamonds and yellow gold he should have gone with a white diamond in white gold.

Cool and elegant, more moonlight than sunshiny.

Yeah, that made way more sense.

What had he been thinking?

"Ronan!"

"Huh?"

He jerked his head up, startled from his thoughts, and blinked at Match.

"What's wrong?"

"That's what I was trying to ask you, dork,"

Match said with a smile, though there was concern in his eyes.

"You looked almost distraught."

Ronan shook his head.

"Nah, sorry, was lost all the way in my head. Guess my face decided to do its own thing. My bad."

Match didn't seem entirely appeased by his answer, but he let it go, probably because they weren't alone.

Clearly annoyed at the interruption, the woman with the crazy diamond said, "Anyway, think about it. You have until the end of next month to let us know if you'd like to be a guest speaker."

"I mean, I'll still be out here working until then, and possibly longer, depending on how it goes. So I'm not sure I can commit to something like that. I guess we can re-evaluate closer to the deadline."

Match laughed.

"I'd have to figure out what to talk about."

"Well, you certainly could speak at length about warding,"

Ronan said.

"You do it better than anyone. Though personally I think you should talk about your pixies, all the cool things you're doing with them and the pixie dust you collect."

The man next to Diamond beamed.

"That would be marvelous! What pixies do you have? I just imported a breeding quartet of arctic pixies. I'm hoping to mingle them with my butterfly pixies."

Match's face lit up.

"I've always wanted to see an arctic pixie! All my pixies are native to my area. I don't have any imports—I'm not really that level of hobbyist."

Only because money had always prevented him before, and now he was too busy to get as involved as he'd like. If Match was part of a larger territory, where he'd have a team of subordinates to delegate duties too, he'd have more time for personal pursuits—and more money, even if he wasn't hurting for that anymore, thanks to Benny's clever efforts and the gross stupidity of the former mayor.

"You should definitely come see mine sometime,"

the man said with a warm smile that Match returned.

"If the arctic pixies breed successfully, I'm happy to give you one. Depending on what you have, maybe we can trade. I'm William—Bill is fine."

Match's smile widened.

"Nice to meet you."

It was the first time he'd said that today that he'd meant it.

Which was fine, Ronan wasn't the kind of insecure jealous asshole who got mad when his boyfriend made friends. His anxiety over everything was just cranked all the way up. And Bill was handsome, and loved pixies, and had fancy ones that Match had always wanted to see. And came from a larger, better district that could probably use a witch like Match and would treat him right.

"—girlfriend might kill me if I bring even more pixies into the house, but then again, she did agree to marry me last week, so she knows what she's in for, right? I keep saying girlfriend instead of fiancée. She keeps laughing at me for it."

Match laughed.

"Sounds like she knows what she's about. Congratulations. Have you picked a date yet?"

"Not yet, though we're looking at a winter wedding, since we met in the midst of a blizzard when we got stuck at an airport for almost three days. Let me tell you, eating airport food for three days fucking sucks."

Diamond tittered a rather condescending laugh.

"You do love to tell that story, don't you, Billy?"

"Bill,"

he replied tightly.

"No one but Moira calls me Billy."

"Yes, yes,"

Diamond said breezily, already turning her full attention back to Match.

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"So dear, why did you settle on matches, of all things?"

Ronan bristled, because it was one thing for someone to ask 'why are you called Match,' and quite another to ask a witch why their conduit was what it was. She may as well ask so why did you choose to be bisexual.

Match, true to form, ignored her.

"Is there dessert? The sandwiches were great, but I'm really jonesing for something sweet."

"Yeah, lots,"

Ronan said.

"You want chocolate, fruity, other?"

"Fruity."

Ronan winked and stood, venturing back to the tables yet again and returning with a heaping serving of strawberry shortcake for Match and a slice of chocolate cheesecake for him.

"So how long have you two been together?"

Lynwood asked.

Another woman said, "Aren't you on the same Guard?"

"No rules against it,"

Match said idly.

"If there were, lots of Guards would lose people. Is your fiancée a guard?"

Bill shook his head.

"No, but she works in the office part time, doing accounting and stuff. Mostly she's at home with our little girl. Born last year, she turns one next month."

"And you're stuck out here?"

Match asked, horrified.

"You should be home for her first birthday!"

Diamond, clearly clinically incapable of keeping her damn mouth shut, waved her ring-laden hand in the air.

"The baby won't remember it, and protecting our community is far more important. Billy knows that. He's happy to be part of the project, and leading one of the groups even."

Bill's polite smile didn't look very happy at all, but Ronan didn't think saying so would help anything.

"I see,"

Match said in that level way of his that people often took for defeat or acceptance but which really meant you are now enemy number one.

Maybe an orange diamond had been the right call after all.

Ugh, he was going to drive himself crazy.

The door flew open, and a whole new group of people walked in, and the introductions began again, though at least this new group was all the people who should have shown up last night.

Two of them seemed pretty cozy with Lynwood, but the others shared looks that expressed many of Ronan's opinions on the little bastard, so that was heartening.

He tried to remember all the names, but there was just too damn much going on for them to really register.

Ah, well, he'd try again later when things got quieter.

God knew there'd be plenty of time to learn names while they were hiking through the woods. Ugh.

Too full to eat, though the cheesecake tempted him to a second slice, he settled for sipping on water while he continued to watch damn near everyone simp over his boyfriend.

A few people cast him curious looks, a couple even made small talk, but it was clear they considered him barely one step above the furniture.

When they'd all finally finished eating, the group dragged Match outside, leaving Ronan to trail behind them, still invisible as ever.

A large wooden table had been set up, along with all manner of familiar tools and components.

A different woman spoke now, from the late-arrival group.

She was handsome, with gray threaded through her orangey-red hair, wearing a flowy green dress and lots of bright-colored wooden jewelry, a classic hippie vibe if ever Ronan had seen one, but she was the kind of woman who made the look really work.

Unlike stupid Diamond, whatever the hell her real name was, who looked somewhat out of place.

Like a city person on the farm for the first time. Why was she a witch when the job fit her like a wrong-sized jacket?

Whatever, not his problem.

The new woman smiled from the head of the table as the other witches present gathered around it, Minerva to her right, Diamond to her left.

"I thought as a bonding exercise, we could make each other protection charms.

I've put names in this bowl.

The name you draw is the one you make the charm for.

Half of us will carry our charms as we travel the woods over the next month, and the rest will have them as they cover our duties."

Now this piqued Ronan's interest.

He'd only ever seen Match and his mother work—well, and one other witch one time when he was a kid, but he barely remembered it.

Normally when he did this kind of thing, Match brought out his nifty plastic box with all the little compartments that he'd gotten at a craft store, filled with the most common herbs and other plants he used on a daily basis.

This time, though, he worked with what was on the table.

Ronan recognized some of them: lavender, rosemary, thyme, fennel, geraniums...but plenty of others were a complete mystery.

All the other witches stripped the leaves and petals in brisk, familiar movements, clearly something done so often they could do it in their sleep, then threw them in a mortar before taking up pestles and setting to work reducing the contents to paste.

Huh.

That was nothing like the way Match did it.

Match didn't bother to strip anything, for one.

He cut small bits of branch or whatever, and gently removed only a few petals from a bright pink geranium, and tucked everything gently into a mesh bag so much like the one that hung from the mirror of Ronan's car and were tucked around their room, though this one was plain white, and Match preferred colorful ones.

Once everything was in the bag, he piled up scraps from around the table, a couple more petals, and piled them neatly into the mortar he'd ignored until that point.

From the pocket of his jeans he took out his ubiquitous box of matches, struck it, and

set the contents of the mortar on fire.

Then, as always, he extinguished the match and stuck the burnt end in his mouth.

Ronan had watched him do that more times than he could ever count.

Match always tasted faintly of his namesake whenever they kissed, salty and faintly burnt, a taste that should probably be terrible but which he definitely would never be able to live without.

It was Match, wood and sulfur and a burst of brilliant, sunny orange in the dead of night.

After everything in the mortar had burned, he tipped the ashes into the bag, closed it securely, and shook the contents about so the ash coated it all.

Usually, he made the ashes from the used up remains of the previous protection, had once explained it strengthened the spell, carrying all the previous spell had left over to make the new one all the stronger.

The longer the chain, the greater the protection.

If someone ever tried to bespell Ronan's car, it would take way more energy than was worth expending to make the magic stick.

He shifted his attention to everyone else, who were taking the pastes they'd made and pressing them into wax that they then closed up into a ball.

Then the ball was gently molded into a disk, the size of a really hefty coin, like a gold doubloon in a bad pirate film.

The 'coins' were then dropped in the same kind of mesh bag, followed by little gems, though the type and color was different for each witch.

"Why the rocks?" he asked.

Diamond said rather snottily, "Gems, not rocks."

Ronan stifled a sigh.

"No shit, lady. But why use them? Match never does anything like that."

"What do you mean?"

She frowned and shifted her gaze to Match, as did the other nearby witches, all of them looking at his protection spell for the first time.

"You need crystals for a proper protection."

"Nah, not if you use the ashes of the previous spell. Which, granted, I didn't have this time as this is the first one I'm making, but using the leavings abandoned on the table by other protection spells is a good start. When I don't have even that, there's usually something around that will make do as a booster. Burning is purifying, so even if it's not ideal, reducing it to ash will usually cleanse the impurities and make it suitable."

At the head of the table, even the hippie woman had taken notice.

"In all my years, I've never heard of doing it that way. May I see?"

Match handed off his spell, which got passed around the table, everyone examining the damn thing like they might find diamonds or something inside.

Ronan felt kind of stupid he hadn't known Match's way of doing things was unique. Surely he should have known that about his own boyfriend.

"What compelled you to try doing it this way?"

Hippie asked, and beside her, Minerva was examining the spell intently. Forget diamonds, she seemed to be looking for the meaning of life. What in the world?

Match shrugged.

"No one thing, really. I've always liked fire. It answers to my magic. Also, I grew up really poor. A lot of magic components can get expensive fast when bought in the quantities we need. So I learned to make do with what I had, and herbs, flowers, and other plants are plentiful and cheap when you can forage and grow them. Our entire yard growing up was given over to gardens. You can get pretty far with a pile of herbs and a box of 300 matches that cost a dollar."

He picked up a piece of blue quartz that had rolled into his station, turning it over and over in his fingers before setting it down.

"I find stone cold. It doesn't work for me."

He smiled faintly and looked up.

"My mom always used bones instead of stone. Her cats hunted the rodents that tried to decimate the gardens, brought her the ones they didn't eat. She'd keep the bones, break up the bigger ones into small pieces, and used them in place of stone in her workings. She thought stone was cold too. She said bone was earthy and warm, full of the life it had lived. She also brushed her cats and used their fur.

"My grandmother always used rose petals, no matter what she did. She had fifty

different rose bushes by the end, every color, shape, and size you can imagine. Every single one died the same day she did.

"It's just what my family has always done. Gems and all clearly work fine for other witches, but they never called to my family."

"I see,"

Minerva said softly, and the hippie woman beside her seemed equally...quiet and almost reverent.

"Most impressive, Match. I knew you were good, obviously, but still I missed how good."

Even Diamond seemed to experience humbling for the first time in her life.

Ronan should probably figure out her actual name, even if he didn't particularly want to.

The bag was returned to Match, finally, and then they went about exchanging bags.

Of course, of course it was Diamond who got his.

Ronan hated everything.

Any lesson the woman had almost learned just five minutes ago was quickly forgotten as she preened over being the recipient of Match's protection.

After that, they decided to go into the woods to commune with nature or whatever.

Ronan loved Match, but he was not going to sit on the ground meditating and

becoming one with nature.

He'd had to do that shit during training.

Sit beneath a dumbass fake waterfall in somebody's backyard and everything.

He'd practically heard the training montage music playing in the background.

One of the best days of his life was the day he'd completed his training and never had to do any of that dumbass shit every again.

One of the ways he and Benny had first connected was by commiserating over the ridiculousness of their training regimens, vowing ardently to not inflict it on their own kids should they ever have them.

Benny of course was up to three kids.

Ronan was hoping maybe that future was not so distant anymore, though he and Match hadn't talked much about it past agreeing they did want kids.

If only somebody would actually just fucking propose already with the ring he'd had for two months now and stop being a chickenshit.

Maybe he should go meditate under a waterfall.

Someone tapped him firmly on the shoulder, and Ronan turned to see he was not quite surrounded by Lynwood and two other paladins, another guy and a woman who looked like she could bench press all of them at the same time and find it too easy.

She smiled in greeting.

"I'm Agatha, this is my cousin George. You wanna spar with us while the witches hug trees?"

"I would pay an injudicious sum of money to see them actually, literally hugging trees,"

Ronan replied.

"Yes, I'd love to spar."

Not with Lynwood, but he could play nice. "Ronan."

"Heard a lot about you,"

Agatha said as they walked off toward presumably a sparring ring or field or whatever this place provided. She glanced at his arm, but the tattoo was currently covered by his sleeve.

George said, "Surprised you'd do all this."

Ronan's brow furrowed.

"Why wouldn't I?"

Lynwood sneered.

"Given what your parents say—"

Oh, Ronan saw what this was about now.

"You mean the parents I'm damn near no-contact with? The ones I stopped living

with right before I started high school? The last time I talked to them was several months ago, like last year, I don't even remember exactly when. So I have no idea what shitty thing they're doing now. My family is my uncles, Match, and my teammates."

"That sucks, must be rough,"

Agatha said.

"I told them you weren't like your family."

Ronan gave a terse nod. "Thanks."

They came to a stop in an area that looked like it was meant for volleyball and such when the camp was open, but the nets had been taken down and stored somewhere, leaving only a large dirt square. Perfect for sparring.

"Four corners?"

Lynwood asked.

Ronan grinned.

"My favorite. One minute?"

"Sounds good,"

Agatha said.

They dispersed to what was called the 'cardinal points,' even though they rarely if ever actually aligned with them, forming a diamond.

Lynwood had set up a fancy timer, exactly the brand and style his parents had favored, meant for this sort of thing.

After it started, it would chime every minute, then ring differently when the total time was up.

Base Four Corners was twelve minutes, but as they were all pretty veteran, they'd likely go twenty-four minutes.

After he'd started living with his uncles, Ronan had bought himself a far less fancy but much more practical timer for his training exercises.

Benny had one that damn near took a degree to use, but only because that was just Benny. The man had six cast iron pans and a set of French cookware that Ronan couldn't pronounce.

Ronan stripped off his hoodie and long-sleeved shirt, leaving just his tank top.

On his right arm was his sword, and on the left arm was his armor.

Thankfully, he almost never had to use armor.

When the armor came out, things were bad bad.

On his upper right arm was the only other magic permanently imbedded in him—a protection spell meant to be used for things like sparring.

It could also be called up for actual fights, but mostly that wasn't necessary because Match could do infinitely better with little effort.

This was just a minor thing meant for sparring and other practice, so dumbass

paladins didn't hurt each other while showing off.

He activated the protection spell and then drew his sword, spinning it easily in his hand, an old habit for settling into 'paladin mode'.

Four Corners sparring was, obviously, four people, one at each point.

North and East started, sparring for one minute.

Then it was East and South, then South and West, then West and North, then North and South, East and West, then it started over.

For basic warm-ups, or newbies, two full cycles was more than enough.

The longest he'd ever been forced to go was forty-eight minutes, which was fucking brutal.

He had not enjoyed that day at all.

"How long we going?"

he asked, rolling his shoulders and stretched his neck.

"Twenty-four?"

Agatha suggested.

Ronan gave a thumbs up, as did the other two.

She set the timer, and it chimed a countdown to give everyone a chance to position.

As he was the west point, he got to wait a couple of minutes.

General rules were no going for the face, no crotch shots, no dirty moves.

Four Corners wasn't really about causing damage, anyway.

It was a training exercise for learning how to move, and done for fun amongst paladins otherwise.

Some asshole trainers had ways of making it about damage, but none of Ronan's had tolerated that nonsense.

There were better training exercises for that.

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The start chime sounded, echoing across the field, and Lynwood moved with a speed that Ronan was forced to concede was impressive.

It was also clear that these three trained together often.

Which he'd kind of already known, but it was still interesting to see in action.

George wasn't as fast as Lynwood, but he had better movement, dodging and weaving elegantly where Lynwood was much more brusque, more lunging and retreating.

The end of the first minute rang out, and Lynwood dropped back as Agatha surged forward.

She was, obviously, way more force and muscle than the rest of them.

Much more on par with Benny's build.

Watching those two in hand-to-hand would be awesome.

The chime sounded and Ronan surged into motion, easily countering Agatha's first swing, sliding out of the way of the next, ducking, shifting his weight to his free hand and kicking her feet out.

He was well back on his feet before she'd recovered hers, and they'd barely squared off again when the chime came.

He blocked Lynwood's first swing, got clipped trying to dodge the second, but

managed to block the third and send him reeling back.

Before they could go much further, the chime sounded.

So it went for the next several minutes.

For the most part, he was having fun, but every time he matched with Lynwood, the bastard seemed particularly nasty, far more vicious than he was with the other two, though it was clear he saw everything as a competition and had to be top dog.

Right as the minute chimed, Lynwood lunged—and cut Ronan's arm.

Swearing, Ronan withdrew, banishing his sword because he was fucking done now.

They only had a couple of minutes left anyway.

He scowled at the cut, a nice long slice on his forearm, just a hair away from cutting across his tattoo.

"Sorry, man,"

Lynwood said, not looking very sorry at all.

"I don't know how that happened. Is something wrong with your protection spell?"

"Match's mother did it for me, so no,"

Ronan replied icily.

"You wanna tell me—"

"Oh, sweaty Paladin with his guns out, my favorite,"

Match said.

Ronan turned, ire fading as he grinned and wiped his brow with his left arm.

"Hey, handsome."

"I am definitely not the handsome one."

Match tugged him down into a kiss, smiling when he drew back. "How—"

His smile vanished.

"Why the hell are you bleeding?"

He reached into the satchel that he was almost never without and pulled out a little paper envelope filled with powder and a small wooden bowl.

He poured the powder into the bowl, tipped out a bit of water from the bottle clipped to his bag, and stirred until he had a thick paste.

Scooping out the paste, he consigned the bowl to the ground, grasped Ronan's arm, and smeared the paste across the cut, completely uncaring about the blood.

Ronan braced for the next part, and despite the pain and all the eyes watching them, smiled faintly as Match reached into his pocket, drew out a box of matches and struck one, then grasped his arm again and set the flame to the paste.

There was a rush of not-quite-painful heat, the paste turned to gray ash, and Match stuck the burnt end in his mouth, smiling around it. Removing the match, tongue

adorably blackened, he said, "All better, paladin. What happened?"

He immediately examined the tattoo on his bicep.

"Spell is fine."

"Of course your mom's spell is fine. I want to know what the fuck is on his sword,"

Ronan said, glaring at Lynwood again.

"Nothing!"

Lynwood insisted.

"I don't need to cheat to kick your ass."

All of a sudden Ronan just didn't fucking care anymore.

"Whatever, we're done here. See you at dinner, I guess."

Match took his hand, and they headed off, ignoring Agatha when she called his name.

Back at their cabin, before they went inside, Match took his arm again and with his bottle of water and a soap rag taken from his bag of goodies, meticulously cleaned off the ash. All that was left behind was a hairline scar, though even that annoyed the piss out of Ronan, because it shouldn't be there at all. Not from a round of Four Corners.

"I don't know much about Paladin swords, a problem I should have fixed by now, I'm sorry,"

Match said.

"Is there anything about them that could bypass a protection charm?"

Ronan shook his head.

"Nothing legal, and the illegal stuff isn't worth the hassle unless you're like, competitive. And even then, it's so hard to get away with, and the punishment so extensive, it's not really worth the hassle there either."

"What are the illegal things?"

"The most popular modification is called a bite. It does...well, basically this. It can punch through the protection spell just enough to slice you up. I don't think there's a single instance of it being fatal, mostly it's to startle and distract, so you can more easily disarm your opponent. Doesn't make any sense. This was a stupid, so-called friendly Four Corners."

Match seemed sad.

"That's your favorite. You and Benny get so ridiculous at the country fair when you do it with any visiting paladins. Wonder if they'll go through with making it an actual exhibition next year. Though that means a whole lot more people would be admiring your lovely arms, and I don't know if I'm about that."

Ronan grinned and kissed him.

"Dork. I'm gonna go shower, then maybe take a fucking nap before dinner."

"I would offer to join you in the shower, but we'd probably die,"

Match said with a sigh.

"Guess I'll just give you the blowjob after our nap."

"After?"

Ronan pouted.

Match rolled his eyes and gave him a shove.

"Get going."

Ronan bowed ostentatiously, and then got.

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"I would like it stated for the record that starting off in the rain is bullshit,"

Ronan said sourly.

To be fair, a good part of his attitude problem this morning was that nobody had seemed to give a fuck about Fuckhead slicing his arm.

We're so sorry and we'll look into it and a terrible, strange accident and other similar bullshit.

Clearly Lynwood was the favored child who could do no wrong.

Even Minerva hadn't seemed overly concerned, mostly just confused, and apologized profusely and promised it wouldn't happen again.

Also, they were stuck with Lynwood.

The team consisted of their guide, a mage, and two paladins.

Common sense would have dictated that a golden paladin be in their group to balance Ronan, but somehow it hadn't worked out that way.

Whatever.

They'd just be driving off bears and shit, anyway.

He'd be too busy and exhausted most of the time to give a shit about Lynwood, and

could mostly ignore him the rest of the time.

Their guide was the son of Diamond, whose name was apparently Carmen.

The son, Marvin, was...fine.

Kind of snotty, clearly thought he was special because he knew the woods so well, but at least he wouldn't do something shitty like hurt Ronan and then act like it wasn't a big deal he'd broken one of the biggest rules of sparring.

Whatever.

Nothing Ronan could do about it while they were in the middle of the stupid woods.

He'd just get through this, and then they could go home and this nightmare would be over.

It was just a stupid cut, already healed, he shouldn't be so hung up on it.

They wouldn't reach the first node to start the warding until tomorrow, though it might be late tomorrow with this shitty ass weather.

Ronan trudged onward, keeping to the path they thankfully were following for now.

That wouldn't last, but he'd enjoy it while he could.

Right ahead of him, in the middle of the pack was Lynwood, who of course wasn't interested in taking the rear, since that was one of the most dangerous places to be.

He was yammering on incessantly about how wonderful and perfect his Guard and the general area were.

He and the others had spent all fucking night doing the same thing, talking it up to Match to a truly ridiculous degree.

The only thing that bothered Ronan about it all was that they seemed sincere in wanting Match with them.

They probably wouldn't cave to lame ass attempts at blackmail and leave Match to suffer when he needed them most.

No, they'd give him full, unhesitating support.

He'd never be at odds with so much of the town because they'd stabbed him in the back in the worst possible way.

If he did decide to move here, would he want Ronan to come with him, or would he prefer a clean break? Would a clean break be better? Could Ronan leave his uncles and the life he'd worked so hard to build? For Match he would do literally anything, but that one would fucking hurt.

On the other hand, Match so far hadn't seemed interested in anything they'd had to say.

He also hadn't talked about it, even the couple of times Ronan had brought it up, he'd just moved the conversation to other matters.

Like he didn't want to talk about it with him.

Ronan didn't know if that was a good thing, a bad thing, or not a thing at all.

When they finally stopped for a break at a little campsite, the rain was still going, so they couldn't even make a fire to get warm.

They just huddled under a little shelter that someone had installed, some wooden and metal thing that was probably meant to sleep under for anyone staying the night, and munched on trail mix and jerky for a quick snack.

Then they were off again, trudging through the cold, dreary mess.

If this was the first day, he wanted nothing to do with the rest of the trip, but there were a hell of a lot of days to go, so he mustered up as good a mood as he could and kept his snarking to the texts he sent to Benny and Traci.

Finally, the rain let up about an hour before they were due to stop for the night.

By the time they did, he was almost dried off.

When they reached the spot where they'd be staying for the night, a cute little clearing that wasn't as formal a stop as where they'd taken a break but still showed signs of use, like logs to sit on and a cleared space in the middle for a fire, Ronan set to work, despite exhaustion and soreness.

He started by clearing debris, making certain to do so for both tents.

Then he got the tent he'd carried all day set up, got the little heater and its propane tank set up, and got the tent warming.

With all that done, he changed into sleep clothes, slipped on his favorite fleece pullover, and set his still-damp clothes out to dry.

If they dried suitably overnight, they'd be good for another day of wear.

After that was a short, miserable bathroom break, and then he could finally sit the fuck down.

Match of course had a beautiful fire going, and Marvin was at work preparing their dinner.

"Man, I hope the rain gives us a break for a few days,"

he said around a yawn.

"No kidding."

Match tossed the match he'd been sucking on into the fire.

"Thanks for setting up the tent and everything."

Ronan smiled and kissed the corner of his mouth.

"What I'm here for, yeah? And to fight great and terrible evil, but let's be real, my biggest threat is the giant ass spiders that will attack me in the night."

Match giggled against his metal coffee cup.

"You're more likely to be struck by a meteor than dangerously bit by a spider."

"I don't believe you. That one in the mailbox almost got me."

Lynwood dropped down on Match's other side.

"Are you seriously scared of spiders?"

"Everyone gets the heebie-jeebies around something, and their little legs freak me out."

Ronan shrugged, refusing to be bothered.

"It's not like I murder them. Ain't their fault they scare me. Live and let live, so long as they don't touch me."

Marvin gave a small laugh.

"I'm not the biggest fan of snakes, which sucks, because we'll see snakes before we see spiders."

"You're all ridiculous,"

Lynwood said.

"What's for dinner?"

Marvin looked up from his work putting dinner together.

"Chili. Me and some of the others spent damn near a whole month making and freeze-drying food for this. I've got chili, beef stew, beef and barley soup, mac and cheese...all kinds of stuff."

He held out a steaming cup to Ronan.

"Here, some chamomile tea with honey."

"Thanks."

Not his favorite tea in the world, but he wasn't gonna complain about something hot to drink. He took a sip and barely kept from wrinkling his nose. He didn't remember chamomile being faintly bitter, but then again, he hadn't had it in at least six months.

He usually had mint or chai or one of the million unique herbal teas Match threw together.

By the time he'd finished the tea, dinner was ready, which was good, because Ronan could barely keep his damned eyes open. Not yawning between every single bite was an exercise in control.

"This is really good,"

he said around another yawn.

"Thanks for making it."

Marvin smiled absently, looking up briefly from his phone before going right back to it. They still had reception, but that probably wouldn't last as they went deeper into the woods and further from civilization. Thankfully, Marvin carried a satellite phone for emergencies.

"You look exhausted,"

Match said, rubbing a hand soothingly up and down Ronan's back.

"Go to bed. It's not like there's much else to do anyway. I'll be along—"

"We should switch things up,"

Lynwood said.

"We're gonna be out here a long time. We need to get to know one another. I should sleep with you, and Ronan can sleep with Marvin. Tomorrow we'll switch it up, and just keep rotating."

Ronan was going to punch him. "You—"

"That's fine,"

Match said.

Ronan stilled, feeling like someone had just punched him in the face. But his eyes watered on another jaw-cracking yawn, and they felt so heavy.

"Fine. Whatever."

He went into the tent he'd worked so hard to put together, which was nice and toasty now, and grabbed everything he'd left in there, then went into the other tent that decidedly showed a half-assed effort, and crawled into the first sleeping bag he saw. If they didn't like his choice, too damn...

"Ronan!"

Ronan dragged his eyes open, trying to respond to a voice that seemed so far away. Familiar and angry. He finally managed and stared groggily at Match, who was glaring at him in a way he never had before. "Wha..."

"Why are you still asleep?"

Match demanded.

"I shouted for you like six times! We needed your help. I needed your help!"

"What?"

Ronan fumbled to get his hands under him, then pushed up to a sitting position.

"I'm sorry. I'm so tired. I can't seem to wake up. What happened?"

"A troll, that's what,"

Lynwood said from behind Match.

"It came right at our tent. If I hadn't woken up, it would have destroyed a lot more than that. If you'd woken up, we could have maybe saved more stuff, but as it is, we're down a tent and a heater and some of our food."

Ronan scrubbed at his face. Fuck, why couldn't he seem to wake up.

"I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. I just can't seem to wake up."

"Here, take this,"

Match said, pulling a bottle out of his satchel and thrusting it into his hands, still clearly put out.

"Thanks."

Ronan drank the bitter tonic down, and thankfully it started to work damn near immediately. He'd have a headache when it wore off, but he was already perking up and feeling clearer-headed, which was all that mattered.

Lynwood gave him a sneering look as he stood.

"You sure you're cut out for this? We can still call someone to replace you, and you can just help at camp."

Ignoring that, Ronan said, "I'll get the mess cleaned up and pack everything. We can leave the wrecked stuff here for someone else to retrieve, or I'll come back for it when we're done with this round. I really am sorry. I've never slept through danger before."

Outside, the air stank of dead troll, like someone had pissed on hot garbage. Pulling up the collar of his hoodie as far as he could to help block it, Ronan set to work bundling up the shredded tent, setting the bits of the broken heater in the middle, and tying it all up with the ripped cords from the tent. He secured that to a tree and placed an orange flag in the middle of the clearing for someone to easily spot if they came for the stuff.

By the time he was done, and the others had packed up everything else, the sky was just barely beginning to lighten. They turned on lanterns to help a bit and headed out, barely saying anything as Marvin led the way through the dark.

Ronan rarely ever felt compelled to cry about anything, even when his parents had been at their worst, but he really wanted to cry right now. He'd never slept through danger before, not once. His various teachers had all, to the one, praised him on being so alert. It hadn't even been a difficult trek. Exhausting, sure, but he'd hiked way harder just for fun, usually with Match when he did one of his hardcore foraging expeditions. It made no sense.

Why the hell had a troll attacked anyway? Trolls were pretty skittish, generally. They rarely bothered anyone unless they were bothered first. If they'd been after the food, which was unlikely, they'd have been scared off after realizing there were multiple people around. Attacking out of nowhere was so weird. Never mind that if a troll was skulking that close, they should have noticed it in some way.

He looked up, staring at Match's back, yet another apology on his tongue. But Match had been distant all morning, since they'd broken camp... He glanced at his watch.

Three hours ago now. It was only seven in the damn morning. And the tonic Match had given him was wearing off, the promised headache already throbbing at his temples.

Normally he might ask for something to relieve it, but dealing with a headache seemed the least he could do. Anyway, normally Match was pretty good at giving him stuff like that unprompted. If he wasn't this time...

Anxiety roiled in Ronan's gut. Was Match starting to change his mind? About staying in Harper Valley? About them? No, that was stupid. One bad night, one stupid mistake, wasn't enough to make Match quit anything.

Except it wasn't one mistake, was it? It was years of being underpaid and unappreciated. It was not one but several of his friends turning their backs on him when he'd needed them most. It was the mayor abusing him, throwing him out. It was months of a strange, miserable stalemate with the town as Match refused to speak with them, and they floundered on how to rebuild the bridge they'd burned down.

Now it was Ronan sleeping too hard to carry out his most important duty.

The ring felt heavy and out of place in his pocket. Maybe he should have left it back home, instead of hoping for a pretty waterfall, a field of flowers, bright moonlight, and as close to happily ever after as life ever got.

Why wouldn't Match be tempted to go with the people who showed him so much appreciation and made it clear they'd support him properly? Even fuckhead Lynwood had done his job while Ronan snored the night away.

Ugh, his head really fucking hurt.

They stopped a few hours later, around ten, for a late breakfast or early lunch, Ronan

wasn't sure which.

He hefted himself up to sit on a boulder next to Match, guzzling water like his life depended on, hopelessly thirsty on top of everything else. What the fuck was wrong with him? Was he getting sick? He never got sick. It seemed weird he would now all of a sudden. Reaching into his pack, he dug out trail mix, jerky, and an electrolyte packet to add to his water to help perk him up and maybe abate some of the headache. Match still hadn't offered him anything for it, and at this point, Ronan was too scared to ask for fear of rejection.

Instead he fished out all the peanut M he must have a plan.

He paused ever so briefly when he saw a flash of color that didn't belong, then laughed.

"Look, there's a piece of ribbon or something caught in this mess."

He went for it right as Match grabbed right next to it, yanking in tandem—and toppling over as it gave way far easier than they'd anticipated, throwing off their balance and putting them on their asses.

"Ow,"

Ronan groused, even as he laughed. He shifted to one knee, turning to face Match.

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"You all right?"

Match was staring at their hands though, where Ronan had grabbed his reflexively as they fell. The ivy and what was actually a piece of red rope, the kind used by campers for all kinds of things, was tangled around their hands and wrists, almost binding them together.

Before Ronan could ask what was wrong, Match looked up with a smile that was...bashful, almost. Ronan had never seen anything like it. Match was quiet, often reserved, but he wasn't shy.

"What's up?"

Ronan asked softly, reaching out with his free hand to cup Match's cheek.

Match pressed into the touch, eyes closing briefly as if to savor it, which made Ronan's heart go straight to two hundred. Maybe—

"If you two are done with your stupid tree or canoodling or whatever you're doing,"

Lynwood said sourly, "we need to get moving."

All of the soft, tender joy on Match's face vanished, replaced by the blank, not quite stoney expression he wore when he was done with life. "Come on,"

he said with a sigh.

"We'll talk later."

Instead of just yanking his hand free, though, he carefully untangled the ivy and rope, then wound the bit of rope up and stowed it in the pocket of his jacket. The ivy he clipped a piece of and wound it around his neck, then he tucked another bundle of it into the folded over bit of Ronan's toboggan.

Then he was standing and walking off, leaving Ronan feeling like he'd missed something important about the stupid ivy.

"Good luck, trees,"

he muttered, making sure to kick all the torn ivy well away from them, where hopefully it would die off and not cause further problems.

The walking continued, miserable and boring as nobody seemed to want to chitchat with him, only Match, who they continued to woo by explaining all there was to do in town, all the connections they had across the country and even internationally. Lynwood spent at least a fucking hour talking about the friends he had in Italy and the villa they'd totally let them borrow if Match wanted to join them for vacation in the spring.

"I bet it's really pretty that time of year,"

Match said.

"I could never leave my duties that long, or travel that far from my wards though. That'd be irresponsible."

Marvin scoffed.

"There'd be plenty of witches to cover for you. My mom goes to Bermuda every summer, and they cover her wards and work just fine."

That actually made Match draw to a halt, Ronan barely avoiding crashing into him.

"They cover her wards and work just fine,"

he repeated icily.

"That's not how wards work. The only reason I could come do this little project was because my family has long maintained the wards for Harper Valley, so even when they're no longer woven into them, the wards still welcome them back. There is no way I could leave my wards with anyone but my mother without months of preparation. Either your mother has someone else permanently woven into her wards, which is a massive security and ethics breach, or she just says they're woven in and has been banking on there being no problems all these years."

"Her sister,"

Lynwood said hastily.

"Family, just like you. Her name is Gertrude—we call her Aunt Gerdie. She's not much of a witch, but she's enough to hold the fort when Carmen needs a break. Don't you go on vacation?"

"No, I don't, not like that,"

Match replied as they resumed walking.

"My family never had the money for that kind of thing, and we'd never want to leave the wards that long. Part of being a Guard is always being there, or making certain

someone else equal to the task is if you absolutely cannot be there yourself."

Marvin and Lynwood both scowled, and Marvin said, "You have to see how messed up that is, that you're never allowed a break, any time to yourself. What'll you do if you get married someday? What are you going to do, honeymoon at the county fair?"

"I think my spouse—"

Match's voice seemed to hitch on the word, though Ronan was probably just imagining things "—would understand my life and obligations, obviously."

Ronan wanted to crawl into a hole and die, because yeah, they'd never be able to do the traditional honeymoon, but that wasn't really their bag anyway. He had thought they could rent out a tent or something at the county fair, invite family and friends to hang out, pass out tokens that were good for pretty much all of the food booths and even some of the game booths. Lots of people did that. It was practically a marriage tradition in its own right.

So, yeah, he had thought they'd celebrate at the county fair.

Orange diamonds and hick fairs, boy what a fucking prize he was. Couldn't even fucking wake up when he was supposed to.

"—should see it, a lot of families choose it for their venue. Some of them get married in the church on property, some in the house with the big open hall, flowers hanging from the rafters and the balcony, snow falling on the skylights... but there's also a pond and waterfall out back that would be perfect right?"

Ronan was going to kill somebody. Probably Lynwood, for talking about marriage with his fucking boyfriend. How dare he suggest a waterfall, that was Ronan's idea! Though he'd only thought of it for a proposal. Getting married in front of one was

way better, even if he died a little inside admitting Lynwood had one up on him for that.

"Sounds pretty,"

Match replied, a bit of wistfulness in his tone.

"Is that where you want to get married someday?"

"Oh, no, my family always gets married in the family church. It's tradition. The same place we're sworn as paladins and take the vows as witches."

"Huh,"

Match said.

"We do our vows in the woods back home."

"My family did the ostentatious church bit,"

Ronan said.

"Whole stupid Roman Catholic thing, takes like a bajillion hours."

All the stupider because his family was about as religious as potatoes. But whatever, he'd gotten through the whole ordeal, then he and Benny had met up to do their own thing in the woods. Because in Harper Valley, it was the woods that surrounded them that mattered most.

Marvin said, "Lynwood's wasn't ostentatious at all. It was a beautiful ceremony, on the harvest moon, light streaming through the stained glass, the choir singing..."

"Mine was on the blood moon."

Lynwood looked at him like Ronan had spit in his face.

"How bloodthirsty."

Ronan shrugged and resumed walking, leaving them to catch up or not. He wasn't gonna be baited over something so stupid.

"It's also called the Hunter Moon, which my family believes is apropos for those of us who hunt and fight monsters beneath the moon, the original purpose of the dark paladins."

"He looked so good in his fancy regalia,"

Match said with a sigh, unraveling another knot in Ronan's stomach.

"We don't have much cause to dress up, so it's always a delight when he does."

Ronan had felt ten kinds of stupid that day, wearing a dumbass tunic and hose for the love of god, reciting stupid Latin shit he'd forgotten the moment it was finally said. Seriously, they didn't live in medieval Europe. If any of his kids followed the tradition, he'd come up with a ceremony that meant something to them, not to people who'd been dead for hundreds of years.

Though probably they'd just wind up with a bunch of miniature Match's, because being a witch looked way cooler than being a paladin, even if he got the neato sword.

Well, he hoped they'd wind up with a bunch of Mini Matches. Sometimes it seemed like Match was done with all of this, especially when he made wistful noises about traveling to Italy. Which Ronan would do in a heartbeat, but like Match had said, he

couldn't just up and leave like that. Traveling a few hours away was one thing. Thousands of miles was something else—that kind of distance risked the wards breaking down entirely. They were a living thing, when it came down to it, and Match was the beating heart.

Thankfully, conversation lapsed after that, Lynwood apparently having nothing more to say about blood moons. Ronan kept alert for further trouble, but trolls were pretty territorial, and where there was one, there wasn't likely to be another. The only exception was mating season, which was in spring.

By the time they stopped for the night, his head was still throbbing, and he felt tired to the bone again. In his defense, it was just past four, and they'd started at four, so a twelve-hour haul was a hell of a good reason to be exhausted.

Thankfully, this was their first node, or a point of strong energies, ideal as an anchor point for the ward. Which meant they'd rest tonight, Match would do his thing tomorrow, and the day after that they'd head off for the second one. They'd do five total before heading back to base for a long break, and then do the remaining five.

There were five groups covering five section, with ten nodes to each section. Taken together, they'd ultimately form a three-tiered system of wards, with ten in the innermost circle, twenty in the middle, thirty on the outer ring. Though 'ring' was used loosely here, as it wouldn't be nearly that perfect, just following the border of the territory.

As he had the last time, he set to work on the tent, humiliation and tension sparking anew. Once it was warming up, he changed his clothes, stuffed his dirty ones into a special bag so they wouldn't stink up his clean clothes, and stowed it.

Yawning, he sat down on the mat Match had laid out for them, as there were no handy logs to perch on tonight, and chairs weren't worth hauling around.

Marvin was already hard at work rehydrating dinner, but once again, he paused to make tea, handing Ronan his cup with a smile.

"What kind?"

Ronan asked.

"Just chamomile again,"

Marvin said with a shrug.

"I tend not to bring out anything with caffeine at night, and chamomile is relaxing."

Match smiled.

"It smells great. I'll keep an eye out tomorrow, though, see if I can forage some mint. I didn't bring more than what it's my case. Silly of me."

"Nah, chamomile is fine. It's nice to have something that isn't water."

Though all day he'd been thirsty no matter how much water he drank. Thankfully, the teams that had gone first to mark the nodes had also buried plenty of water to keep them well supplied, and they had the stuff to clean creek water if it came to that, too.

"Thank you."

"No problem!"

Marvin turned back to making dinner, and Match was busy going over all his supplies, and Lynwood was...somewhere. Ronan took the opportunity to dump the stupid chamomile and refill his cup with water, after rinsing out some sugar or

whatever that hadn't dissolved properly. Wait, hadn't he said he used honey last night? Or was he imagining that? God, he'd been so tired, Marvin could have said it was chamomile sweetened with the blood of innocents and Ronan wouldn't have noticed.

Lynwood reappeared from the woods just as dinner was ready.

"Something up?"

Match asked.

"Huh? Nah, was just poking around the area, making certain we wouldn't have further surprises tonight. No sign of trolls anywhere."

Ronan bit back a scathing reply about obviously, because they'd killed the only one that would be in this area, unless they magically just happened to be close to the border of two territories, and the second troll decided to act as weirdly as the first one. He didn't have room to talk, not after sleeping instead of doing his one job.

By the time dinner was done and the dishes attended, he was exhausted but not as wiped as he'd been the previous day. He could have fallen over from the relief that last night had clearly been some weird one-off.

"So what do we do about the tent problem?"

Lynwood asked sourly.

"The tent is plenty big enough for three,"

Ronan replied.

"I'll sleep out here by the fire. It's the least I can do after failing so miserably last night."

Match scowled.

"No way, I'll sleep—"

"You need to be safe and get plenty of rest, because tomorrow is going to kick your ass, we both know it. As much as I vastly prefer when you're in my arms, I'd rather you be safe. We can cuddle when we get back to base."

Huffing, Match said, "Fine, but this sucks, for the record. I don't like leaving you out here all alone."

"I'll be okay."

Ronan kissed him briefly, savoring the warmth and softness, the familiarity, the rightness. Match would never walk away from him, from this, right? He could hold a candle to everything the others were offering, couldn't he?

Match gave him one last kiss, then yawned his way into the tent. Soon enough, Ronan was all alone. The fire crackled, bright and cheerful, and the sky was star-strewn and beautiful. But the ground would never be terribly comfortable, no matter how nice the padding or fancy the sleeping bag.

He moved around restlessly until he found a position that was mostly comfortable, then tried to settle in to sleep, though now he wasn't so exhausted he was falling over, everything was too loud and too quiet all at once. He missed the familiar sounds of home—the traffic, the night owls out doing their thing, the barflies laughing on their way home.

Despite the wrongness of the sounds, Ronan eventually started to drift off—only to be jerked awake by a sharp, stinging sensation on his arm. Yanking it free of the sleeping bag, mind filled with images of lurking black widows and brown recluses, he stared at his arm in the firelight.

His scar from the sparring match, that was the source of the stinging, throbbing sensation. What the fuck? Match had healed it so well the scar was barely even there, why was it hurting?

The pain spiked to the point he actually cried out, but was immediately drowned out by an ominous roar.

The hell? That sounded like a golem, but finding a golem on the surface was like finding a polar bear on a tropical beach.

Ronan surged to his feet as the golem burst through the trees, clearly bound right for him—which was also weird. Golems were cave creatures. They didn't have shit for vision, hunted entirely by sound and smell. When dragged to the surface, they became immediately overwhelmed by too much and mostly just panicked and flailed about blindly until they could find cool, quiet dark again. If they voluntarily came to the surface, it was only in the dead of winter when everything was darker, quieter, and colder.

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The others came bursting out of the tent right as Ronan summoned his sword and armor, because without the armor, this was going to fucking hurt. Well, it was still going to hurt, but he was a thousand times less likely to die.

"You're awake?"

Marvin asked, clearly dumbfounded.

"Get fucked,"

Ronan snarled.

Match's face turned into a thundercloud, but the golem roared and all attention was diverted back to it.

His scar flared with sharp, hot pain again in the beat before the golem swung at him. Ronan lifted his broadsword to block the worst of the attack, but still was knocked back, stumbling over the fire, feet smashing and scattering the burning wood.

"I'll get that,"

Match said, stripping off his clothes to reveal his tattoos.

Much as Ronan loved to watch him work, he was busy. The scar was distractingly painful, but he ignored it as much as possible and braced for the next attack. Times like this he wished guns were of any use at all, but with golems especially they were useless. Because funnily enough, it was really hard to penetrate the hide of something

that was meant to withstand rockslides and long falls.

Only faerie steel could reliably contend with every threatening paranormal known, minus the likes of demons and such, which was way above his pay grade.

The golem knocked into him again, sending Ronan slamming into a tree. He barely managed to roll away when it came at him again, then lunged forward to slice at the back of its knee before tumbling forward to get out of the way as it turned in a wide swing—and faltered when it put full weight on its wounded leg.

Panting, Ronan went in for another strike, getting the ankle of the other leg.

The stench of golem blood filled the clearing, sharp and pungent, like some sort of concentrated, industrial cleanser.

With its movements successfully slowed, taking it down became significantly easier and mostly just made him feel bad because the poor thing had probably just wanted to go home. But he had no idea where home was, or how to get it there, and in the meantime, it would be a danger to everything in the forest as it gradually starved to death.

It was stupid and shitty. By the time he landed the killing blow, Ronan didn't know if he wanted to cry or scream or go commit more violence. Banishing his sword and armor, wiping sweat and blood from his face with his fleece before stripping it off and discarding it before the stench knocked him out, he rounded on Lynwood.

"Where the fuck were you! Why the absolute fuck weren't you helping me? I know you don't like me, but that's no excuse to abandon me in a dangerous fight!"

He surged forward, determine to break Lynwood's fucking nose—

Then Match appeared in front of him, hand on his chest.

"Ronan, stop."

Anger turned to hurt and then back to anger.

"What the fuck, Match."

"I'll handle them, like I should have sooner, but I talked myself— Nevermind, it doesn't matter right now. I'm sorry for letting you down. I'll take care of these cretins. Go rest, you've done more than enough."

Utterly bemused, not knowing what else to do now, Ronan obeyed. Completely not fucking caring about anyone or anything, he stripped off his sweat-soaked sleeping clothes and pulled on actual clothes.

He stared at his sword arm, frowning.

"The scar has stopped hurting."

Match whipped around, a fury in his eyes that Ronan had never seen, not even when his shitheel, so-called friends had stabbed him in the back. He moved so quickly Ronan blinked, but was gentle as he took hold of Ronan's arm to exam the scar.

"I checked for anything weird, purely on reflex. There was nothing but residue from the punctured protection spell."

Snarling, he slapped his right hand to one of the tattoos on his left arm. The bottom of his hand glowed white, but as he slapped it to the scar, the light turned orange.

"You son of a fucking bitch,"

Match bellowed before Ronan could ask what the fuck was going on. He rounded on Lynwood and Marvin, who stood there staring wide-eyed, mouths gaping, like a pair of dumbasses. Match stormed across the short distance between them and threw a fist right into Lynwood's face.

Ronan's mouth dropped.

"Holy shit."

He hadn't known Match could throw any punch, let alone one good enough to break Lynwood's nose.

"You aggroed my boyfriend! I'll fucking kill you for this! And you—"

He rounded on Marvin, who held up his hands like that would do anything at all to save him.

"You've been drugging him! I'm so fucking pissed. I thought it this morning, when we struggled to wake him up, but then I thought I'm just paranoid, pain and annoyance are making me paranoid. I just decided my poor boyfriend was extremely tired and maybe getting hit by the elevation, even though it's never bothered him before. But no, I was right, I should have listened to me: You've been drugging him."

Marvin scowled.

"I have not."

"Yes, you did!"

Match howled.

"He poured out the chamomile tea tonight when he thought nobody noticed, and low and fucking behold, he didn't sleep through pulling aggro on a goddamn golem."

"It wasn't supposed—"

Lynwood snapped his mouth shut.

Ronan was going to be sick. They'd drugged him. Cast a spell on him to draw monsters. They'd put him and Match at risk. Put themselves at risk. Why? Just to convince Match that Ronan was a worthless piece of shit and he should leave Harper Valley for them? That was worth risking all their lives?

Marvin raised his hands again in a show of peace, which Ronan could have told him would just piss Match off more, but fat chance of that. The bastard had drugged him. Could have so easily fucking killed him.

He really just wanted to crawl into his own bed and cry.

Lynwood lifted one of his own hands, though to what purpose, Ronan couldn't say.

"Come on, Match, we can't work this out if you don't calm—"

"Calm?"

Match bellowed.

"I'll fucking show you calm."

Then, in the single hottest move Ronan had ever seen, he drew not one but two matches, struck them together, took one in each hand, and crossed his arms to press them against both sleeves, reigniting them. As Marvin and Lynwood were still

bumbling out stupid excuses and pleas, various markings on Match's left arm lit up like a damned Christmas tree. He slammed his hand over Marvin's face, and the little bastard dropped like a sack of potatoes.

He turned to Lynwood, who'd given up any pretense of being nice.

"Fucking touch me and I'll kill you."

Match laughed, low and mean.

"Try it, bitch."

His right arm flared like the left one, and even as Ronan made to surge forward to protect him, right as Lynwood called up his sword, Match threw out his right arm and suddenly there was fire everywhere.

Lynwood shrieked, panicked, actually let go of his fucking sword like some sort of fresh-faced newbie, and started swatting uselessly at the flames that were very obviously an illusion. Match slammed his hand over his face, and Lynwood dropped down beside Marvin.

With a sharp jerking motion of both arms, Match put his magic back to dormancy. His breath hitched in a way that said he was trying not to scream or cry.

"So that was stupid hot,"

Ronan said into the silence.

"Where'd you learn to throw a punch like that?"

"My uncle."

Match turned to him, ran across the few paces separating them, and threw himself into Ronan's arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I feel so stupid and awful. I suspected drugging, especially when I couldn't wake you up, and I was so scared that it was so difficult and so mad at everything because Lynwood wouldn't stop telling me how perfect a fighter he was and how you clearly couldn't do anything once you left Harper Valley, and I've been trying so hard to play nice, but I'm so sick of it—"

Ronan grabbed his flailing hands, squeezed them gently, then let go to cup his face.

"Hey, breathe. It's all right. Whatever they did, they failed miserably in the end. Are they okay where they are?"

"Huh? Yeah, they'll be fine, but who cares if they aren't? Are you okay? Let me see your arm again."

Ronan obeyed, watching fondly as Match fussed over his arm, running more spells over it, even though he was pretty sure the earlier orange-colored one had taken care of the matter.

"Where did you learn a term like aggro? I don't think you've ever played a video game a day in your life."

Match looked up, the barest hint of a smile curving his mouth, though his eyes were still dark with hurt and anger.

"I'll have you know I played thirty whole minutes of Call of Duty. Under duress. Because I lost a bet to Benny. I hated it. But Benny is the answer—I know the word because of Benny. That doesn't matter right now. What matters is that I failed you. When it mattered most, when you needed me most, I failed you."

"Hey, hey, don't speak like that,"

Ronan said softly, wiping away tears with his thumbs.

"I'm not gonna lie, this trip has fucking sucked. It's nothing at all what I thought it would be. And I'm gonna be processing getting cursed and drugged for a long time. But these people purported to want to be our friends. Well, your friend. Why would they assault your boyfriend? Of course you dismissed that idea."

"I shouldn't have. You clearly caught on, not drinking the tea."

Ronan snorted a laugh.

"Not even close. I just don't like chamomile, and his was weirdly bitter. I just thought he was over steeping it. God, I feel dumb. The clues were right there."

He explained the 'sugar' he'd noticed and dismissed.

"I should have noticed, I guess, but it never crossed my mind. Because why would they do something so stupid and dangerous? Also they clearly didn't like me, but they do like you. Why would they hurt you like that?"

Match hugged him tightly.

"I don't care what you say, I should have trusted my gut. Should have told all of them to get fucked, instead of continuing to make nice and listening to all their stupid blathering. But I was distracted by pain and frankly regretting agreeing to this, so..."

"That's the second time you've mentioned pain,"

Ronan said, forcing him back up a bit.

"What pain?"

"From being away from my wards. It's like a constant, low-level ache. Like when you work out too hard and your body is sore the whole next day or three. But it's constant until I get back to my wards. I thought with my mom watching over them, it would help some. If it is helping, then fuck I never want to leave anyone else in charge when I have to go out of town."

He sighed and rested his head against Ronan's chest, arms tight around him.

"I was really hoping it would work, though, because I know there are places you'd like to see, things you'd like to do, and you'd never leave me behind, so you'd never do them..."

Ronan kissed the top of his head.

"Is that why you seemed so interested in Italy? I don't give a shit about any of that. I just want you. And maybe something for this goddamn headache that's come back. I was really sad you didn't give me the powder for it when you gave me the tonic."

"What!"

Match jerked back and looked up.

"I didn't— Please don't tell me I actually forgot that. I swore I grabbed both out of my bag and gave them to you."

"Maybe it slipped out of your hand and you didn't notice?"

Match looked anguished.

"Why didn't you say anything, dumbass?"

"I thought you were pissed at me for falling asleep and didn't want to bug you."

"I— No—"

Match clung to him again, which was good, because Ronan really wanted him close right now. He leaned up to kiss Ronan hard.

"I'd never punish you with pain. I'm sorry I led you to believe I would do something like that. Never, not anyone— No, wait, I'm a liar, those two I would definitely punish with unmitigated pain if I got the chance—but definitely never you. Next time just knock me upside the head. I was certain I'd grabbed them both. I keep them right next to each other, because the tonic is a bitch without the powder. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's okay,"

Ronan said softly.

"Honestly, sounds like this trip has been cursed from the start."

Match sniffled.

"Here I was so certain it was destined to be a great one because we handfasted."

"We what?"

Match tried to smile, but it didn't quite catch as he pulled away again looking heartbroken.

"It was so silly, and completely an accident, and of course not in earnest because you weren't aware, so couldn't...but it was just so perfect..."

He sighed and went to his bag, pulled out the strip of ivy he'd been wearing earlier and something else.

The rope, Ronan realized, but at some point in the day he'd woven it into a Celtic knot looking thing.

Returning to Ronan, he pressed it into his hands.

"It's an old witch tradition, not often done anymore.

My parents didn't even do it, and you know how Mom is with her rites.

Cord for binding, to show that where we go, we go together, that nothing can pull us apart.

Ivy for affection, friendship, happy marriage, fidelity."

His cheeks flushed as he looked at Ronan's chest instead of meeting his eyes.

"Handfasting is somewhere above engaged but below marriage.

Traditionally, a handfasted couple would live together for a year in like a test-run marriage, and if at the end of that year they were happy with each other and their lives together, they'd get actually married."

Ronan remembered getting tangled together in the ivy and rope, that shy, happy smile.

"I wish I'd known, so I could be happy with you."

"I was going to tell you tonight, but you insisted I stay with Jackass and Jackassier in the tent, and I wanted to keep an eye on them anyway, so I was hoping to wake up early and tell you then."

"What a mess,"

Ronan said with a sigh.

"I feel kind of silly now that I didn't know about handfasting, and just did the usual engagement ring instead."

"You what,"

Match said, staring at him wide-eyed, frozen in place. Then he reached out to grasp Ronan's shirt and made a futile attempt to shake him.

"You did what. You can't say that and then not keep going! Stop being a jerk!"

"Okay, okay,"

Ronan said, grinning, suddenly feeling lighter than air.

"Can we do this not by those dumbasses, though? They're killing the vibe."

Match snorted, but let himself be dragged off into the woods after Ronan had fished the ring box from his bag.

And then Ronan heard it. Water. Loud and rushing. His heart kicked up. Could it be? Could this one fucking thing go his way?

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He almost cheered, loudly and obnoxiously, when a waterfall came into view.

It wasn't enormous, maybe nine feet or so, but it was pretty, cascading down over two tiers, almost more like a double waterfall, and there was greenery all over, lichen on many of the rocks, flowers overflowing the entire field, all of it beautifully visible and near-glowing under a brilliant harvest moon.

Match smiled as he took it all in.

"This is beautiful. Harvest Moon, a time of gathering, bonding. Much better for ceremonies related to that rather than a ceremony tied to violence and bloodshed."

"See, I knew Blood Moon made more sense. But yeah, this place is perfect,"

Ronan said, not stopping until they were at the bank of the pond, in front of the waterfall, moonlight shining down from above and reflecting off the water, flowers all around them. Only then did he finally go down on one knee, opening the ring box and offering it up as he said, "I love you more than life itself, Match. Would you marry me?"

"Yes!"

Match shouted, then threw himself at Ronan, knocking them to the ground.

"Don't lose the ring,"

Ronan wheezed out.

Match laughed and scrambled back upright, found the box in the grass, and pulled out the ring.

"This is beautiful! Don't ever tell me what you spent. I can already tell it will stress me out. Look at this color. It's like a crystalized piece of flame."

He put the ring on then looked up with a smile, and Ronan finally understood what stars in his eyes meant, because that was definitely how Match looked at him.

"I'm not sure I deserve you after how shittily we all treated you this trip, even me. Especially me. For which I am so fucking sorry. I know what it's like—"

"Hey, hey,"

Ronan said, pressing a finger to his mouth and then bending to kiss him briefly.

"Forget about it. Shit happens. It's over. Those little rat bastards will get what they deserve, and I got the fiancé I was hoping for. I don't care about the rest."

Match threw his arms around Ronan's neck and kissed him like it was the last thing he'd ever do.

"I love you too, Ronan. I really wanted to tell you about the handfasting. I was so mad I kept being denied a chance, even though I was also anxious that maybe you wouldn't want to be."

He drew back enough to admire his ring.

"I've never had anything this fancy in my life. This ring could buy a house. I'm scared to wear it."

"It could be a down payment, maybe,"

Ronan replied with a chuckle.

"Definitely not the whole house, dork."

"Do you have one?"

"One what?"

"A ring."

"Oh."

Ronan laughed.

"No, I didn't even think of that. How about you pick one out when we get home? Take smelling salts."

"Oh, shut up,"

Match retorted before dragging him into another kiss that turned into more than he could count.

Eventually, though, as much as he'd rather fuck by the waterfall, risk of spiders be damned, there were still a few glaring problems that needed addressing.

"So what did you do to those fuckheads?"

"Put them to sleep. It'll only last two, maybe three hours, though, so we'll need to do something to secure them."

"I'll take care of that. You dig out the sat phone and call the team. I want them here before we face down the others. Also, I would like to say again, that little move of yours with the double matches, the way you whammied them, was the hottest thing I've ever seen. Pretty sure you don't need me for protection at all."

"I need you every hour of every day,"

Match said.

"Now, let's get to work. The sooner we do this, the sooner we're home, because I'll quit the Guard and work at the fucking diner before I'll finish helping these fuckheads. This whole territory can rot."

He kissed Ronan one last time, then led the way back to the campsite.

The first step was moving camp. The fight with the golem had wrecked their campsite, and the corpse was gonna start smelling shortly, and nobody wanted to eat or sleep around that. He was still so fucking pissed that a poor, innocent golem had died just to try and...what? Make him look bad? Ronan didn't think killing him had been the point, but they were all fucking lucky he knew what he was doing, because the fight could have gone south very quickly.

Which reminded him all over again that Lynwood hadn't helped at all. That question was gonna be asked when the little shit woke up.

Once he'd moved everything, he hauled Marvin and Lynwood to the new site by the pond, then found some rope to secure them. No doubt once Match was done with his phone call—Benny, by the way he was talking—he'd add some additional precautions, so they wouldn't have to worry about them doing anything stupid when he had to let them go to piss or something.

With everything finally moved, the tent set back up with his and Match's bedding in it and the assholes' bedding and other belongings set aside, he turned his attention to building a new fire and getting some food going. After all that fighting, he was fucking starving, and Match would be at least as hungry.

So he got the fire going, sadly without the help of a magic boyfriend, and then rifled through Marvin's stuff until he found the freeze-dried beef and barley soup, which was a personal favorite.

He also found a small baggie of white powder that nearly ruined his mood, but he'd just gotten engaged and handfasted, damn it. Nothing was bringing him down, not even all this nightmare fuel. So he set it where Match would see it, got the soup going, and then finally went to fetch his spare fleece. It wasn't quite as nice as his favorite, but it would suffice—and hopefully sometime tomorrow they'd be back in their own house, and he could do laundry.

Of course, it would probably take longer than that. It would be several hours before the others arrived. They probably wouldn't even leave for a bit yet, since there was stuff they'd need to do first. So what, twelve hours at best? Stuck in the woods with assholes one and two, ugh. On the other hand, stuck in the woods with his fiancé.

Going through Marvin's bag some more, he found a bag of chamomile tea that he dumped right into the fucking fire. As long as he lived, he would never be able to stand the taste of chamomile. Possibly honey, but he hoped not, because he really liked a whole lot of things that involved honey.

There was also black tea and green tea. Little bastard liked his tea.

"Match, do these smell okay to you? I think that's the powder, but..."

He was gonna be rampantly paranoid for a long fucking time. He was really fucking

pissed at Lynwood for the nasty little aggro spell, but he rather thought he hated Marvin more for violating him in such an insidious way, a way that would have him fucked up long after this nightmare was over. There was something particularly gross about someone who smiled and chatted and offered you poisoned tea to help you relax.

Ronan gave a sharp shake of his head to banish all the gloomy shit trying to drag him under. He was okay. Match was okay. Match wanted to marry him. They were going home soon-ish. Those two fuckheads and everybody else would be wishing themselves dead by the time his team was done with them.

Match came over and took the bags, sniffed them.

"Yeah, they're fine, but to hell with it anyway. Benny, hang on."

He lowered the phone.

"Give me like twenty minutes, and I'll be back with some mint."

"Okay."

Match kissed him, then went back to talking a mile a minute, something he really only did with their group. Otherwise, he wasn't all that much of a talker.

Ronan focused on the food, adding more water as it seemed necessary, and pulling out what looked like a packet of biscuit mix and getting that going. He wasn't the greatest at campfire cooking, but he'd done it enough he generally didn't burn things. There was also a packet marked chocolate cake that was definitely getting made. The instructions only mentioned adding water, so it must have literally everything else in powder form. Nice.

After everything was cooking either on or near the fire, there wasn't much else to do.

A soft groan made him startle, and he looked over at the fuckheads to see Marvin was stirring. Anger filled Ronan, scorching hot. He snatched up the bag of powder and stormed over.

"You wanna explain yourself, jackass? How often do you go around slipping mickeys to people?"

Marvin stared at him, the bag, then back up at him.

"I was only doing what I was told."

"Who told you to fucking drug me? Do you know how easy it would have been to kill me? Over what? Maybe convincing Match to move? That's so fucking stupid. I should break your goddamn face the way Match broke Lynwood's."

He didn't reply at first, but when Ronan scruffed his shirt and yanked him upright, he held his hands in front of his face, cowering as he replied, "My mom! My mom, okay? She gave me the stuff, told me how much to add per cup of water. I measured! I was careful! I didn't want to kill you. Nobody wants that. Murder is bad. We just wanted you to sleep—it's not that big a deal."

Ronan let him go—then punched him so hard he hit the ground. Blood gushed everywhere, but Ronan spared him no pity past making certain he wouldn't choke on his own blood.

"Not that big a deal,"

he hissed.

"Fuck. You."

He dug his phone out of his sleeping bag, along with the solar charger he'd use once the sun came up in a few hours, and started going through a billion texts from Traci, Benny, Penny, and his uncles. Uncle Rick had called him like ten times, that wasn't like him.

Crazy they were getting reception at all. Swallowing, anxiety spiking for no good reason at all, he called Rick back.

The phone had barely rung once when he answered.

"Ronan, thank god. Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine,"

Ronan said.

"Benny had Match on speaker for a bit, we heard the whole sordid tale. I was roofied once, you know. When I was eighteen. My friend found me in time, thank god. So I know very well you're not fine."

Ronan sniffled, a tear finally escaping to roll slowly down his cheek. He wiped it away impatiently.

"I'm holding steady. I'll be okay for now. Probably only buying bottled drinks for a bit."

What he'd do at restaurants, he didn't know, but one problem at a time. Who knew, maybe by the time he went to a restaurant, his new phobia would have dialed back. Problem for later.

"Honey, I still don't take drinks from anyone but Phil, my sisters, and you. If they don't pour it or one of us doesn't watch it get poured, I don't drink it. Even though I'm ugly old man now—"

"Not ugly!"

Phillip hollered in the background.

"Definitely old and crotchety, though."

"That's rich coming from you, you cranky old queen,"

Rick replied cheerfully.

Ronan laughed-cried.

"Really, I'm hanging on. Breaking his nose helped."

"Hell, yes. My friend, her name was Roseanne, but we called her Rosie, broke the nose of the dude who tried to assault me. I don't even remember his stupid name anymore, just his awful cologne. I'd been trying to overlook it. Always judge a man by his cologne."

Phillip, closer now, said, "You didn't like my cologne."

"Yeah, and you threw it out, and then the next time you asked me out I said yes because you were wearing a better one, and you listened to me. What man could resist that?"

"Me,"

Phillip said dryly, "because you never listen to me."

"Yours is to obey, darling, not mine,"

Rick replied breezily.

"Anyway, Ronan, we're here if you need us. I'm too old to be gallivanting into the woods on a death machine, but I'll try it if you want me to come."

Ronan laughed at the idea of his poor uncles geared up and zipping through the woods on four wheelers.

"Me and my new trust issues will be just fine waiting until we're home to see you. Anyway, Uncle Phil would insist on driving, and none of us wants that."

"There's no cause to be rude!"

Phillip said indignantly.

"The truth hurts, darling. We'll let you go now, Ronan. Take care of yourself—"

"No, wait! I want to tell you first! I asked Match to marry me and he said yes!"

"Oh. My. God! Obviously he said yes, of course, but congratulations. We'll start planning the engagement party immediately. You go kick those assholes in the balls and then celebrate with my favorite son-in-law. Ciao, baby."

Ronan smiled as he hung up, and kept smiling as he replied to all the texts. He'd almost caught up when Match appeared with a bundle of familiar-looking leaves.

"How the hell did you find those in the dark?"

"Flashlight and experience. One of my training exercises was to be able to identify plants in the dark, because you never know what circumstances you'll be facing in an emergency situation, and being able to find the right plant quickly could be the difference between life and death."

"Man, and I thought fighting in the dark was annoying. You win,"

Ronan said with a grin.

"By the way, I told my uncles about the engagement, and they're planning a party. I should have anticipated that, but foolishly, I did not."

"You didn't? Really? Because I was already wondering if I had anything suitable to wear for whatever craziness they cook up. It'll be really fancy fine dining or a paintball tournament. There's no in-between with them."

Ronan snickered at the idea of his uncles hosting a paintball tournament. They'd do it with particular flair, that was for certain.

"I think dinner is ready. Thank you for getting the mint. I would have been fine with water."

"It's the least I can do, Ronan. It'll always haunt me I thought was he drugged and then said no, I'm just being paranoid, they'd never do that."

Ronan dragged him into a kiss.

"There's no need for that. They're the only ones to blame in this mess."

He looked past Match's shoulder to where Marvin sat looking like he'd lost his whole world, and Lynwood was just beginning to stir.

He ignored them for the moment, far more interested in dishing up soup and biscuits and chocolate cake that he enjoyed happily with mint tea picked and made specifically for him by the love of his life. When that was done, he could barely keep his eyes open, though it was just plain old boring, not drugged exhaustion.

"Get some rest,"

Match said.

"I'm way too keyed up to sleep anyway, and I don't want to leave these assholes unsupervised, even though it would take an act of god to break them free of their magic tethers."

Raising his voice, he said "You assholes can wander off just far enough to piss, and I'll bring your sleeping bags, and maybe some trail mix."

"Thank you,"

Marvin said meekly.

Beside him, Lynwood said nothing, not even looking up from where he was restlessly yanking up grass by the fistful. Looked like somebody was anxious about what would be happening to him. Ronan spared a moment to consider getting them some wet cloths to clean their faces, then said fuck that and went to bed.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:47 pm

He woke up to the sound of Benny's strident voice, and jerked up. Damn it, had Match let him sleep on and on, forcing himself to stay awake? He glanced belatedly at his watch, which said it was a little after seven in the morning. When he'd gone to bed it had been a little after one. No way they should be here already, with prep work, a five-hour drive at least, probably longer, and then hiking out to them. Well, driving, 'cause he didn't doubt Benny had in fact come in on four wheelers.

Climbing out of bed, he stepped from the tent and looked around. Yeah, four wheelers. Five of them, and could seat two apiece. Benny, Traci, Minerva, and a dude he didn't recognize, but who was clearly a cop by his black and purple uniform.

Ronan had never entirely liked cops. He'd seen far too many of them be entirely too buddy buddy with people like his parents. And he hadn't forgotten the way they'd been treated while that dirtbag mayor had been trying to oust Match. But cops were important, because if the Guard had to handle all the petty ass bullshit like bickering neighbors and kids doing dumb pranks with magic, they'd never get any of their real work done.

This one didn't give off asshole vibes, though.

"Hey,"

he said, then cleared his throat and tried again.

"Hey, nerds!"

They all turned around, and Traci shrieked before bolting over and hugging him

tightly.

"Hey, Ro. Sorry if we woke you. How are you feeling?"

"Homesick, honestly."

He hugged her back just as tightly, then slowly let go.

"How did you guys get here so fast? You should barely be finished driving with all that stupid construction."

Benn scoffed.

"Driving, please. I called in a favor, and we took a helicopter."

"A...you...a fucking helicopter?"

"Yep. Landed close to the camp—with permission and everything, I didn't skip that part, don't give me that look—and immediately set to work. Penny is supervising the people I called to take care of your car. I related everything you told me to Minerva and some of the others."

His face said he wasn't terribly impressed with most of them.

"I also told the police. Two of them stayed behind at the camp to start questioning people and looking into things. One is retrieving the tent you had to leave behind. And Officers Lockley and Thomas came with us. We just arrived a few minutes ago. We were about to wake you up. Would have been here sooner, but meeting up with everyone at camp and coordinating how to get out here to you took some time. Sorry you couldn't sleep longer."

"It's fine. I'll crash when we're home. Where's Match?"

"He went with Officer Thomas to examine the golem. Poor thing,"

Benny said, looking angry and sad. His first kill, the one that had definitively made him a paladin, had been a rabid golem. He had a soft spot for them, and always did his best to get them home rather than kill them, no matter if it took them hours to do it. He glared across the clearing where Marvin and Lynwood sat like their whole world was ending. Fucking good.

Minerva looked somber, and twenty years older, as she faced Ronan.

"Apologies aren't enough, Ronan, but I do apologize for the behavior of my son. I did not authorize such things, I did not know about them, which is a failing all its own, and I am deeply, deeply sorry they violated and endangered you that way. I am ashamed to call Lynwood my son right now, but his failings are my responsibility, and I won't shirk them. He'll be properly punished, and recompense paid."

"I don't need recompense, I'm well aware that just because some of a family is shitty doesn't mean the whole family is shitty. I'm sorry he let you down in such an awful way."

"You're kind."

She touched his arm lightly, then strode across the clearing to crouch down and speak with Lynwood.

Ronan turned back to Benny.

"I don't understand why. I mean, Lynwood I sort of get. He wanted to impress Match, I think, while also making me look bad. Not sure why he was so determined to hook

Match, but I mean, I get being crazy about him. Not that crazy, but..."

It was Officer Lynley who said, "I can't really say much as it's an ongoing investigation, but it seems to me there's a lot of politics and internal turmoil at play..."

He shrugged.

"May I examine your arm?"

Ronan stripped off his fleece hoodie and held out his right arm. Lynley touched a tattoo on the back of his right hand and pressed it to the scar much like Match had hours ago, and a faint orange light emitted from it before fading again. He snapped several pictures with a small camera he pulled from a pocket.

"Confirmation of both a draw spell and a time spell."

He put the camera away, pulled out a small notebook, and jotted several things down. After he was done writing, he put the notebook away and pulled a laptop from the bag on the ground. Once he'd opened it and logged in or whatever, he said, "So tell me the whole of the tale from your perspective. Every last, seemingly stupid detail you can think of."

Ronan sorely wanted a cup of coffee first, but the idea of a random cup of coffee that could have come from anywhere just made him tense, so instead he grabbed his water bottle from his tent really quick and then told the whole sordid tale. He started with meeting Lynwood and went through to tying the bastards up and going the fuck to bed.

When he was done, he was ready to crawl back into bed. Or just sleep right there on the ground, he genuinely didn't care.

"Thank you, I'm sorry you had to do that,"

Lynley said.

"Sit down, get some rest. I might have more questions as this goes along, but for now just relax."

He walked off toward the group across the clearing, and Ronan looked around for something halfway decent to sit on.

"Hang on,"

Benny said with a grin.

"I came prepared!"

Ronan smiled.

"Of course you did."

Whistling cheerfully, Benny went to the four wheelers and with Traci's help, soon had improved their campsite by miles. Chairs, a little grill, coolers. Ronan hadn't even noticed until now that two of the four wheelers had little trailers on them. Of course they did. Benny was nothing if not thorough, and a chance to grill outside? Comfort his stressed, unhappy friends? He'd probably run to the grocery store and left Traci to do most of the other packing, the dork.

Just as Benny was taking hotdogs and hamburgers off the grill, Match and Thomas returned.

"You're awake!"

Match said.

"I was hoping they'd let you sleep, but I guess that wasn't possible."

Ronan stood and caught him up in a tight hug, kissed him briefly.

"What did you do with the golem?"

"Burned it, poor thing, but it will go to the forest now, which is something."

Match yawned.

"Food smells awesome. What did you do, Benny, bring an entire pantry?"

"Obviously. Figured we'd be out here with the questioning and stuff for a bit, and that you'd like better than whatever freeze dried bullshit you've been eating."

"Amen,"

Ronan said.

Benny went into the cooler and pulled out a can of Ronan's favorite iced coffee. Well, as canned iced coffees went.

"Here, looks like you could use it."

"I could use straight caffeine in an IV drip. Thanks."

He popped the tab and drank a third of it straight down.

"That's fantastic."

Grinning, pleased, Benny pulled out a fruity green tea thing for Match and handed it over.

"Food's ready. Unorthodox breakfast, but I figured you wouldn't care."

"I do not care remotely. It smells awesome."

Also fighting the way he had, and all the magic Match had used, had burned serious calories. Burgers, hot dogs, potato salad, macaroni salad, and so much more all sounded goddamn perfect, even if it was way too early in the morning.

"Thanks for doing so much, Benny."

Benny scoffed.

"Like I don't love feeding people, and I look after my team anyway."

He kissed Traci as she came up to him, then filled a plate for her and playfully swatted her ass as she went to sit down.

By the time Ronan had finished round two and was going for three, the cops were coming back over to them.

"We're all finished here. Gonna transport those two back to headquarters for booking. You're free to go. We'll call if we have further questions."

Lynley ripped a sheet of paper from his little notebook.

"Here's the case number, our names, should appear in the system after about seventy-two hours."

When they'd gone, Ronan sighed and went back to his food.

"Still wish I knew why they did it."

"Desperation,"

Traci said.

"Penny has been digging. Apparently that bitch with the really ugly, ostentatious ring—"

"Carmen."

Benny cast her an amused look.

"I kept calling her Diamond in my head until I knew her name,"

Ronan said.

"It really was an ugly ring. Like, people like what they like, I guess, but I'm judging her anyway."

Traci snickered.

"Anyway, there's apparently talk of her territory being absorbed into Minerva's. The three Guards watching over it, headed by Carmen, haven't been doing a great job, and Minerva's Guard needs more help. That they had to call in outside help for something as important as wards makes that painfully clear. Carmen also has a lot of complaints lodged against her, and her job security wasn't looking great if the merger went through."

"So...they thought drugging and spelling me would accomplish...what exactly?"

Benny finished eating the last bite of his burger, then said, "As you already surmised, that was to get you out of the way and also make Lynwood look like a better paladin by far. Because of course that's the only reason Match loves you."

Benny rolled his eyes.

"People are so dumb. Anyway, get rid of you, convince Match to join them... Lynwood gets Match, gets all that comes from being the main squeeze of one of the best witches in the country, including forming his own Guard, and he promised Carmen and Marvin they'd be on the team."

"That is so beyond stupid, I don't know where to start,"

Match said flatly.

"I have told everyone a thousand times that I have no desire to leave Harper Valley. It's my home. It's where all my family is, going back to the town's foundation. My grandfather gave his life to give me magic, and these assholes think I'd just lightly skip off for popularity and money? I don't do this job for the money. Obviously,"

he added sourly, because yeah, he'd made next to nothing for way too fucking long.

"Nevermind what leaving would do to the town, as I tore down the wards because anyone who replaced me would have to rebuild them, and that puts everyone at risk for a long fucking time. Fuck, I can't wait to be home again, everything hurts. I can't believe they thought I'd just drop all of my family, my entire life, for speaking gigs and being popular. I'm a witch."

Benny smirked.

"Yeah, they should have offered you a gingerbread cottage in the woods and a really fancy herb garden. That might have gotten them somewhere."

"I will put you in a stew, Benny,"

Match retorted.

"You're meaty enough to make a good one."

Benny slapped his stomach with both hands.

"USDA Prime."

"Prime dumbass,"

Traci said, smacking his ass.

"Sit down and finish eating so we can pack up and go home."

"Yes, mistress,"

Benny replied cheerfully.

Traci grinned at Ronan.

"Speaking of prime, that ring is top tier. Congrats on your engagement, sorry the excitement is dampened by all this bullshit."

"Nothing could dampen my happiness that Match said yes,"

Ronan replied.

"Nobody and nothing will take that high from me."

"Dork,"

Match said, looking the happiest Ronan had ever seen him.

"Oh! Speaking of things that please me, I can't believe I forgot. Lynwood!"

Ronan wrinkled his nose.

"What about him?"

"He drugged the golem and the troll. That's why he was able to kill the troll all by himself. But he used the same poison on the golem, which wouldn't work the same because they're so different. Instead of leaving it confused and weak, it sent the poor thing in the opposite direction. That's why he didn't help you. He's a shitty ass paladin who was in over his head and pissing himself."

He sneered.

"Difference between nepotism and properly training your successor, I guess. So determined he was the greatest ever, but he can only kill a troll when it's drugged while my fiancé singlehandedly took down a berserked, aggroed golem. Suck on that. I wish he was here so I could say that to his face."

"You're a fucking dork,"

Ronan replied, but he was absolutely grinning through the whole rest of the meal.

Once all the food was gone, which never took them long, Ronan helped pack everything up and get it loaded. Mostly because if he held still for too long he'd fall

asleep standing.

After that, it was only the driving left. He guzzled another coffee, took a quick bathroom break, and then climbed on. Match settled behind him, Benny took off to lead the way, and finally they were leaving.

If Ronan had his way, they'd never see this shitty place ever again.

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In the end, everything was kind of humdrum. The fallout usually was. Lynwood, Marvin, and Carmen went to prison. Minerva and the others were cleared of involvement, she got the expanded territory, and last he'd heard she was seeking out people to fill all the empty Guard slots as there were plenty of people tied to Carmen that she simply did not trust.

What would become of the fancy wards, he didn't know and didn't care.

Match's parents took them to dinner to celebrate their engagement, and the waiters were happy to open the wine at the table, and otherwise he drank water that came from a pitcher left at the table.

It really fucking sucked this was an issue now, but whatever. He'd deal, and maybe, with time, get past it. If he didn't, anyone who mattered didn't mind. Talking to his uncle had also helped immensely. Who would have thought one drink—well, one and almost a second—could fuck you up so much?

After dinner, they helped pack up everything.

"I came loaded for bear,"

Jordan said with a laugh as she stood with Match watching Ronan and Darius load the car.

"Figures we weren't here even two full weeks. Not that I'm sorry to be going home, much as I love to see you boys, and your house is lovely. The cats certainly approve. They barely ever left the pixie enclosure. They came for snacks and bathroom breaks

and to make sure they tripped me while I was getting out of the shower, that's about it. Might have to get them some damn pixies now, they love them so much."

Match laughed.

"We'll come up for New Year's. I'll bring some good starter pixies for you."

"Deal."

She kissed his cheek, hugged Ronan, and then they were gone.

Match sighed.

"I know we've been home a couple of days now, but it really only feels like it now. Rick called earlier, asked me if I wanted him to invite Maddy and the others to our engagement shindig."

"What did you say?"

"I said yes. This weird stalemate can't last forever. I don't know if I'll ever call them friends again, but I'd like to try. I do miss them, the friendships I thought we had. I dunno. Maybe I should have said no."

"If you want to mend fences, then do it. If you change your mind, fuck'em. Deciding when to keep trying and when to cut people loose is a difficult, heart-draining matter. I still love my parents, but I don't like them, and being in their vicinity was bad for me. I've been a hundred times better without them. But I still hate every day that's the choice I had to make. You make whatever choice is right for you, and ignore everyone who tries to make you feel bad about it."

Match smiled and slid arms around his waist, leaning up to kiss him softly.

"You're always so chill about it, easy to forget you've made this kind of choice before and are never left in peace about it. Well, not forget, but easy to stop fully appreciating. My cool under pressure of all kinds paladin."

"Oh, I was pretty fucking hot every time Lynwood so much as breathed near me or you,"

Ronan said.

"Do you think it would be childish to send them care packages in prison that are just filled with bugs?"

"Yes, but the imagery is delightful,"

Match replied with a laugh.

"All right, here's what we're gonna do. You're going to shower, then enjoy a beer and TV. I'm going to sit with my pixies for an hour or so, then get a shower. Then you're going to fuck me through the mattress, and after that we're sleeping clear through to next weekend."

Ronan grinned.

"Excellent plan, fiancé. Now let's get to executing it."

He kissed Match one last, lingering time, then headed off to complete step one.

End