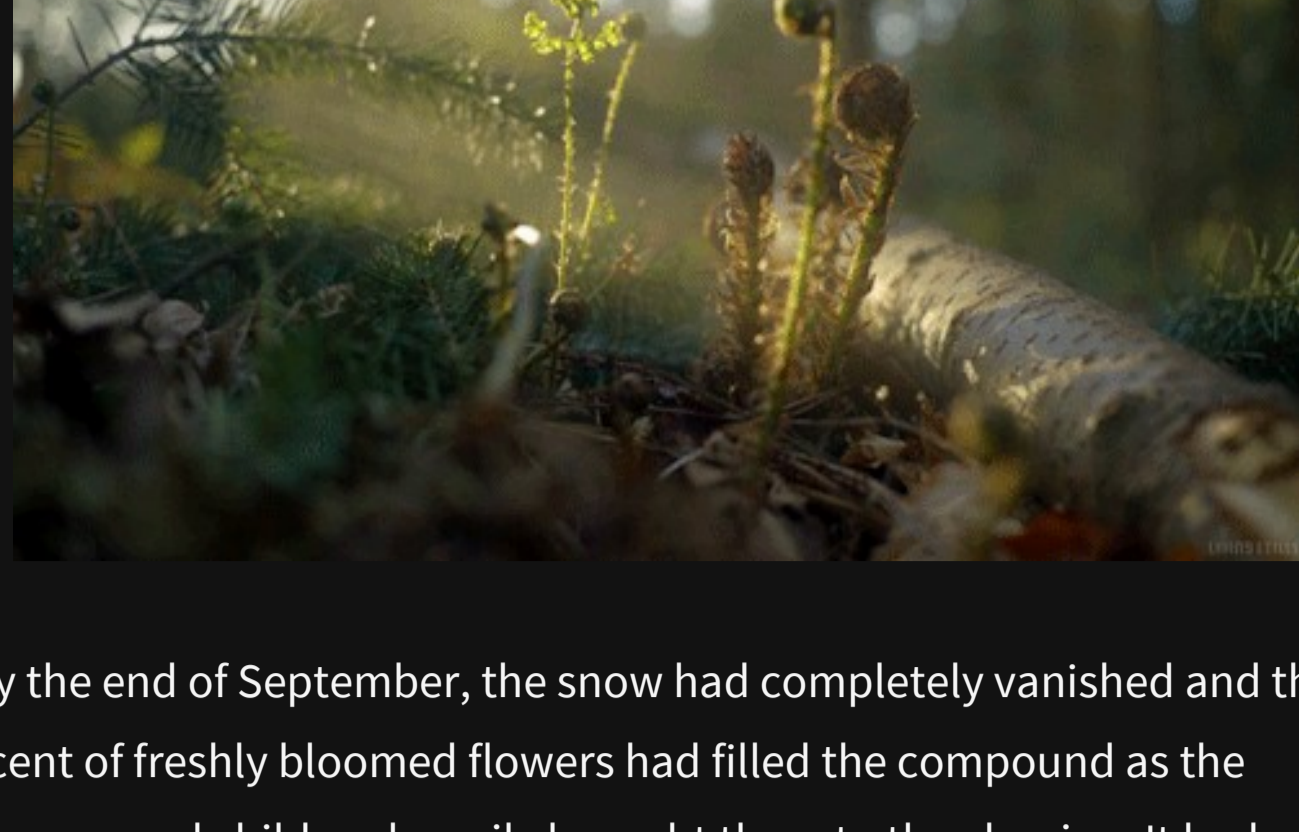


## CHANGE



By the end of September, the snow had completely vanished and the scent of freshly bloomed flowers had filled the compound as the woman and children happily brought them to the clearing. It had become a morning ritual for the children to sit huddled together despite the warmer weather and braid the flowers into beautiful crowns as the woman used grass to make baskets. Gabriella often found herself when she wasn't training or with Druig, squashed in between groups of children happily teaching her how to weave with them.

It didn't take long for the children to mock Gabriella's terrible skills at it though, as she found herself fiddling away with the flowers to only snap them in defeat. Usually by the third or fourth time of trying, Gabriella would throw the flowers away in frustration as those around her laughed in amusement. Despite the many things she was good at, making flower crowns was not one of them and as someone who wanted to be the best at everything, this was especially upsetting.

"Oh come on!" Gabriella cries out bitterly as she throws yet another broken flower stem to the ground before falling back into the grass and closing her eyes, "this is just getting ridiculous!"

Putting a hand over her face to shield it from the sun, Gabriella hushes herself before sitting up to try again but notices a young girl leaning on her knees observing her. Straightening herself awkwardly, Gabriella half-smiles as the girl lifts her hands up shyly, pushing them forwards. Looking closer, Gabriella's smile widens slightly as she notices several flower stems neatly tied together, showing the young girl had continued the one Gabriella was trying to make.

"You fixed my flower chain," Gabriella comments shyly as she holds her hands out towards the young girl, "I was having an awful amount of trouble with it, thank you."

"It's not that tricky," the young girl replies shyly placing the flowers into Gabriella's hands as she can only laugh awkwardly at the girl's response, "you just need patience."

"Oh, yes, you're probably right.."

"Katia, don't be rude!" A woman suddenly calls out from behind a pile of grass woven in patterns as Gabriella looks over smiling before looking back to the girl, "come here, child."

Watching the young girl rise slowly and bow, Gabriella's eyes follow her as she wanders back to the woman, who Gabriella could only assume was her mother. Catching the woman's eye, she quickly bows and mouths an apology as Gabriella bows gently in response. Turning back to look at the half-finished flower chain her smile softens as she lightly moves it with her fingers, her thoughts lingering to how happy she felt.

Looking up from her hands, Gabriella carefully places the flowers beside her before sneaking a look at everyone busily moving about the clearing. Pulling her knees up to her chest, Gabriella leans her chin peacefully on them smiling as she notices Druig walk out of the hall and get stopped by a group of children. Peeking her interest, it seemed like the children were wanting something and Druig was making things difficult as he continued on his way with a sly smile, the frustrated children following him. Giggling at his response to the children, Gabriella's smile grows as Druig notices her and begins to make his way towards her, the children's voices getting louder as they came closer. As they came close enough for Gabriella to see their faces, her eyes light up as she notices them to be Gabriel, Evita and Julio.

"Sir," Gabriel whines out rushing forward to tug on Druig's coat, "why can't we go past the entrance?"

"We won't go far!" Evita calls out finding her courage as Druig stops in front of Gabriella, winking before turning to the children.

"Why do you want to go, past the clearing?" Druig questions, his hands placed lightly behind his back as the children awkwardly shuffle before him as if they were being scolded, "what don't I know?"

"Nothing sir," Julio replies bravely as Druig turns his attention to the boy speaking up, "we just want a new place to play, the clearing is so boring."

"I'm curious, do you know why I don't like you going past the entrance?"

"Because it's dangerous," the children moan shyly together as Gabriella giggles, making Druig turn to her.

Leaning her head slightly to the side, Gabriella smiles as Druig extends his hand offering to help her up as she graciously takes it and is pulled to her feet. Keeping his hand holding hers, Druig tugs her gently to his side so the children could see her before his eyes linger back to them.

"Children," Druig announces warmly as they nervously look to him, stealing glances at Gabriella as she half-smiles, "since, you so badly want to go past the entrance, I might allow it."

The children burst into excitement as Gabriella laughs shyly, squeezing Druig's hand as she notices him raise his hand to quieten them down.

"Settle down," he warns with a smile as the children quickly follow orders, not wanting him to change his mind, "I will only allow it, if Gabriella allows it."

Turning her attention from the children to Druig, her eyes narrow curiously as he simply smiles keeping his own eyes on the children. Feeling the pleading eyes of the children on her, Gabriella hesitates before smiling and looking towards the children waiting patiently for her answer.

"I say," she comments loudly as she places her free hand to her face, tapping her finger against her cheek playfully as the children lean forward slightly in anticipation, "why not! If you promise to not go too far and stay close to the entrance, then there's no harm with it."

Watching the children erupt with excitement, they don't even allow for anything more to be said before expressing to each other what they were going to do as they began to walk towards the entrance. Feeling Druig lean forward to move to command them to stop, Gabriella turns to place a hand to his cheek as she shook her head with a smile.

"Let them go," she whispers laughing lightly as he looks at her to return her smile, "they're just children, don't take it personally."

"Who says I'm taking it personally?" Druig comments with a sco as Gabriella shakes her head with another soft laugh.

"I am, now, since I have you, are you free this afternoon?"

Just as Druig was about to speak, his eyes linger downwards to which Gabriella follows to see Katia, the young girl from before who had quietly moved to their side. Turning from Druig, Gabriella crouches down as Katia watches nervously before pointing to the entrance and the children making their way to it.

"I would like to go with them," Katia asks shyly as Druig places a hand to Gabriella's shoulder, "I promise to stay close, just like you said."

"Did your mother say it was okay?" Gabriella questions as her eyes linger over to the where the woman were busily weaving.

"She did," Katia replies quickly as Gabriella smiles, "please, I'm brave and I'll be careful."

"Go on then, have fun and stay close to the others."

Straightening up slowly, Gabriella laughs lightly as Katia smiles shyly before turning to run after the other children who were almost at the entrance. Placing a hand to the back of her neck, she looks suddenly to see Druig watching her.

"What?"

"Nothing," Druig comments as Gabriella laughs again before rolling her eyes with a hush, "aren't I allowed to just look at you?"

"I suppose you can," she replies quietly turning to face the entrance again, the children now no longer in her sight, "Druig? Do you think the children will be okay? Maybe I should go with them."

"I think it'll be okay, they won't go far."

"Are you sure?" Gabriella whispers as Druig bumps her lightly, making her smile, "I just don't want them to get in any trouble, you know?"

"Relax, my love," Druig answers pulling her into his arms as she nods slowly, "they'll be fine."

Feeling his chin rest against her shoulder, Gabriella's eyes linger on the entrance before she sighs. Although Druig was trying to reassure her, she couldn't help but to have her worries as she continued to watch where the children had vanished. It had been a long time since anyone was hurt or attacked at the compound and that thought settled her heart as she placed a hand up to rub Druig's hair gently.

It was silly, why would anything change now.

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Hiya lovely people! So, firstly I want to thank everyone who is keeping updated and interested by my story! I know it's super fluffy at the moment and I'm sure you're waiting for something to happen, but prepare, I want to try and spice it up and try my go to a mix of emotions. I hope the direction excites, saddens, amuses and warms you as you continue on this little journey with me. Again, I thank you all <3

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