

It was so close. Just down on the beach, he could see it waiting there. For the first time, in he couldn't say how long, he felt something bordering on hope. The island had become a prison, and they were tired of fighting back against their wardens. They agreed... it was time to give it up.

But it wasn't as simple as apparating away to greener pastures. No one actually knew just how they'd achieved it, but there was no form of magical travel that could get them off the island. Nigh-on impossible to break wards kept them trapped there. Given enough time and patience, Harry believed he could achieve it. 'But there never is. They always know.'

Then there were the brooms. There'd been stories that they'd found a way to monitor the skies for even that sort of travel. Harry didn't know if he believed it, or if it was just propaganda spread by the Church. 'Either way, I'd still be willing to try if I could even find one, but it's been hopeless.' He hadn't seen his Firebolt in years, and there was no venturing into Diagon or Hogsmeade in the hope of finding one laying about.

They tried to find thestrals, or hippogriffs, griffins. 'Or even a bloody dragon.' Anything that might mean they could get off the rock. But the Inquisition was thorough. They didn't kill all of these creatures, they were simply another of god's creation, but they kept them guarded and watched without fail, so stealing one, let alone more than that, was improbable if not impossible.

It meant that their only means of escape was more mundane forms of travel. And it needed to be discreet. 'Can't just walk into any old harbor and look for a ship.' After years of the church always nipping at their heels, they'd grown paranoid. He'd had a close call just a week before when he tried to compel a boatman to take them. The crucifix every bastard in the country had seemed to be a beacon of sorts, because five minutes later there were zealots breathing down his neck long before they were able to make way.

That was why the six of them were walking along the Cornish coast in the cover of night.

"Is that it?" Katie sounded so hollow as she leaned against Draco for support. They waited for hours for others to join them... Dean... George... anyone. But they never came. They hoped in vain that they'd simply escaped elsewhere. But every day that went by drove another dagger into that hope. After four months, it was all but dead.

"That's it." Harry confirmed. There was a single light in the cabin of the old metal ship, marking it out against the darkness of the shore. It'd taken two months to find someone sympathetic to their plight who was still willing to risk the retribution of the Church. The boatman was an middle-aged muggleborn named Mick Tipple. For decades before the conflict, he'd all but abandoned the magical world but couldn't stand to see the persecution of his fellows. So, at great risk to himself, he ferried the few magicals who managed to find him... for a price of course.

"That thing doesn't look like it can make it to Ireland, let alone the coast of western Africa." Neville was weary, his eyes sunken and his body thin, "Suppose drowning will be better than whatever the Inquisition might do to us."

There was a squeeze against his hand, one of assurance. Since the loss of the twins, it always seemed like Ginny was on the verge of tears. He'd been her stalwart support, him and Luna. The blonde was walking beside Ginny with her head resting against her shoulder.

“It’s nothing magic can’t keep going once we’re on our way.” Harry assured them.

They made it to the boat in silence from there. It was anchored just offshore, and they had to trudge through the cold waters to get there. Harry helped Ginny and Luna up and Draco did the same for Katie. When they reached the deck, Harry headed for the helm. He could see Mick waiting inside, sitting there.

At the doorway, he told him softly, “Mick we’re all here, ready to go.”

All it took was a look and he knew, not for the first time, they’d been betrayed. The guilt was written in every line on his face. His voice broke as he tried to rationalize, his own wand wavering in his hand, “For what... for what it’s worth. I’m sorry. I had a baby, six months ago... she’s like me. They’ve made promises... promises that she’ll be safe, returned if I only help root out the last of ye!”

He yelled the last at Harry’s back as he had already turned away. He didn’t care about the excuses, he only cared about getting them to safety but the spellfire already started. Sickly green and crackling orange lit up the darkness as it came from all sides, dozens of them creating a light show along the Cornish coast. If it weren’t aimed at them, it would’ve beautiful

When he reached his companions, they were hiding beneath the edge of the boat. Luna was trying to stem the tide of blood pouring from where Neville’s left arm used to be. It was lay blackened and shriveled on the deck of the boat.

Harry thought to do the same as he had in the cave. ‘Break the Anti-Apparition and we escape.’ He turned the Elder Wand up, and poured his magic into. But it held strong... They knew exactly who they were trying to apprehend or kill, and they’d come more prepared this time. ‘They’ll overwhelm us before I can manage it.’ Even working together, it wasn’t enough. He could see the look of terror on the others’ faces, as they failed. It was an all too familiar feeling.

“The only way out is back.” He couldn’t steer the ship himself, but he could force it back to shore. ‘Not that they’d let us get out to sea even if we tried.’ Pointing his wand toward the bow, the ship surged forward and beached on the stones. There were screams of pain, as at least one was crushed in the process, “We jump and we run! Hurry!”

“I’ll... I’ll distract them!” Neville insisted, looking to all the world like a man who was ready to die, “Not of much use for anything else at this point.”

Ignoring him, Harry led them forward, all of them careful to keep low. The gravel around the feet of their assailants turned into a vortex of his own making, swallowing some of them in the process. It gave them an opportunity to jump down. Lightening their fall with a wave, none of them missed a beat. They ran hard. Harry raised a wall around them on either side that stopped the onslaught of spells for a moment.

But they were not content to let them run, they climbed the walls. Harry dropped them just as quickly as they raised. Three of them went tumbling into the tiny stones of the beach. Luna dispatched one, Ginny the other. But as the wall came down, a flash of green shot through the air. And Neville did something that he never would’ve expected years before. He stepped between Draco and the green light. The light left his eyes... and Draco went mad.

They fought together in a flurry of light and fury. But that alone wasn't enough to overcome the Inquisitions' number. His wand became a blur in the air as they fought together always pushing further inland, away from the fortified wards they'd trapped them in. More than once, he heard the dull thud of a body hit the ground around them... too often... They left a wake of bodies behind them, but there always seemed to be more. And then he felt it, the wards shifted. They were weaker, and he turned his wand up.

A bolt of energy shattered the wards in a clap of thunder. Harry reached out... for a hand... anything... and apparated away. His body burned, there was a deep cut in his left forearm that left a trail of blood that dripped down to his fingertips. 'When did that happen?'

Looking around, he still held a soft hand in an iron grip. It was Luna, her silver eyes were distant. She wasn't blinking and tears slowly seeped from the corner of her eyes, "Where's Ginny?" All he got in return was a sob, "You saw her die though?" It was morbid, but that was better... far better than the alternative. He breathed easier when he saw her nod.

There was a pop next to them. It was Draco, his back was to them as he collapsed to his knees. As Harry moved to him, he caught him before he could fall backward. He smelled of death. There was congealed blood around his collar and staining his neck. His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper, "I made sure... it was quick... for Katie. They would've taken her. She wasn't dead... just... just down. I couldn't let that happen."

"I know. It's what she would've wanted." Frantically, he tried to repair the damage, but, as though Harry's reassurance was all that he was waiting for, Draco's eyes glassed over, and he lolled over to rest against his shoulder, still.

Harry didn't even notice it happen, but he started crying.

Slowly, he woke. There were soft fingers gently caressing his hair, soothing him. A finger brushed across his cheek, and he could feel the wetness there. When the fog of sleep cleared, he was staring into concerned, midnight blue eyes. Rowena was sitting on the edge of his bed, ready for the day ahead.

They were back in her little keep where Hogwarts should one day stand. He could see that she was nervous, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to intrude. But you sounded distressed, like you were having a terrible nightmare. You were murmuring in your sleep, and I don't know... I just wanted to help. It was foolish of me. Again, I'm sorry." She went to pull her hand away, but he stopped her before she could with his hand against her wrist.

"Don't apologize, Row..." He let go and her hand went back to his hair. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"I was worried." She looked away, stopped herself once and then decided to say it anyway, "Was it a nightmare?"

"In its own way... yes. But a memory, more like." That didn't seem to surprise her.

Her thumb brushed along his brow, and he found himself leaning into her touch, "I did say you were interesting, and you never seem to disappoint." She gave a sad smile down at him, "I'm willing to listen... if that's what you need."

There was a part of him that wanted nothing more than to share that story with her. But one story would lead to questions; questions that would be difficult to answer. And it simply wasn't the time. If they continued to grow closer, he knew, at some point, he'd need to explain his complicated history, but it just wasn't the time. 'No time for such outstanding distractions when you're organizing a war.'

"No...not right now at least." It was hard to know what to expect. There was every chance she might take his refusal poorly.

For a time, they just stared at each other as she continued the gentle scraping against his scalp. It was nearly enough to lull him back to sleep and he took it as a good sign. Finally, she nodded, "When you're ready then." With that she stood and headed out into the main room.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to center himself. 'I'll be surprised if she even believes me when I do finally tell her. But then, she does trust me.' With that, he got out of bed and threw on a shirt and trousers. There was breakfast waiting for him, and twenty minutes later they found themselves in the clearing with the kids.

"Everything is still in one piece." He noted, and she just snickered at that. You could never be sure where young magicals were involved.

They were already up and about, taking care of their own breakfast. It was Tadc that saw them first and the boy came charging over, "What happened with Gofraid?"

Esla hugged his leg, and he ruffled her hair as he answered, "He's dead."

"Really?" His eyes were wide with delight at that news.

"That's usually what happens when you bury an axe in someone's neck." Harry chuckled, "You were right though, absolutely horrid bastard."

Tadc looked about ready to dance at the news, "You don't have to tell me. Gofraid is the man that sold me to the Church... it would've been good to see him die." Even at ten, it was obvious Tadc felt an overwhelming sense of joy at the small semblance of vengeance. 'I don't blame him for a second.'

"To the Orkney's next then?" Heiddi asked.

"Today, yes."

"And then Varrich?" Euan asked.

"Soon, yes." Rowena told them, "There's no telling how long we'll be in Byrgisey."

"A day... at most if things continue as they have." Mairi snickered.

"There's no knowing for sure until we get there." One man might not be as agreeable as another. 'Or as easy to bring to anger.'

"You'll want to convince Thorfinn if you can." Rorik piped up. Considering he was from Orkney, Harry meant to learn what he could from him anyway, "Arnkel and Erlend will follow him."

"All three rule the islands?"

“They’re meant to... but it is Thorfinn’s word that is most respected. He’s measured and reasonable. Well mostly.” It sounded as though Rorik respected him.

“Mostly?”

“He has a seithmenn, Halland, who can see and shape the future, or so he claims. Thorfinn considers his advice like no one else’s. He believes in his gods wholeheartedly and sees him as their voice.” Harry had to resist the urge to bang his head against the nearest tree. ‘A seer... of course there’s a bloody fucking seer.’ All he could think of was Trewlawney’s horrid lessons. ‘Hopefully this one won’t predict my death the first time he meets me.’

“And the other brothers?” Rowena questioned.

“Arnel is wild and impulsive, happy for a fight regardless of the consequences. Erlend is a glutton and drunk, but good company even when he’s in his cups.” Rorik shrugged, “But all of them were younger men last time I saw them, new to their jarldom. And I was just a child. Things may have changed greatly.”

“We’ll see for ourselves soon enough.” Harry reasoned and stood.

Before they left, Rowena gave them a quick tutorial on a few spells, with Harry’s help, of course. She decided on Levitation and Summoning because they were relatively similar in nature and had some simple, practical applications. After they said their goodbyes, they headed to the edge of the clearing.

A portkey later, and they were standing down the coast from a seaside stronghold made of solid timber. It sat on a high hill looking over the Kyle of Tongue, a sea inlet that led out into the North Sea. The day was blessedly sunny considering they were in for a far longer flight on the broom than their excursion to Man.

“The first of them have arrived.” Rowena was looking down into the inlet. There were just three longships. They were banked along the lower coast and encamped just a short distance from their ships. Further along the coast was the small village of Tongue, though it’d clearly grown bigger in the past few days as other Highlanders took refuge there.

“The first of Ansbjorn’s men. If he sent them at dawn the morning we left, they probably arrived before the end of the day yesterday.”

“The winds must’ve been kind.”

Even as they looked out over the lush green landscape, they could see more people walking along the beaten path, dispossessed of their land, toward Tongue and Varrich, “More are coming every hour.”

“From the sea and land. Hopefully, they’re as good at keeping out of trouble as the kids.” Harry said it as a joke, but there was some genuine concern there, too. The Highlanders and the Norse could get prickly easily enough.

“If my uncle is with them, he’ll be sure to keep them in line.” Rowena chuckled. He had little doubt that she was right on that account.

“Well,” The broom appeared in his hand, “shall we?” Harry had never been to Orkney, so even if he wanted to reveal his ability to apparate, he couldn’t get them there. ‘And just like the dream, that’s a story I don’t want to get into yet.’

“Could we not just... conjure a boat?” Their little flight the day before hadn’t been enough to cure her fears.

“Flying is still faster.” He tried not to smile, but her nervousness was rather adorable. He threw his leg over the broom. He’d taken the time to smooth it out and cushion the seat, so it was at least a bit more comfortable to fly.

“We have magic...” She reminded him very matter-of-factly, “Surely we could think of something.”

“If you like, I can fly there by myself and come back to get you.” It was a reasonable compromise one that would save her from flying.

“No... no, that’s ridiculous. I’d rather not stand here all morning.”

“You could always go back to the kids.” He reminded her. “A portkey can get me back to the forest as quickly as it can get me back to the coast.” Or nearly as fast at least. ‘Never really did work out the time difference depending on distance.’

Rowena flexed her hands nervously at her side as she tried to come to a decision. It was obvious that she came to a decision when she threw leg over the broom, “Just... be careful.”

“Promise.” His assurance was enough for her to relax and nestle herself between his arms. He let her get comfortable before pushing off the ground. He saw ships along the western horizon, half a dozen, right as they exited the inlet ‘More of Ansbjorn’s men.’

Unlike their journey to Holmtown, it took them quite a while. Harry never let them soar too high, staying close enough to the cold sea water that even if they fell it wouldn’t hurt too badly. He kept them along the western coast of the isles because they knew enough that they’d find Byrgisey there.

And then, something quite unexpected happened, “Row... look.” She shook her head against his chest. Water splashed around them and even that wasn’t enough to get her attention. So, he dipped a little lower until their feet just grazed against the surface of the water. Even in spring, those waters were terribly cold. It made her jump against him and turn to glare at him. It didn’t last as she finally took the chance to look around them. There were white-sided dolphins popping up out of the water on either side of them.

“Don’t see that every morning.” It seemed that Rowena agreed, because instead of turning her face back into his chest she finally looked out even after the dolphins disappeared into the distance.

Shortly after, it came into view. There was a strong fort surrounded by stone buildings, a few dozen at least, sitting on jutting bit of land. It was connected to the main island by a small isthmus. They landed in the soft grass, on the mainland just along the coast as the tide beat heavy against the rocks.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Rowena shook her head, long hair slightly wet from the spray of the sea, “I... actually enjoyed it. I say that was down to you, though.”

“Well, I love to fly. So, I suppose it rubbed off a bit.”

She giggled at that as he pocketed the broom. They walked together down the footpath that led along the isthmus to the settlement. As he'd come to expect, they got some odd looks from the locals as they made their way to the stronghold, "At least they should be easy to find this time."

"No need to go to the local tavern and come perilously close to causing a fight, you mean?"

"That too."

There were stone steps that led up to stronghold, at the top of the steps were banded double doors that were already open. It was a pagan's hall, that much was obvious. Long tables ran the length of the room up to a raised dais, but instead of just one chair of prominence, there were three. Though only one of them was filled.

Thorfinn sat with his back straight, eyes forward, as though he were expecting someone. He was young, of an age with Harry if he were to guess. A well-built man, he was tall. He had dark blonde hair in an intricate braid that ran down his back and a neatly-trimmed beard. A scar ran from just next to his right eye down to disappear in his beard. His sword rested against the side of his seat, ready and waiting if the need arose. The moment he saw them, he glanced back at a man standing just over his shoulder.

'So, this is Halland then.' He was older with short, dark hair peppered with silver. His nose was a bit too big for his face, and he was rather short and thin. A rune was painted on his left cheek, and he wore a large red robe. There was a staff in his hand, a branch of white wood with a single knot where a gem was inlaid and banded in brass.

"I was expecting my brothers, and instead I'm presented with two strangers." Thorfinn's voice echoed around the near empty hall, "So, I can only wonder who you are and what brings you to Byrgisey?"

"I'm Harry, Lord, and this is Rowena." He introduced them, "And there's a great deal happening to the south."

From the look on his face, he wasn't surprised by that news, "I'm well aware of that, Harry. We had word of the ships sailing into the Tongue from Hamnavoe last night. I just don't know the nature of these happenings. It's the very reason why I'm waiting on my brothers. Perhaps you can shed some light on things."

"The ships you saw belong to Jarl Ansbjorn. More are arriving even now, I'm sure."

"He raids?"

"No, lord," Rowena cut in, and it didn't seem to offend him any, "He means to join with the Highland toiseachs who've been dispossessed of their lands. He means to go to war. And Ragnall of Man is raising his men to do the same."

Thorfinn hid it well, but he was clearly taken aback by what he'd just been told, "You've told me a great many things I didn't know. You'll understand that it raises many questions."

He was interrupted then by heavy footsteps, and a booming voice, "Thorfinn, brother, what do you need us for?! I was busy!"

"Fighting, I'm sure." Thorfinn didn't sound impressed, "Sit down, and perhaps we'll find a better outlet for your frustrations. Our two guests have news."

Two men came in, one proud as a peacock and the other holding his head and staggering a bit on his feet. Arnkel looked much like his brother, though he was slightly shorter but bigger in the arms. His hair was darker and cut short, but the set of their brows was identical. Erlend was round around the middle, soft with a largely unkempt beard. He looked like the sort of man who had far too much time on his hands and filled it by filling his gob. From the fact that that his head and shirt were covered in water, it appeared that it took great effort to rouse him.

The brothers stepped past Harry and Rowena as though they weren't even there. Arnkel draped one leg over the arm of his seat almost lounging across it. Erlend leaned back closed his eyes, and looked as though he was resisting the urge to vomit.

Thorfinn looked to Erlend and simply shook his head in disappointment, "One of these days you're going to drink yourself into such a stupor you'll walk right into the sea and never walk out."

"I'm sure that would be for the best in your estimation, brother." Just the act of talking seemed to trouble him.

"Can we get on with it?" Arnkel asked, impatient.

Thorfinn clenched his jaw and his fist, but returned his attention to Harry and Rowena, "Who has attacked the Highlanders?"

"Their fellow Scots, stirred up by the bishop at St. Andrews. The Christians wish to rid themselves of the pagan." Harry explained.

His nostrils flared in anger, "When?"

"A week or less? They were traveling through the highlands to safety at Varrich and Tongue only three days ago when we met them."

"Yet, there's already a war brewing?" The man was astute. It was incredibly fast, even rumors didn't spread that quickly. 'Much less plans getting made.' Behind his seat, Halland was growing increasingly more uncomfortable. His eyes flicked between Harry and Rowena and he looked about ready to run from the room.

"It's why you've seen Ansbjorn ships, lord." Rowena said.

"And you said Ragnall raises Man, not Gofraid?"

"Gofraid is dead." Harry revealed.

"How?"

"His temper and an axe in his neck."

Arnkel barked a laugh that left Erlend wincing, "Aye, that'll usually do it! Who was it that ended the prickly bastard?"

"Me." The room went silent. It wasn't a small boast. Gofraid was a man with reputation.

Thorfinn's eyes narrowed, "When?"

“Yesterday.”

“You must have traveled on Slepnir himself to have traveled so far so quickly!” Arnkel boomed as his brother watched and thought, “I don’t believe it!”

“Men know it.” Rowena told them, her voice firm as steel, “You need only ask Ragnall when you see him, and he will tell you the truth of it. As would any of the men that were there.”

“If we choose to fight, you mean. Otherwise, we might never see Ragnall again.” It was the first time they saw Thorfinn smile, “Because that is why you’re here isn’t it, to gather more fighting men for this war?”

“Yes, lord.” There was no point in lying. ‘He doesn’t seem the sort of man to care for games.’

Thorfinn finally turned to Halland then, “Tell me?”

His voice quavered and he’d gone pale as the attention turned to him, “I’ll need to throw the bones, lord. And look for the omens.”

“Do it then.” He commanded, not unkindly, “Brothers, with me.” As he stood, he inclined his head to Harry and Rowena, “You have my hospitality and my thanks for the news. But there are some things that are best kept between brothers.” With that, he turned to head toward his own quarters, only stopping to drag Erlend out of his seat.

Halland shuffled on his feet before walking down from the raised dais and toward the door. He tried to hurry right past them. But Harry stopped him with a hand to his shoulder, “So I assume it was both your parents then?” He could’ve been wrong, but the way he looked at them, like he knew exactly what sort of people could travel so far so fast, but for some reason was afraid. ‘Another wizard, or proper seer, would have no reason to be afraid.’ That and he felt about as magical as the average toadstool.

“What?” There was sweat on his brow as he fidgeted beneath their gaze.

“Your parents, they were gifted with magic.” Rowena was gentle, “But you’re not.”

“I...I... don’t... don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.” Harry let go of his shoulder, “You know enough of magic to play the part, to know what we are with just some small part of our story, but you can’t do it yourself. I imagine you’ve gotten quite lucky over the years. One wrong move and it could’ve meant your head.”

His nerves turned to irritation then, hand tightening around his staff. But it amounted to nothing. He knew full-well that any confrontation wouldn’t fall in his favor. Instead, he bit back at them another way, “Luck has nothing to do with it. I’m a voice for the gods... I read the work of the three spinners, and something tells me they will look down poorly on these plans of yours.”

“Do you think that’s wise, Halland?” Rowena pressed him, “Should your lord remain here, safe in Byrgisey, while the likes of Ragnall and Ansbjorn go and win themselves glory and reputation all on your word... do you think he’ll thank you?”

“Without him, do you think you’ll succeed?”

Harry's eyes glowed menacingly as he glared at the imposter, "Yes... and all will know that Thorfinn chose cowardice on your word."

With a frown on his lips, he finally pushed past them and out of the hall. As they watched him go, Harry pointed out, "We could simply compel him."

"It's a difficult thing to compel someone to do something they wouldn't do themselves, even mundane people."

"True."

Rowena sighed, and shook her head, "I understand the desire though. It's frustrating that our plans might be thwarted by a fraud."

"We thought of something in the Hebrides. We'll think of something here if it comes to that." Of course, there was another option. But the Imperious wasn't something he resorted to lightly. 'And even if she is pragmatic, I doubt Rowena would take too kindly to it.' She was a woman that valued her own thoughts, and the indoctrination of the Church horrified her. 'Controlling the thoughts of another doesn't seem much better.' But if worst came to worst, he would do what was necessary.

"So... is now a good time to tell me about that dream?" She might've accepted his decision, but it didn't mean that she wasn't curious.

Harry just chuckled, "No, Row... it's not. I know you struggle with not knowing **everything**, but you'll just need to bear with me on this one."

Rowena pouted but didn't press the issue any further. Instead, they spent their time chatting about the kids, the war to come, and finally he shared a story about his schooldays.

"Really?" She questioned, "Mermaids don't often take people captive as far as I'm aware." Their conversation was muffled to the few other people milling about the hall, "And if they were taken, how did they manage to survive?"

"A spell to keep them in stasis beneath the water, it was all that could be done for them before they were taken." He wasn't quite telling the whole story, but the Triwizard Tournament was a hard enough thing to explain without the thousand years in between.

"Quick thinking." She complimented him.

"Four of us went down to save them. I used gillyweed to manage. They were down in the depths of a lake." Harry continued, "Only three of us made it though. My oldest friend was down there, and the younger sister of the girl who was forced to retreat to the shore."

"You got them both though, didn't you?" There was a knowing little smile on her face.

"I couldn't rightly leave her there alone at the mermaids' mercy." It'd been his thought at the time anyway, even if he came to realize how foolish he'd been.

Rowena just shook her head, "It says something that saving two people from mermaids is the least outlandish story of yours I've heard. If it weren't for the fact I've seen the proof, I'd think you were making it up."

"I have proof for one, doesn't mean I'm telling the truth about all of them." He smirked.

She fixed him with a stare, her dark-blue eyes piercing into his. She spoke softly, but with such sincerity, "No, you're telling the truth. I know it... I was just teasing you." Something about that brought a soft smile to his lips.

The moment was broken then as the three brothers came back into the room. Thorfinn took his seat once more, while Arnkel and Erlend made their way back out into the town. They were sitting at the end of the table just next to his seat, "I expected Halland back by now."

"Divining the future isn't always a simple thing, lord." Rowena told him.

"No... I suppose it isn't." He was looking at the two of them, evaluating them, "I can't help but wonder how so much has happened so fast. My brother was right, no ship could've carried you from Man to Orkney so quickly."

They were saved from answering, at least for a time, by the reappearance of Halland. He looked troubled, and Thorfinn could see it, "What say you then? What counsel do you have for me?"

Halland hesitated, and glanced in their direction, "Lord... it is unclear. And there is no rushing the advice of the gods. I believe they might leave it in your hands to make this decision or... you need only wait until something reveals itself."

His frown made his displeasure obvious, but he didn't rage, "You'll try again." He returned his attention to Harry and Rowena, "You will have my answer soon. I promise. Should it take a day or a week, you are welcome here." He rose again and headed back to his quarters, leaving them alone with Halland.

The false seer hurried over to them, "What did you do?"

Harry and Rowena shared a look, completely taken off guard. It was easy thing to tell them, "Nothing, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"We've been sat here since you left." Rowena added.

"Impossible." He spat out, "Seven times! Seven times, I threw the bones and each time the same. And as I sat there a raven came down upon the rocks by my side. The last time I threw the bones, it flew off south toward Varrich and left behind a single feather."

"It sounds to me like you got your answer, and yet you refuse to accept it."

"And the only reason you didn't tell your lord to abandon any idea of war outright, despite your desire to spite us, is because you know it's the truth."

Halland looked between them, trying to find any hint of falseness. But there was none there to be found. He scowled and stormed back out of the hall, leaving them behind.

They waited there, throughout the day. The hall filled for supper. They met Thorfinn's young children, three sons, Arnfinn, Havard, and Ljot that were ten, eight and four, and a daughter, Eydis who was six years old. There was his woman as well. Grelad was tall with fair hair and grey eyes and just showing the swell of another child growing within her.

They drank and found the company pleasant. But all the while they were waiting for Halland's return. The crescent moon hung high in the air of the clear night's sky, its pale rays shining right through the smoke vent. There was a fire flickering in the hearth at the center of the room when the seer finally returned. The fire seemed to roar as he approached and it quieted all within the hall.

"Lord," his voice sounded hoarse as he stomped his way up to the dais, "I have news." There was a single mark upon his forehead, and a drip of blood falling from it. His hair looked wild and ragged.

"Out with it then." Thorfinn insisted.

"The bones, they were clear, lord. I just refused to see it." That caused more than one person to start murmuring, and Thorfinn clutched the arm of his chair, "I couldn't accept it, but I have... I have. And if there was any doubt... two ravens sat beside me as I cast them. For all the hours I was there they squawked and screeched at me, until I raged at them. Only then did they peck me, one after the other in the same spot. It drove any doubt from my mind, lord." He took a deep breath, his eyes darted to Harry and Rowena a split second before he said it, "To battle... to Alba, and war, lord."

Thorfinn stood and walked down to his seer and embraced him. Harry and Rowena were some of the few close enough to hear what was said, "I'm glad for it, old friend. But should you ever lie to me again, I'll slit your throat myself."

With that he let him go, and addressed the gathered crowd, "To battle and blood!" Every fighting man in the room threw up a cheer and Harry and Rowena added their voices to it.

The night that followed was filled with drink, and song, and games. Because the next day, they'd be sailing south to war. And with that last piece added to their army, it would be upon them sooner rather than later.