

CHAPTER 1

The once lavish atrium of the Ministry of Magic was derelict. The many fireplaces that lined each wall were quiet, and hadn't been alight in years. The pea-cock blue ceiling no longer spun and winded with golden writing, it was entirely still. Years of dust had built up on the polished, hardwood floor covering dried blood from the carnage that had taken place there. There was only some dim, unnatural light built into the very walls that kept it from pitch darkness. The towering Statue of Magical Brotherhood was chipped and damaged, but still stood as testament to a defunct government.

Shoeprints formed in the dust seemingly from nowhere. The little particles were thrown up into the air as something slid across the ground, but not a sound echoed in the empty halls. Beneath Death's cloak of invisibility, a weary Harry Potter strode slowly through the atrium toward the elevators that would lead him to the rest of the building.

The man beneath the cowl felt little sympathy for the simpering sycophants that once populated those walls. For every Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones, or Nymphadora Tonks, there'd been half a dozen horrible bastards who forced through ridiculous legislations and hampered the good work of well-meaning citizens at every turn. *And all along allowing the sickness that saw Voldemort's first rise to fester and grow. Morons.*

He didn't blame the common witch or wizard, and he knew that in the end, they suffered worst for the follies of others. For them, there was still a great deal of sympathy in his heart. But the men and women who allowed magical life to stagnate deserved nothing but contempt.

And it was a man beneath the cowl, gone was the short, specky boy that once walked Hogwarts' halls. The glasses went years before when he realized just how much of a liability they were. *Magic can fix nearly anything when put to the purpose. Sometimes it just takes time.*

He'd grown to be just shy of six feet, still a far cry from Ron's height but nothing to scoff at. Where once he'd been terribly skinny from years with the Dursley's, there were strong sinews of muscles from years of use and struggle. The most obvious change to the naked eye was the neatly trimmed beard on his jaw.

Despite his best efforts, he still had his father's unruly hair. While thankfully, he still had his mother's striking emerald-green eyes. The last bit of him that was entirely unchanged was the scar on his brow. The lightning bolt was a thin white line that was perfectly visible when the light caught it at the right angle. A constant reminder of the monster that had caused so much strife.

Years later, Harry still wondered just what possessed the madman to wreak such a horrible destruction. *What would've happened if he kept himself to Britain and the affairs of wizards?* But more than that, he wondered if Tom would've gone through with it if he knew what would come of it. *He should've listened to the Hogwarts motto, 'Don't Tickle a Sleeping Dragon'. But he didn't just tickle it he fired a Bombarda right at its fucking head.* But he knew better than most, wondering was futile. *What's done is done, there is no changing it.*

Harry reached the other side of the atrium, stuck in his own musings. The golden gates that once barred entrance to the rest of the Ministry were twisted and gnarled, the metal wrenched open and

marred by spell-fire. The splintered remains of the visitors stand laid scattered about the floor, a broken Probitivity Probe resting among the wreckage.

Stepping through it all, the wood snapped beneath his feet as he went. The first noise heard in those halls in years echoed impossibly loud. The elevators to the other levels were nowhere to be seen, the long shafts stretching up and down into blackness.

The Elder Wand appeared in his hand with a thought. The centuries old, legendary tool responded to him instinctually. He'd taken it from Dumbledore's tomb when he was just seventeen, after the war started properly. It'd only been thanks to Luna that he understood the significance of it well enough to retrieve it to begin with. He missed the odd girl with her brilliant insights as much as anyone.

It was a long wand, fifteen inches, with a thestral tail-hair for the core. It responded to him better than the holly and phoenix feather wand of his youth. *Peverell blood... same lineage ran in Tom's veins just from a different brother.* Though it hadn't become fully his until he bested Draco. It still owed its allegiance to him after he disarmed Dumbledore. *That's one cowardly little shit I don't miss one bit.*

A sphere of light emerged from the tip and dropped down the shaft to the floors beneath. No Latin would pass his lips again, reliance on spells, instead of a true understanding of magic, had been pivotal in the deaths of countless magicals.

Stepping over the precipice, he glided down, light as a feather. He descended the levels, noticing how each floor appeared as though it had been barred. The people they'd been trying to keep out hadn't been deterred, though. Each one was broken, and he could see the trail of dark, old blood stained the floor of each department. His descent didn't stop until he reached the last entrance.

When his feet met solid ground again, he found himself in a familiar corridor. The torches on the walls erupted in blue flames. Ahead of him, in the dark, tiled hallway of the Ministry's lowest level, was the black door to the Department of Mysteries.

There was a faint stench of death as he approached. The decaying corpse of one of the Unspeakables rested forgotten against the wall. Dried blood stained his white robes from half a dozen wounds delivered by a blade.

Fire erupted from his wand and incinerated the corpse. *Didn't even do them the courtesy of a proper burial or pyre.* There was blood on the dark walls, barely visible in the torch light. Far too much blood for only one body. *But why leave just the one?*

He opened the black door and was met with the enchanted entrance room. It was meant to disorient. A circular room with a black marble floor that looked like standing water and twelve doors all around. He knew there was a way to ask for an exit, but he had no intention of leaving the way he came.

When he was fifteen, some eight years earlier, he stumbled his way to the Chamber of Death, but not this time. As though drawn to it, he opened a door and revealed the massive rectangular room he was looking for.

It looked older than any other room in the Ministry. Made entirely of stone that stepped ever downward to a raised dais. On that dais sat the Veil. It whispered to him, even from the other side of the room.

But he didn't listen to the whispers because he was not alone. As soon as his foot met the stone, bodies rose from the ground. Shambling corpses, willed toward the single purpose of tearing him apart. Fire erupted hot and consuming from his wand. *Of course, why would I have expected anything less from the sanctimonious bastards.*

It explained the lack of bodies anywhere near any of the blood he'd seen. They'd brought them all down to the Chamber of Death and defiled them. *How long did they cower on every floor of the Ministry, common witches and wizards wanting nothing more than to see their families one more time? Only to have their corpses used as Inferi.*

He hadn't been there to see it, but he'd seen the results all over Britain and heard more than his fair share of rumors about what happened elsewhere. *But it was worst here, terrible retribution for the atrocities of the few.*

Fire surrounded him and pushed ever outward as he stepped closer and closer to the Veil. They did not cry out in pain, but they did bay for his blood as the fires consumed them, burning to ash even as they tried to fight their way through the flames that licked at their rotten flesh. Finally, the scraping, cloying desperation ceased and an eerie quiet settled.

It didn't last though. From behind the dais, sweating and singed emerged what to most would appear to as nothing more than a monk. Harry knew better.

This was one of the Inquisitors, the deadly arm of the church that spearheaded the decimation the magical population across the world. *All because Tom went much too far.* He was short, and young, no older than him, with a shaven head and mad, bloodshot eyes.

A holy spell was on his lips, and he fired it right at Harry. Even with the cloak, the hint of his face was visible and gave some hint of a target. But he was quick enough to move out of the way.

The light that erupted from the tip of his wand in retaliation was a vile orange, meant not to stun or incapacitate, but to kill. *Oh, how disappointed Dumbledore would be if he could see me now.* But in the years since the man's death, he'd learned a valuable lesson. Fight to win otherwise you're the one that would end up dead.

The little monk wasn't the seasoned veteran he'd fought and beaten and watched kill a dozen times over. He was green, and afraid. Even with years of conditioning and training, and torment to reinforce it all, he stumbled out of the way of Harry's spell, losing his footing. The shield he threw up to stop the next spell shattered on contact and his arm crippled and crunched from the impact.

Harry felt a vindictive glee as he heard the man cry out in pure agony. But he wasn't satisfied. The blue light that struck his enemy's chest as he writhed wouldn't kill him instantly, it would be over minutes and torturous. Stepping to the edge of the dais, he threw the cowl away from his head and stared down into the face of the holy man, "How unlucky that you got this pitiful assignment."

“Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium...” The monk wrapped his hand around the crucifix at his neck and cast his eyes heavenward.

Incensed, Harry jumped down from the dais and grabbed him by his collar, “Your God cannot save you, and why would he, you are the work of the devil aren’t you?”

The saddest thing about the abhorrent arms of the Inquisition was that every one of them was a magical raised from infancy to detest what they were. A practice of the church done with the express purpose of countering the unseen world of magic should they ever step out of line. It was not the first time they’d implemented such measures, but it was the most decisive.

The monk’s voice was loud, fanatical in its reverence. He spoke in Italian, but with a bit of magic, Harry understood every word, “I am a child of the devil who works in the light that I might see the gates of heaven and eternal peace.”

“Is that what they told you in Rome, when they tortured you for years?” Harry laughed derisively, “You are nothing more than a weapon meant to be discarded and thrown away. They won’t mourn you, not one second. You’ll die here alone and forgotten.”

“I’m never alone so long as I have my God. And I need no praise, heathen.” He spat the word like a curse, but it was one that Harry wore gladly, “I will live in his light for all time. You... you will only know the fires.” The monk groaned in pain as his magic did its work.

“But not because of you. You failed... quite miserably. There were first years who would have given a better fight I think.” Harry snarled, shoving him into the ground. His head bounced against the hard stone.

“It is only as God wills. He, and he alone, will determine when it is your time to meet the flames.”

“I’ve seen no evidence of your God. So, you’ll understand if I don’t fear the fire.”

“And yet he is there all the same.” The monks groaned in pain as the magic tearing apart his body from the inside did its work.

“I speak only to the old gods of the earth and sky, and all other manner of domain, and I hear their weakened whispers every day.” *It was their whispers that brought me here.*

It was the truth, a practice that he took to in the years of terror that followed the rise of the Inquisition. The Christian god certainly had nothing but disdain for his ilk according to the priests and monks, so he sought refuge in the older gods.

“The whispers of the devil... nothing more.” The monk believed every word with a zealotry that could see otherwise good men do terrible things.

“Perhaps... I’ll only know for sure when I’m dead.” Harry turned away from the dying man, but something brought him up short. Looking back, he asked, “You know of Tom Riddle? The Dark Lord Voldemort?”

“The monster,” he spat, and a bit of blood dribbled out of his mouth. His body was breaking down quickly, his organs starting to fail, “Will suffer for eternity.”

“If there’s one person who deserves the fires you wish so fervently on your own kind, it’s him.” Harry despised the church for everything they’d done, and even fought alongside blood purists against them, but there was still no one he reviled more than Tom, “He still can’t die, I take it?”

He never found the last of the Horcruxes, too often hunted and harried to manage the feat. *And when every muggle across the country is wary of even a hint of magic, it makes it incredibly difficult to search in the first place.*

Millions of muggles turned to their religion for fear of what they didn’t understand. Whether it was Catholicism, the Orthodoxy, the Protestants or Islam, each offered a salve to the fear and answers in lieu of truth. Every service in every holy place across the world had been filled to bursting in the years since Tom’s folly.

“He remains at the Vatican,” The monk gave him a bloody smile, “tormented and tortured daily for all to see. A testament to the His Glory and the successes of the Inquisition. And someday his soul will be dispatched to the deepest circles of Hell.”

“Good, thank the gods for small mercies.”

“God.”

Harry rolled his eyes and spoke plainly, “You should make your peace, monk. It won’t be long now.” With that, he left the monk to die and stepped back up onto the dais. He could hear muttered Latin as the young man returned to the

Staring into the Veil, Harry spun the ring on his finger around idly. He’d inlaid the Stone into it, silver instead of the gold that’d been before. It was a simple band inlaid with the black stone bearing the symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

It was the last of the Hallows that came to him, taking him years to finally work out Dumbledore’s meaning. More for a lack of trying than anything. Tom wasn’t his focus for many of those years and so that old snitch lay forgotten among his possessions. He’d never used it, afraid to suffer the judgement of the dead. But more than that, he didn’t want to see the faces of those who died for him... or with him... or despite his best efforts to save them. Not while he still walked the realms of the living.

He could not explain his hesitation on the dais. Now that the moment arrived, he didn’t know if he could actually do it. Just as his first time in the room, he felt as though something, or someone, was looking at him from the other side.

There was something unsettling about taking a step into the unknown. *But then what is left here. Life in exile or fighting futilely until death.* There were rumors of some small conclaves. Survivors in the remote parts of the world, tucked away in hills and mountains, and places that would otherwise be inaccessible or unlivable. And even then, they would be hunted until their dying days. *My friends are either dead or captured... or worst of all turned traitor.*

What is the worst that could happen? Just a few steps and it’ll be done. No more wondering.

There was that whisper in his mind. They weren’t his own thoughts and it’d been urging him now for what seemed like weeks to take this step. The last time he’d heard voices there’d been a sixty-foot

basilisk in the walls of Hogwarts, so there was a part of him that wondered if this was madness born of solitude and loss, but he couldn't say for sure. All he knew for sure was that it sounded feminine and distant. *Maybe it's Death looking to take back her gifts.*

Whatever the case, the voice was right. All it would take was a few steps and he would have his answers. *And I've seen first hand that there are worse things than death.* It was something that Dumbledore understood years before and that Tom learned that lesson the hard way. He was reminded of it far away at the center of Christendom every day.

Harry took a deep, steadying breath and willed his legs to work. He strode unsteadily toward the high arch of the Veil. As he stepped through, the monk took one last shuddering breath and the room fell into peaceful, permanent silence. For no soul that ever passed through the Veil returned.

CHAPTER 2

Hoot. Hoot. Hoot. He didn't even realize that he'd closed his eyes before taking the plunge. Opening them, the moon hung high and clear above him. It peaked through the boughs and leaves of the trees he found himself standing among, larger than he could ever remember. And not only that but the night's sky was alight with thousands of twinkling dots of starlight. The great expanse of the cosmos hung above him with far more clarity than he'd ever seen before on a crisp and cool darkness of an early spring.

Hoot. Hoot. Hoot. The owl echoed in the peaceful silence. *I don't know what I was expecting, but this... wasn't it.* Given the existence of the Veil, at the very least, he'd expected some afterlife. But everything around him screamed of the land of the living, though the air tasted richer, cleaner even. *Who knows? This might be Valhalla, or even Tír na nÓg. I hoped to at least see my parents.* He patted at his body beneath the cloak, "I seem to be alive though," he didn't know whether to be disappointed by that, "Veil of Death indeed."

Looking around he saw that the Veil behind him was roiling on its surface. The archway looked no different, but it certainly wasn't tucked away in the depths of London any longer. *What in the bloody hell have I gotten myself into this time.* He walked over to it of half a mind to step right back through. *Maybe the second time's the charm.* The voice in his mind was no longer a whisper in that moment. **NO!**

The command had a strength he wasn't expecting, bringing him to an abrupt halt. Disturbed by the sheer will of the voice, he asked to the air, "Hello?" There was no response. The voice was silent, satisfied that he listened. *Great.* "Nothing for it, I suppose. Might as well figure out where I am."

Walking through the trees, his footfalls were silent on the soft ground. The wood was thick, and he could hear the skittering of creatures big and small as he passed. A badger hurried along just in front of him, scurrying away to its burrow with a fox in hot pursuit.

A cool breeze cut through the trees, rustling the leaves all around him. Then, just on the edge of the tree line, there was a new light, orange and red pushing through the shadow of the trees. Harry stopped and stared in the direction of the fire, before sighing, resigned. *Let's just hope they're friendly.*

The fire sat in the middle of a small clearing where two elms had been felled by lightning. Their trunks lay broken on either side of the fire, just high enough to use as a bench. Sitting on that bench was a woman, all clad in dark furs, with coal black hair in a braid. Her back was toward him as she spoke, voice light and velvety, "Beo þu gesund"

That wasn't a language he recognized, not that he could speak any but English anyway, but he recognized a greeting when he heard it, "Hello." His magic worked around them, as he willed it to translate for him.

The woman clearly felt it as she turned to look at him. Her skin was snow white, and her eyes gleamed like freshly polished silver, "Now that is interesting."

He edged around the fire until he stood across from the woman, her mere presence had him on edge, "My magic?"

"Yes and no. The feel of it is... unique. But that isn't the only thing that is interesting." She smiled at his confusion, "Sit, won't you?"

It didn't sound like a request, and something instinctual told him it would be unwise to refuse. He dropped his bum against the bark of the broken tree, "You wouldn't happen to know where I am, would you?"

"Rockingham Forest," she told him, "Quite a good distance from the town."

Still in England then, but more than 150 kilometers from where I was. He pushed his hands toward the fire as another breeze cut through the trees. The fire whipped and flickered as he replied, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she looked at him intently, "How did you find yourself here, all alone?"

He didn't question for a moment why the same was true of her, "By chance... or fate, I never know for sure anymore." It was an evasive answer, but not an outright lie.

She laughed lightly at that, "Perhaps a bit of both then." He felt as though she could see beneath the cloak as she looked him over, "Your cloak, quite the thing. Where did you get it?"

He could lie, but it seemed pointless. Anybody chasing the Hallows would find it difficult to part him from them, "From my father, and his father before him."

"And it lasted so long? It must be of incredible quality." There was something in her voice that told him she knew more than she was saying.

"It is."

Silence fell between them, even the animals of the wood had gone still. It was eerie as she didn't seem to blink, "I saw the oddest thing, just a few short minutes ago. It's the reason I made this fire, you see. It takes a great deal to surprise me, but you managed it when you walked out of one of Death's Doors." Harry swallowed thickly, as she leaned forward, and he noticed for the first time that she didn't cast any shadows, "Such a thing shouldn't be possible. Not for a mortal."

"I..." After years of fighting, and the deadly adventures that preceded them, Harry didn't often feel fear anymore, but sitting across from Death, he could feel a tendril of it creep up his spine, "Just walked through, I didn't know what to expect."

"Most would expect death."

"I've always been an exception to the rule," even at the times when he didn't want to be, "and nothing say that would've been so bad. There are things far worse than death."

"How true." She smiled at him, though it wasn't comforting in the slightest, "But then, I found something even more interesting. You sit here bathed in my magic. Your cloak, your wand, even that stone on your finger, all of it is mine and yet not."

So, there's at least some truth to those old legends. "I came by them honestly, I promise."

"Oh, I know." She assured him, "If I thought you stole them from me, you wouldn't be breathing any longer. But I would remember gifting such things to a mortal."

"You're Death." *or at least some physical representation of it,* "So, you've been around how long?"

"Since the first star was born. Where there is life, there must be death."

"Eternity is a long time to remember every little thing." He quipped, mouth dry.

Death chuckled at that, "Oh, very good, but wrong all the same. I've forgotten nothing." She leaned back, hands dropping to the wood beneath her.

Harry wasn't surprised, "I believe you," *Which means one of two things,* "It's funny, there's a legend or a rumor, that said any who gathered these three items would become Master of Death?"

The laugh that bubbled up from her chest was high and cut through the still forest like a sword through flesh, "Oh that is rich. No, no, I'm afraid I have no master, mortal."

Harry shook his head, wry smile on his lips, "I can't say I ever believed it myself."

Her fingers tapped against the trunk, "They may not make you Master of Death," she couldn't help but laughed again at the very implication, "but they were definitely crucial to your survival. I was serious, going through the Door should have meant death. None of that explains who tampered with it or why?" She said the last more to herself.

"Sorry?" The Hallows were the working theory for his survival but it didn't explain the change in location. *And it would seem that voice in my head isn't Death, they sound nothing alike.*

"Magic," she told him unhelpfully, "not mine and not yours. I have my suspicions. Very few people can find the Doors, and even fewer can alter them."

"Mind telling me those suspicions?"

Eyeing him, she smirked, "Yes, I think I do. You're out of place, by a good distance I'm willing to wager. I want to see why for myself. It's terribly intriguing."

“I grew tired of being other people’s pawn years ago.” He growled out in his frustration, “If somebody is playing with me, I want to know.”

“Too bad,” She told him without a hint of remorse, his anger not bothering her in the slightest, “Now, there is one thing I need from you.”

“I don’t suppose I have much choice in the matter.”

“No, I’m afraid you don’t, master.” Death taunted him as she held out her hand, “The cloak.”

Harry’s jaw ticked in irritation, “It’s been in my family for generations.”

“And yet, it’s still mine.” Her cloak shifted to be entirely translucent, a perfect match for the material around his shoulders, “And so long as you wear it, you are hidden to me. Had I not been at the Door when you arrived, I might never have known of your arrival. As I said, I’m intrigued and, I can’t have my own pesky cloak getting in the way of my curiosity.”

There was a small, stupid part of him that wanted to argue with her, but he stamped that down. Resigned, he grabbed the cloak at his shoulders and pulled it over his head, “Any chance I’ll get it back?”

“Who knows? Maybe someday. Fate will have to decide.” She grabbed the cloak and as she draped it across her thighs, it sewed itself back into her changing, endless shroud. He was left standing in an old pair of jeans and tattered black shirt, both cleaned a thousand times over with magic .

There was clear amusement in her eyes as she looked him over, “Oh, definitely out of place.” The sun was just starting to peak up over the tops of the trees on the eastern hills. As the light pushed into the clearing, the fire went out in a blink as Death stood, “Now I must be off.” Stepping over the tree trunk, she headed toward the forest.

“That’s it then? Just going to take the cloak and leave?” He knew that he was pushing his luck, but he didn’t particularly care.

She stared at him for a long moment, unblinking, “For now, yes... but as I said, I’ll be watching.” Without another word, she stepped into the forest and disappeared.

“Well fuck.” Harry muttered to himself. *What a fantastic morning. I have no idea what’s actually going on and lost the cloak on top of it. Really great, Potter.* “What next? What next?” He could trudge through Rockingham Forest for hours until he reached the actual town, but that didn’t sound appealing in the slightest. *Could always apparate back into London, but there’s nothing there of any worth.* The Veil was the only reason he’d gone to begin with. **Home, go home.**

“Home?” The voice was no longer a weak whisper, but nor was it the outright command he’d experienced near the Veil. He was of half a mind to ignore it now. It hadn’t exactly led him to anything worthwhile. *Just more questions so far.*

But still, Harry only ever had one true home. The Weasleys did a good job of making him feel welcome at the Burrow, but a handful of weeks over the course of five years didn’t make a home. No, the only home he knew was in the Scottish Highlands, hundreds of miles to the north. He hadn’t seen the old castle in years, simply because it wasn’t safe.

The Inquisition tried to decimate it to no avail. The castle was built in a place rife with magic, and after a millennia worth of magical students came and went, it developed its own sentience. When that failed, they used it to lure unsuspecting magicals seeking refuge. Once people became wise to it, it became wholly derelict, and Hogsmeade nothing more than a ghost town. *It wouldn't surprise me if it becomes a tourist attraction. A testament to the defeated magicals.*

Standing up, he ran a hand through his dark hair, "It'd be good to see it again." Without another thought, he popped away. Snow crunched beneath his feet as he arrived in the Highlands. It was melting slowly in the early morning sun, the tops of the grass just peaking up from the white blanket. The south of the British Isle was warmer than the Scottish Highlands and his breath misted in the early morning chill.

But that wasn't the oddest thing about his arrival. Looking up to the high hill, there was no magnificent, eye-catching castle, instead there was a hall made of smooth stones and a thatched roof. Nor was there any town in the valley below, not a single structure resided in the place where Hogsmeade should have been. The Forbidden Forest looked thinner, the trees younger. The only thing that appeared entirely the same was the Black Lake, dark and clear with just a bit of ice on its banks. The air was still thick with old magic, and the ley-line where the castle should be was still very much there.

"Great," Harry shook his head and walked toward the hall slowly, "Death said I was out of place. I think it was a bit of an understatement." *I can only think of two reasons the castle wouldn't be here. I'm either in an entirely different timeline, where it was never built to begin with or... I've been displaced a thousand years into the past. But why?*

There was a footpath that led up to the hall. He passed a low wall that surrounded the hill and felt the press of wards as he passed through them. The hall was sturdily built, made of dark stone stacked and bound with magic. The door was made of strong oak and banded in iron, locked with something far stronger than a simple locking charm. There were small windows for light and Harry peaked in to see a pot was boiling over the top of an open fire, a large spoon spinning the contents on its own. *Nobody's home.*

"And what was the point of sending me home, if there's no home here to find?" *Real bloody helpful.* The voice was silent, and Harry huffed irritably. Unwilling to force his way into somebody's home, he stepped away. Looking out across the valley below and to the forest, he had to say, it was beautiful as he remembered.

There was a light fog in the valley as the snow melted away. Harry walked down the hill with a very specific place in mind. He walked down to the Black Lake, just along the shore next to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He found a rock that he remembered well. It wasn't as weather worn as the last time he'd seen it. It was a spot he'd spent plenty of time at when he needed some time to himself. He cast a simple warming charm to keep the chill away and made himself comfortable.

Back against the cold stone, he breathed the crisp air. It was odd having a moment of peace, of any kind. For six years, he'd been in constant fear of the next moment being his last. And now, he was pretty damn confident he'd found himself more than a millennium in the past. *Small mercies, at least I don't have to look over my shoulder for the Inquisition everywhere I go anymore.*

The sun rose in the sky, the day growing warmer as it went. The snow melted and the light fog burned away in the light. Harry lay there just basking in the peacefulness of the morning. He knew full well that he needed to figure out what to do next, but for that brief moment, he was happy just to relax. It ended abruptly when he heard voices in the forest, coming nearer.

“Thig air adhart a-nis, chan fheum a bhith cho nàimhdeil.” It was a man’s voice, deep and gruff, speaking in what sounded like some form of Gaelic. There was chuckling from more men nearby, and something told him they weren’t friendly. With a grunt, he rose from his peaceful little place beside the lake, and headed toward the wood.

The Elder Wand was in his hand, but his translation spell was silent and wandless. A woman spoke then, “You aren’t here to sit at my table. Don’t play me for a fool. If Causantin wants my lands, he’ll need to send more than four men to take them.”

“Oh, he has plenty more where we came from. He’s king of Alba, he has men to spare. But it won’t take more than us to deal with some little woods witch.”

Harry wound through the trees, searching out those voices. He found them maybe twenty meters into the wood. There were four men, just as the woman said, and her back was to him. Her hair was chestnut brown and fell loose below her shoulders. She wore a heavy cloak and a simple dress made of soft, grey wool.

The men were thick-bearded and wearing heavy chainmail, beneath tunics. *Definitely in a different time then.* Three of them were carrying heavy axes, and the fourth a sword. They approached the woman, their intentions clearly less than kind. A wand dropped into her hand from her sleeve. And before they could even come near her, lights started dancing from the tip in the direction of each of the men. Their eyes widened in surprise but four muggles alone were no match for the clearly skilled witch. They fell one by one, but that wasn’t what had Harry’s attention. It was the fifth and sixth man, approaching from the trees that the witch didn’t see that had him concerned.

When forced to choose between muggles and magicals, he’d decided to always choose his own. Without a second thought, the Elder Wand whipped in the direction of the two men. The spells were bright and quick and shot through the trees with perfect precision. The men fell to the ground thudding against the base of two of the trees.

They didn’t go unnoticed. Stumbling slightly, the woman whipped around to look at him, her breathing panicked despite her earlier calm. Pointing her wand in his direction, ready in case there was just another fight waiting for her, she asked, “Who’re you?”

“Harry, just Harry.” He tucked away his wand and held his hands up placatingly, “Don’t worry, not here to hurt you. Just heard voices and came to investigate. Didn’t look like you needed much help until I saw those two over there.” She glanced in the direction, seeing the two unconscious men before returning her attention to him.

Her eyes were midnight-blue and watching him intently, but she seemed satisfied enough to drop her wand, “And how’d you find yourself on my land, Harry?”

“Just looking for a place to rest,” he lied, “the lake seemed nice enough.” There was a necklace around her neck, it was a large bird’s claw on a fine silver chain. The bag around her shoulders was

filled with some mushrooms that she'd foraged in the forest. If he were to guess, he would say that she was a teenager, though her bearing spoke of someone older.

"Well, I'd agree with you there." She smiled slightly at him, but quirked an eyebrow at his odd clothing, "Thank you, for helping I suppose."

"There are few enough of us. We ought to help each other when we have the chance." Just as he said it, an eagle landed on her shoulder carrying a dead rabbit in one of its claws. It peered at him with intelligent, amber eyes.

"You're not wrong," she reached up and tickled the imposing bird of prey behind the neck, "You're welcome to join me. I wouldn't mind the company... I'm Rowena, by the way."

Bloody hell... this is Rowena Ravenclaw... Harry could imagine Hermione's reaction if she'd been there to see one of the founders in the flesh.

CHAPTER 3

The blade moved effortlessly beneath the fur, the cuts precise and practiced. Rowena removed its innards and skinned the rabbit in no time at all. A spell probably could have done it for her, but she clearly didn't need it. That didn't stop her from waving her wand to drain the blood. Once she was done, she tossed it into the pot boiling away over the fire, bones and all. But none of it would go to waste, as she set the pelt and offal aside.

The stew wafted in the room, scented with rosemary and thyme, and it made his stomach growl. Rowena glanced down at the noise, "Hungry?" She turned back to the table and started dicing mushrooms. All the while, her eagle sat on a perch watching him intently. *She might have invited me into her house, but that doesn't mean she trusts me.*

Sitting forward in a chair she'd offered him, Harry nodded, blushing slightly, "It smells delicious." He hadn't had a fresh made meal in... ages. It wasn't exactly a priority given everything else that happened. He just made do with what he could come by easily.

"This is for tonight so, it'll still be a good while yet before it's ready. It'll be worth the wait." She reached across the table to a basket and pulled out a loaf of bread. She tore a piece of it off and handed it to him, "This should hold you over until then.

"Thank you." He told taking a bite, "If it's half as good as it smells... should be fantastic."

"Where are you from?" She asked him suddenly, before he even finished his last response, "I wouldn't guess you're from any of the southern kingdoms, you don't have the look. But unless the Danes and Norse have changed their garments a great deal since the last time I saw one, you're not one of them either. One of the Norse-Gaels maybe? Or from Alba? Welsh? Or are you just a clever ploy by Causantin, and Caltech and their priests, but..." Harry was impressed that she managed to keep going without a single breath.

He couldn't help but chuckle watching her go on, she stopped and looked at him a little embarrassed. Rowena was revered as one of the greatest witches of her age, both brilliant and skilled. He wouldn't have expected her to be quite so talkative though. *Stories don't always capture the soul of a person I suppose.*

As she looked at him with a quirked eyebrow, he answered the first question, "I'm from Surrey, in England. And I'm not a spy of this... Causantin's... I promise."

"If you were, you certainly wouldn't tell me now would you? So, which of the kingdoms is that in then?" She tapped the knife against the wood, "Wessex I think or is it Mercia. Though does it really matter? Aethelflaed is Lady of Mercia so it may as well be Wessex at this point. It would be outright, I think, if her brother had anything to say about it."

The names were familiar, he'd heard them in primary school more than a decade before, but other than that they didn't mean much to him, "I couldn't say, I haven't been there in years."

"A wandering wizard, then?" That piqued her interest, "Where have you been?"

"From north to south of this island, and a bit of Ireland. Nothing too interesting I'm afraid."

"More than I can say for myself," the knife started cutting all on its own as she turned to look at him, "Never been away from this little corner of the world. Father wouldn't allow it, too worried about sea raiders and his rivals and the church... the church most of all. If he hadn't depleted his wealth to pay them off, they would have tried to take me as a child." The last she said with a scowl, venom on her tongue.

"Not fond of them, I take it?" Well, in that they were kindred spirits.

"I'm pagan and a witch too. They have no love for me, and I certainly don't have any for them. They say people like you and me are of their devil, I say they're fools." Finished with the mushrooms, she threw them into the pot and stirred everything together. With a wave of her wand the fire receded slightly and the pot simmered away slowly.

She sat down on a stool across from him, a scowl on her lips, "Everywhere they go, they wheedle their way into the minds and hearts of kings and simple folk alike. They bring their god from Rome to turn people away from the gods of their forefathers. It's been going on for hundreds of years and now even the Norse and Danes have started to fall victim to their honeyed words and their miracles and their revelations."

"Do the Norse not bring their gods as well?" He wasn't one to defend the church, but he was curious to hear her perspective.

"Their gods aren't so different from mine. They have their own stories and domains, but they are the gods all the same." There was a small fond smile on her face as she thought on something, "My mother... she was of them and she was just as happy to tell me of Lugh and the Dagda as she was to tell me of Odin and Freyja. The Christians say they are demons meant to turn us away from their one true God, I call them liars. When I speak their names, I know that they can hear me."

"You wouldn't be wrong... about their lies, I mean." Harry clarified, though he agreed with her about the gods as well. He spoke to the pagan gods too, and believed they heard him, "They perform no miracles... well at least not the sort they claim. It's just magic used to fool people into believing in their god. Just like their revelations and prophecies." *The sad thing is she's right, slowly but surely the church will cover every bit of Europe and it won't stop there.*

"What?" Her eyes were big and so very inquisitive.

“The priests, the ones that can do miracles and see visions and the like... they’re nothing more than magicals, like you or me, taken by the church and taught to use their gifts to suit their purposes.” He leaned back, “I’d guess it’s why they wanted you as a child. They pay the poorer family’s for their children when they show signs of magic and take them away to a convent for... education. Since your father had land and some wealth, they took everything they could from him since they couldn’t have you.”

“That’s horrible,” She sounded genuinely appalled to hear it, “I’ve never seen one of their miracles for myself... I always suspected they were nothing more than rumors. Just the bleating of priests and nuns to stir the emotions of the average man and woman. To know that they’re using us to convert the masses... it’s infuriating.”

“It is,” He agreed.

“Something must be done...” he mind was racing with the possibilities, “There must be some way to find them before the church, but then they need somewhere safe where they can learn and study and become strong enough to defend themselves from those who wish to use them.” She was muttering to herself after that, “But then there’s the issue of the families. How would we convince them to give up their children, especially considering just how many are Christian. It would be a nightmare. Silver goes a long way to convincing people though, but... Oh, damn, I’ll just have to give it some thought.”

For years, Harry wondered just how the Founders had navigated that particular problem. In the religious fervency that existed not only in their time, but in the centuries that followed, how did they convince parents to give up their children when, according to the church, they were of the devil. *And how many of them were in danger going back to their homes and villages. Surely, they must have stayed at the castle permanently once they started.*

Right in that moment, he saw the beginning of the idea that would form into Hogwarts. It was a sad thing to know such well-meaning beginnings would fail so miserably in the end. *Hiding away and hoping that it’s enough to protect them won’t be enough... much as you might want it to be.* He’d seen firsthand what hiding and hoping led to when they knew far more than you thought.

Birds chirped outside her home as they sat in a comfortable silence. He could only watch as her mind worked furiously. Her lips moved slightly and she would occasionally shake her head at something. Harry tried to hide his amusement, but knew he wasn’t succeeding entirely. Wanting to break her from her thoughts, he asked, “So, who is Causantin? And what does he want with you?” Her eyes snapped to him and she blushed as she realized just how distracted she’d gotten.

“You sure you haven’t been wandering elsewhere, Harry? You don’t seem to know much about this island you’ve been traveling.” Rowena gave him a little smirk, “He’s the King of Alba, from north of the Firth of Forth to the south of the Moray Firth. Son of Aed, grandson of Cinaed, who were King of the Picts.” She frowned as she continued, “And what he wants is my land... for some gods forsaken reason. But that is the way with kings isn’t it, to expand beyond what they already have, so they might be remembered for years to come.”

“You were worried I might be a clever ploy from him and his priests?”

Rowena nodded, "Oh, yes. They whisper in his ear about my lack of piety. About my flouting of the church. While he was never a convert, my father gave up more silver than was right to be left well enough alone. He was afraid for me, and I loved him for it. Maybe it makes me a fool but I'm not afraid for myself. And I refuse to give one more piece of silver to people that hate me."

"They're good at that, playing on peoples' fears. They use it to great effect." *And will only continue to in the centuries to come. The witch trials and the Inquisition come to mind first and foremost.* "So, have I convinced you that I'm not? One of theirs, I mean?"

"No," she shook her head, chestnut hair bobbing along, "but... you haven't convinced me that you are either. And something is telling me to trust you... for now at least. And... well... like I said, I don't mind the company." The eagle squawked irritably, "I always have you, Aerna. Don't worry." Rowena looked lovingly over at the bird and then back to him with a smirk, "She'll peck out your eyes in a second if you prove false... just so you know" The way the bird leaned forward on its perch and snapped its beak only confirmed she was telling the truth.

Harry coughed, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Oh, don't worry." Rowena snickered at his discomfort, "She's very friendly... until she isn't."

"Well, I'll be sure not to give her any reason to dislike me." Harry did his best to ignore the avian that was doing its best to intimidate him, "So, you don't know why he wants your land?"

She shook her head, "No. I can guess, but he doesn't need any other reason than that he wants it. He may just want all of Scotland, but it shouldn't be worth his trouble. It isn't a place of power or wealth. Its greatest significance is in the magic that resides here. There are unicorns in the forest, and many trees suitable for wand-making. There are grindylows in the lake and this hall is built in a place strong in magic. I'm sure you can feel it?" He just nodded at the question, and she continued, "There are other places just as defensible and more accessible that have already been fortified. He may want the trees for timber, but they would be difficult to transport even if you felled them."

"How long has he been bothering you?" It was the magic that probably interested them most. The priests were no doubt aware of it and would happily make use of it if they could. *How much of the Founders lives was lost to history, I wonder? We only ever learned of their great achievement, not of the lives they lived before that. How many people were aware that Rowena Ravenclaw not only owned the land where it was built but defended it from the church.*

"A year now, on and off, since my father died." She played with the fabric of her dress, seemingly embarrassed, "I... might not have helped myself when I sent some little monk running back to his bishop at St. Andrews with a literal tail between his legs."

Harry barked a sudden laugh, "You didn't?" It was kinder than anything he'd ever done to a monk, but far more amusing to think about.

Rowena nodded with a giggle of her own, "I did. So, when he doesn't have sea raiders to worry about or some troubles in Northumbria or Strathclyde. They send another contingent of men, just to remind me that they know I'm here. And they want what I have."

“You think they’d have more important things to worry about.” Harry remarked snidely. He didn’t have the concerns of a king, but he imagined they ought to be greater than one woman in the Scottish Highlands. “So every time, you just send them back where they came?” She’d made a portkey for each of the soldiers that came to try and take her that took them to the banks of the Moray Firth, far away.

“I do my best to leave them no worse for their journey. I doubt they’d be so kind if they managed to take me. But if I do anything worse to them, I know they will only send many, many more.” Rowena shrugged her shoulders, “It’s all I can think to do. I don’t know how long it will last. If what you said is true, then I’m sure they’ll send one of our own eventually and then I doubt I’ll have much choice to defend myself... more violently. I’m only one woman, so perhaps I’ll fail eventually, but I’d rather die here where my forebears laid their heads than give it up to them.”

“I doubt you’ll have any trouble if they do send another magical. You seem more than capable.” While it was Gryffindor that had been recognized as the best duelist of his time, Rowena wasn’t a slouch from what he’d seen at the edge of the forest.

“I’m good, very good in fact.” Rowena said confidently, “And I would put myself up against most in a fair fight. I don’t think they’d have any intention of fighting fair though.”

“No, you’re right about that.” Harry knew they wouldn’t given an opportunity, “Not that I can blame them. If you want to win, why play fair?”

“True. But not something that’ll go in my favor.”

“Is there no one you could call for help?”

“There are men who were loyal to my father. Pagans like me who live in these high hills who might answer if I called. If I went to the Norse-Gaels... maybe they would help me too.” Rowena thought about it for a moment before continuing, “But, I wouldn’t put them at risk for my sake. And even if I thought to, I never know when Causantin is sending his men.”

“So, you’ll fight them alone until you can’t any longer?”

She gave him a wan smile, “Until I’m dead. If the gods are good and do not take me before my time, I’ll outlive them by a century or more. So perhaps they’ll forget about me with time.”

They never really forget about us. They might ignore us for a time, but they know we’re here all the same. Harry ran a hand through his hair, looking the lovely young founder in the eye, “I’d help you... if you’d let me. If you’d want me too.” It was an inherent part of his nature, even after the years fighting the Inquisition, to help people.

Rowena gave him a teasing smile then, “Well, once I know that I can really trust you, I might just take you up on that offer.”

He shook his head, and rolled his eyes, “I’m sure that won’t take long. I don’t serve anybody but myself.” *At least not intentionally.* “Do you know when they’ll come back?”

“It could be in a week or a month. Or longer.” She shrugged her shoulders, unconcerned, “It hasn’t been consistent. They come when it pleases them.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, though he could tell from the way her lips moved that her mind was far from silent. His own mind was a whirl of thoughts. *A thousand years or more in the past. During the Viking Age. Definitely not what I was expecting when I walked through the Veil. And from what Death said, somebody or something wanted me here, but why? I would think it is something to do with the voice. So not only do they want me in this time but they want me here, specifically.*

Harry couldn't help but look at her more closely as they sat there. *Why Rowena in particular. What has Fate seen or decided for me.* She had sharp cheekbones, a small nose, and a full, pouty lower lip. Her eyes were unlike any he'd seen before. Fleur's had been a captivating blue, unnaturally bright thanks to her nature, but Rowena's were no less incredible. Even though she was wearing a conservative dress, he could still see that she had lovely curves. The swell of her breasts was still obvious and the curve of her hips couldn't be hidden even by thick wool. *Comely, I think would be the right word for her. Or just a timeless beauty.*

"You don't actually speak Gaelic, do you?" She asked him, she asked him suddenly. He was noticing she had a tendency for it, "Certain words... I hear it when you speak but it doesn't fully follow with what your mouth is doing when I really pay attention. And I can feel the niggling of... well your magic, I think." The question broke him out of his musing. Her eyebrow was quirked in curiosity, and she was leaning forward on her stool.

"I don't, no." He admitted, "But magic is an amazing thing. And well, not everyone speaks English, so it makes things far easier." *And no one will speak my form of English, even in its earliest forms, for centuries. So it's absolutely fucking necessary.*

"Could you teach me?" She asked him eagerly. Her reputation as a lover of knowledge shining through, "I speak a bit of Norse... from my mother... but, not enough to have a proper conversation. Could come in useful."

I think she might trust me more than she's letting on. He gave her a smile, "Sure... but there's no spell for it. It's just an extension of my will and my magic together. It's hard to tell you how it even works."

"That's fine. Perfect in fact. Magic comes from within. Will is what really matters. Spells just make that will easier to focus." Rowena looked pleased, as she captured him with appraising eyes, "You're quite curious, Harry. I like curious things. Something tells me you have quite the story, don't you?"

He gave her a roguish little smirk, "A few, yes. And maybe once you trust me... I'll tell you some of it." Rowena shook her head, the corner of her mouth ticking up in amusement. *Though, even if I told her. I don't know if she'd believe it.*

Sitting in a that hall on the hill where Hogwarts would one day stand high and imposing against the sky, Harry felt more at peace than he had since the end of his sixth year. It was so normal, just sitting there across from a young woman talking about anything and everything.

Despite that peace, in the back of his mind, he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Fortunately, it didn't come that day. That night they ate that stew, and it was delicious as it had smelled.

As he laid alone beneath furs, warm and comfortable, he was thankful that whatever had brought him to that time, had at least given him a moments reprieve from strife. *Even if it doesn't last.*

CHAPTER 4

The noon day sun hung high in the sky as he washed himself in the Black Lake. Splashing himself in the face, he breathed the clean air deep as the droplets of water cascaded down his body. He was only some fifteen feet from the edge of the lake, just deep enough to cover his lower body. For a month he'd been in this beautiful, serene place. There was a simplicity to his life in these days. No pressure, no school, no Tom and no Inquisition. *And still trying to figure out why this is where I was meant to go.*

There were no answers from the voice, only silence. It seemed content with where he was for the moment, and he had a hard time disagreeing.

Something fluttered around his ankles as a ripple of water disturbed the calm surface and then there was a firm yank that sent him tumbling in with a yelp. There were more gripping little hands a second later. *Feckin' grindylows. They usually stick to the weed beds at the bottom of the lake.* Harry didn't even bother summoning his wand. With a thought the water demons let go of him as though they'd been stung by electricity. Finding his feet again, he watched as some ten of them went scurrying back into the deeper reaches of the lake.

An amused giggle at the shore grabbed his attention. Rowena stood there, trying and failing to get her laughter under control, "The grindylows finally decided to say hello, did they?" The days were growing ever warmer, and she'd traded the heavy dress he'd first met her in for a lighter one of shockingly soft wool that was a light green with intricate embroidery of Celtic style knots around the collar and the sleeves.

Water dripping from his hair, he could only smile back at her, "They're ruddy little menaces."

"They keep to themselves most of the time and learned a long time ago to stay away from me." Rowena told him, "They must have thought you'd be an easy bit of prey."

"Well, they were wrong."

"I'm very impressed," She said with false sincerity, "Great wizard like yourself managed to take on some wee water sprites. You have no equal, I'm sure." They just looked at each other for a brief moment before they both burst out into laughter.

Padding his way back closer to the shore, the water sat just above his hips. Her eyes darted across his body, making note of more than one of the scars that dotted his skin and rested briefly down on his abs, but he tried not to bare that any mind, "No trouble in the forest?"

"None," she shook her head slightly at his concern, "Just like yesterday, and the day before that. Have you always worried so much?"

Giving a shrug of his shoulders, he couldn't help but worry. He'd seen far too many people suffer or die because of a false sense of security. He knew full well she could take care of herself, but that didn't stop him from worrying, "The first time I met you, you were getting attacked in the woods. Only seems right to check."

Rolling her eyes, she turned away from the shore and headed up toward the keep. As she called back to him, he could hear the smile in her voice despite her protests, "I'll have food ready in just a bit if you want to join me."

Finally stepping out of the water, he moved to his clothes at the shore. They were a far cry from the ones that he'd arrived in. Rowena made him some proper clothing for the time. The shirt was soft, more like cashmere than wool and clean white. The trousers were laced in the front and made of linen, they were a sable brown. His trainers had been replaced by a simple pair of cloth boots, but they were far more comfortable thanks to the magic that seemed to have been sowed right into them. She'd gone about doing it the day after his arrival.

Much as she claimed not to trust me, she was very kind. Walking his way up to the keep, the smells reached him before he even stepped through the door. There was fresh bread baking in the clay oven and bone broth with fresh herbs from a little garden steaming away in pot as it was kept warm by a spell. The most delicious of smells came from a sizzling piece of game, a deer that had been caught and killed the week before, cooking away over the fire. One of the many advantages of magic is that it takes gross stupidity to let our food spoil.

While there were certain comforts missing so many centuries before his time, magic largely mitigated it. Taking one big whiff, he sat down as Rowena ladled some broth into a bowl, "Looks delicious as always, Row." He'd taken to calling her by the shortened name about a week into his time there. She never made any complaint about it, "But one of these days you're going to have to let me cook for you."

"You're still a guest here, Harry." She told him. It was the same thing she told him every time he brought it up.

"After a month, I'd say that I'm a boarder at this point." He gave her a little smile, "You know I'm more than happy to help."

"I let you, where I need it." She turned around and handed him a bowl with half a hunk of bread on it, "but, I don't need it on this." A knife sliced into the deer meat of its own accord and strips of it dropped onto a plate levitating beneath.

Harry didn't think there was much of anything that she **needed** help with. She'd grown accustomed to living on her own and it showed, "The offer still stands."

"I'll keep that in mind." Though, he knew she was unlikely to ever take him up on it, "But you do plenty enough to help as it is. You've paid for your stay a dozen times over simply with some of the improvements you've made around here."

The biggest of them was the piping. She'd been gathering buckets of fresh water herself, but a bit of magic made it easy to solve that little problem, "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing." Rowena corrected him fiercely, "And don't argue with me." The future founder was a fierce woman and Harry found it fun to rile her up when he had the chance.

Harry chuckled, "Of course, why would I ever want to do that?"

"Because you find it funny, obviously." She pointed a chunk of bread at him accusingly.

“Maybe,” he admitted. Shaking her head at him, she rolled her eyes at his cheek. They sat in comfortable silence as they ate. When they were both finished, she took his bowl from him. She moved over to what was essentially a sink that he’d installed and cleaned away what little remained.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she said, “There’s a quarry not far from here... deeper into the highlands, I want to retrieve some stone. I could use your help.”

“Alright.”

“You’re not even curious why I want the stone?”

“No,” She huffed, and he hid a smile, “Just because you like to know **everything** you possibly can doesn’t mean that I’m the same.”

Finished with the bowls, she turned to him with a scowl, “You’re insufferable at times, you know that?”

Harry snorted out a little laugh, “I’ve been told.”

Rowena rolled her eyes and turned to hide the slight upturn of her lips, “Well even if you’re not curious, I’m going to tell you anyway.”

“Funny,” Harry stood then and went to scratch the top of Aerna’s head, “it’s almost like I was expecting that.”

Ignoring him she continued, “Considering it looks like you’re going to be staying a while longer, at least, I think it’s time to expand.” She looked over to him, almost shy, “We could do it with magic... But there’s always the risk that the expansion could break... which could be disastrous...not that I think either of us are incapable... but it’s always better to have a solid structure in a place like this, especially as the wards are connected directly to the ley line...”

Harry could only smile at her, he enjoyed watching her get lost in her own explanations, there was something... beautifully innocent about it. She noticed that he was staring at her and she stopped with a blush. Tucking a strand of her hair behind her head, she told him, “Sorry...”

“Don’t be.” He assured her. Aerna squawked in complaint as he stopped stroking her neck, “I appreciate it... the room.” He leaned into her and nudged her shoulder, “So... does this mean you trust me then?”

Rowena arched one eyebrow and looked at him liked he’d gone mental, “Of course not.”

“Tomorrow then...” She didn’t manage to hide her smile that time. Ever since that first day, it’d become a little running joke between them. *Though I imagine she doesn’t make a point of building new rooms in her own keep for people she doesn’t trust.*

They set off northward together, away from the Dark Forest. Aerna watched them from overhead as they tread along the lush green land. There were crags rolled across the land, as picturesque in that moment as he could ever remember. They passed more than one rock formation, but none of them were the ones that they were looking for.

Rowena's mouth was opened in shock, absolutely gobsmacked, "A mountain troll? At eleven? How are you even alive?"

"Incredible luck," Harry was careful not to reveal too much, never once mentioning that any of his misadventures took place in a school that she founded... *and centuries in the future*, "And a bit of skill as well."

"It sounds more like luck than skill." She said with a little smirk.

"Considering my wand ended up lodged up the things nose, covered in its bogeys..." she scrunched her nose up in distaste at that, "I have to agree with you."

"So how did you survive?"

"Knocked the massive bugger out with its own club." Harry explained, "My friend managed to perform his first successful Levitation Charm on the club while it was taking swings at me and dropped the thing on its head."

"So definitely luck then."

"Absolutely," He knew that many of his earliest adventures were reckless. *The three of us should have been dead half a dozen times by the end of our first year.*

"And did that mountain troll give you any of those scars?" She asked him quietly, timidly even. It was a rare thing to see from the confident young woman, but Rowena couldn't help her curiosity, and she didn't want to offend him either.

There was no reason for her to worry about such things, "No, got out of that no worse for wear." He surprised her with just how easily he admitted it, "I got the first of the scars about a year and a half later."

"Oh?" He could see that she wanted to ask how and when and where, but she stopped herself.

Pulling up his sleeve, he revealed the galleon sized scar on the inside of his arm that went right through to the other side. He showed her both the entry and exit wound. It was big and smooth, the skin paler than the rest around it and raised slightly, "This one is the first."

As she reached for his arm, they stopped as she looked at it. Her hand was soft and warm as she ran her thumb along the decade old scar, "What happened? I doubt it was a spear. Magic could have healed something like that."

"Did you know many healing spells at twelve?" he asked her, a teasing lilt in his voice.

"One or two," she told him, finger never leaving his arm, "More than enough to heal a simple wound from a spear. So what was it then? A dark piercing curse or... a wound from a magical beast perhaps..."

"You knew more than I did at twelve then," He grinned, as he pulled her from the thread of thought she was pulling on, "But they wouldn't have done much good for this anyway. I killed a basilisk with a goblin-made sword."

Rowena's eyes widened in shock, "You're joking... that's... ridiculous."

"No, I'm dead serious." He pulled his arm away and made a show of what happened, "I thrust up through the roof of its mouth and one of its fangs pierced straight down through my arm."

She looked rightfully skeptical, but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, "And the venom?"

"Phoenix tears..."

"That's... unbelievable," She looked shook her, a picture of that disbelief, "You know that, right? It sounds like something out of legend. A twelve-year-old boy slaying a Basilisk and then being saved by a phoenix."

"It does sound rather insane when you put it so simply, but it's the truth." He pointed at his arm, "I have the scar to prove it."

There was no denying that point, "Where did this happen then?"

"Scotland."

"Scotland?" That shocked her more than anything, "I know I'm not the most well-traveled witch in the world, but I feel I would have heard **some** story about that."

"I've never been known to boast." Rowena gave him an odd look, but let the matter drop as they reached their destination. It was a deep ravine at the foot of one of the stony crags. There was very little vegetation around and dark grey stone that looked as though it had been cut and taken before.

Taken from their conversation, she smiled down at the ravine, "Ah, here we are." They carefully made their way down and when they reached the bottom, she removed her wand. The Cutting spell that dug deep into the stone was clean and precise. Four more followed, and it was a perfect rectangular cut that slid out with a Levitation Spell. The thing must have weighed a ton or more, and he could see that it was putting a tremendous strain on her.

With a wave of his wand the stone went featherlight and she nearly fell back on her bum as she suddenly was lifting something weightless. Looking over at him, her cheeks were a pretty rosy red, "Suppose I should have thought of that first."

"Does make things a bit easier." She levitated it over to herself and let it drop to the ground softly. With another wave of her wand, it shrunk down to the size of a book. Opening her bag, far bigger on the outside than the inside, she dropped the stone in.

"Alright then... get to work." With a flourish of her wand another cut appeared. He'd seen it plenty, but this was the first time he really thought to ask.

"So, your wand, where did you get it?" He knew that Ollivander's family was in business for more than two millennia by the time he visited Diagon Alley, but something told him that wasn't the case for Rowena. The wand was light a light brown, airing almost to white with a single vein of blueish black that ran from the tip down to the base. The handle was ornately engraved and looked as though it'd been carved by someone with a great deal of skill.

“It was given to me by my parents when I was ten,” She told him with a fond smile down at the tool in question, “My mother fashioned it while my father carved it.”

“Ash?”

She shook her head, “Birch, taken from the banks of the lake. With a core from a Hebridean Black Dragon.”

Harry didn’t know much about dragons, but he’d heard enough from Charlie Weasley to know that the Hebridean Blacks were notoriously dangerous and territorial, “How’d she come by that?”

“My uncle, her brother, lives in the Hebrides. She once told me he managed to slay a dragon in its sleep and made a gift of its heart for her and me.” Rowena gave him a little smirk, “But then she also told me she didn’t believe that for a second and that he either bought it, or managed to take it from one of them that passed naturally.” She shrugged her shoulder, “Either way, it’s a brilliant match for me and has always served me well so, I thank him for it.”

“He lives in the Hebrides?”

“I did say my mother was Norse-Gael.” She gave him a smile and looked down at his own wand, “What about yours?”

“Elder wood with a thestral’s tail hair.”

She quirked an eyebrow at that, “Quite odd isn’t it.”

“Quite unique from what I understand. One of a kind even.”

“Seems appropriate then,” she gave him a little smirk, “After all, not many people have slain a Basilisk, and even fewer did it at twelve.”

It didn’t take them terribly long, maybe half an hour. The walk was far longer than the process that was certain. They could have apparated, he knew, but there was one small problem with that idea. / *have no idea if apparition is even a thing at this point in history.* He’d been waiting to see if Rowena did it at any point, but she hadn’t as of yet.

They cut away some dozen slabs of stone each, all of them of relatively equal size. As they made their way out of the ravine, the sun was starting to near the horizon. The walk back to the south was peaceful, and quiet, until Aerna screeched overhead.

Then they heard it, just on the other side of another of the hills, “Help! Please... help!” it was faint echoing across the serene green expanse of the highlands. Rowena and Harry shared a look before they hurried to the top of the hill.

There was a girl, no more than twelve, struggling at the foot of it. She slipped on the dewy grass and struggled to her feet as they saw what she was running from. It was a large, incensed hippogriff. Its feathers were an inky black, and its razor-sharp talons were half a foot long and looked sharp enough to cut through dragonhide. Every gallop of its clawed feet left an impression in the soft ground as charged toward the young girl.

Reacting on simple instinct, the elder wand shot into his hand. The ground between the hippogriff and girl suddenly shifted and the beast lost all its momentum. It struggled, wading through quicksand as the ground slowly swallowed it. When its legs were fully submerged, Harry let the spell end, leaving it trapped beneath dirt and stone.

The hybrid screeched violently, snapping its cruel, grey beak in the direction of its prey, but failing miserably. It beat its wing helplessly, doing everything it could to break free, but the earth was unyielding. The girl struggled to her feet and hurried in their direction. She hid behind Rowena as Harry walked calmly past her and toward the struggling beast.

“Quiet now,” He said drawing closer, “Quiet.” He stopped far enough away that he was out of reach of the beak and looked down. A simple, colorless Calming Spell left his wand and hit the hippogriff. Its haunting orange eyes that’d been almost black returned to their normal size. Finally, the beast caught his gaze and, remembering his old lessons, he gave it a bow.

He could feel the hippogriff’s judgement, but he stood his ground. Then, after a long tense moment, he received an incline of its head in return, “Now that wasn’t so hard was it.” Leaning down, he ran a hand along the dark, soft feathers and tried to comfort it, “Relax now, I’m sure this was a big misunderstanding.”

Rowena approached with the girl and Harry turned to look at them both. The girl had mousey brown hair, a sharp chin, and bloodshot, brown eyes. She looked about ready to cry after her ordeal so it was understandable, “What happened?”

“I... I was flying... I... I”

“Calm down,” he told her and gave her arm a squeeze, “Deep breath, then try again.”

“I... stole my mum’s broom.” She admitted not looking either of them in the eye, “One second I was just sweeping over the trees, having some fun... and then... it was chasing me.” Looking fearfully down at the hippogriff, she forced herself to continue, “I don’t know how long I flew but... it managed to scratch me, and I crashed...”

“Probably a nesting mother.” Rowena concluded, “They only have one egg at a time and they’re very fragile. It makes the mothers **very** protective.”

Harry gestured for the girl as he continued to soothe the restless beast, “Come here.” She took his hand slowly and he pulled her toward the hippogriff, “Bow, show her respect and try not to be afraid.” The young girl didn’t blink but did as he directed.

The hippogriff ruffled its feathers and howled furiously once. He could feel the young girl shiver in terror, but she held her ground. After a tense moment, the beast returned the bow, and Harry guided her hand to the feathers, “There now. Everything is better.” He gave the girl a smile, “What’s your name?”

“Mairi.” She told him, eyes wide as she stroked the hippogriff.

“And where are you from, Mairi?” Rowena asked her gently.

“Outside of Inverness...”

“You flew a long way.” Rowena rested a hand on her head, and patted her reassuringly, “Don’t worry we’ll get you home... but I’m afraid it won’t be until tomorrow. I’ve never been to Inverness, so we’ll have to get there one of the longer ways.” She offered Mairi her hand and the younger girl happily took it. The two started walking away leaving him alone with the hippogriff.

“If I let you go, you’re not going to be cross with me, are you?” The hippogriff looked at him with intelligent eyes and clicked its beak once, “Alright then, nothing funny or I’m putting you right back in the ground. And I won’t be letting you out anytime soon if I have to do it again.” The beast huffed and nodded its head in understanding.

With that he waved his wand and the ground pushed up from below. In just a few seconds, it was standing above him, looking menacing. The hippogriff snapped in front of his face three times, but he just stared at it unimpressed, “You have more important things to do than try and look tough for me. Stop putting on a show and head home, why don’t you. I’d say that Rowena was right, and you have an egg to look after.”

The hippogriff huffed at him, seemingly annoyed at his lack of reaction and turned on the spot. Making sure to knock him with her tail-feathers, she galloped away and took flight some twenty paces later. Within seconds, she was soaring over the highlands and back south toward her home.

Jogging to catch them, Harry made his way to Rowena and Mairi. The younger girl was holding the broken remains of a gnarled and beaten broomstick. *Now that is a far cry from the old school broomsticks, let alone my old Firebolt.* There were tears in her eyes, but she just nodded as Rowena assured her, “It’ll be easy enough to fix, don’t worry. We’ll have it good as new before you’re back home.”

“Run! Everyone run! They’re here!” There was panic all around. It made no sense. They were supposed to be safe. They’d been there for three months without a hint or sign of the Inquisition. Deep in the Forbidden Forest they’d hidden, beneath stone and wards in a cave far removed from the castle.

There was fire at the mouth of the cave as they poured in one after the other. He watched in horror as Fred Weasley screamed in agony, blood gurgled from his mouth as he tumbled to the ground. His body was severed from his clavicle half-way to his navel.

Harry heard Ginny’s anguished cry, George’s roar of fury, but he couldn’t worry about that. He could only worry about the man coming toward him. The spell that left his wand was an ugly purple. It smashed into his assailant’s chest and sent him writhing on the ground. He died screaming, his cries only adding to the din of battle.

They’d stopped using the Latin spells over a year before. Many magicals learned the hard way that the Inquisition had enacted a Taboo on some of them. No one knew for sure which were safe and which were jinxed, and so all were avoided like the plague. All Harry could think was that someone slipped up.

He didn’t have time to contemplate it though, as his world focused down to that terrible moment. The heat of battle and the stink of death. He could feel the Anti-apparition ward that had been

layered on top of their old one. Another man came toward him, this one had no wand but wore armor made of silver. It was goblin-made and spell resistant because of it.

A metal spike emerged from his wand and shot straight toward the hulking brute of man bearing down on him. It rent the metal and there was a meaty thud as it pierced deep. There was a squirt of blood as the man spit up blood. He tumbled to the ground heavily and knew no more.

Out. I need to get out. Harry knew he couldn't save everyone, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to help those that he could. He grabbed his invisibility cloak. It'd seemingly grown of its own accord in recent years. There was a scream from behind him and he fired a spell that saved Luna before the sword stroke could reach her.

He gestured for her to follow, and she came to his side as he covered them both with the cloak. Four more he managed to save in the face of their oncoming death. There was Neville and Draco both fighting side by side but surrounded and outnumbered. Something he never would have thought to see in their days at Hogwarts.

Katie was bleeding from her left arm and her right looked as though it was dislocated but she shuffled along beneath the cloak. Then there was Ginny bleeding from the back of her head with someone else's blood covering her jumper.

They headed toward the mouth of the cave but were cut off at every turn. Worse yet, he could see that it was guarded by five of the Inquisition's zealots. **Up! We can go up.**

Aiming at the ceiling of the cave he gouged at it with an almighty spell that tore through rock like it was dragon through a sheep. All around them the rock came tumbling down, but he deflected it away as enemies and friend alike were caught in the collapse. Pointing his wand upward, he extended his magic. Bolstered by the Elder Wand, he tore through the Inquisitions wards.

"Out! Now!" Harry took hold of Katie, knowing that she was in no state to apparate. With a pop, he disappeared away from the chaos and death.

UP! UP! With a start, Harry awoke, pulled from his tormented dreams. The voice in his head resounded loud and clear, enough that it made his ears ring. For the first time in weeks, he felt its presence. **Go to her, now!** There was a pitter-patter of light rain leaving, the clouds leaving the keep bathed in a consuming darkness.

Jumping to his feet, he wore nothing but his pants as he bound across the small keep and threw open the door of Rowena's room. His wand cast a bright light and shadows across the room. There was a little bed, one that Rowena had conjured for Mairi, except that the young girl wasn't in it. No, she stumbled away from Rowena's bed clutching a dark, jagged stone close to her chest as she stared up at Harry with utter terror in her eyes.

Rowena snapped awake and looked at him with her midnight blue eyes, alert and afraid. She wore just a light shift, and her hair was bedraggled. Her eyes went from him to the rest of the room, and that's when she saw Mairi cowering in the corner. Voice like steel, she asked, "What is going on?"

"I think we need to ask her." Harry gestured with his wand to the young girl.

"Mairi," The girl shook her head, trying to deny that she was even there, "what's going on?"

“He... he promised... that if I did this... my brother,” The girl sobbed and tears streamed down her face, “my brother and I would be free to go. Please... please don’t make me go back... I don’t want to be like the others... like the older ones...” She desperately thrust the jagged stone toward her, “Just take it please... take it... if you take it... we’ll be free.”

Harry summoned the rock but didn’t let it touch his skin, “Who? Who sent you here?”

“Bishop Oran at Inverness...” She looked lost as she glanced between the two of them, “He wanted me to send her back... with the magic... something about the King and Bishop Calleach.”

Harry felt white hot rage well up in his chest. *Seems they’ve never changed. Always the same miserable bastards.*

Rowena managed to maintain her composure far better, though he could hear the strained calm in her voice, “Mairi, I’m not going to Bishop Oran, at least not the way he would like.” She moved over to the girl and wrapped her in her arms. He could see then the caring nature of the teacher she might become, “But in the morning you’re going to tell me the whole story and then... then we’ll go and get your brother and all the rest.”

She hid it from the young girl, but in the low light, Harry saw the cold fury in her eyes. It promised a response and he had a sense that the other shoe was now dangling by its laces, about ready to drop. And for some reason, deep in the back of his mind, there was satisfaction.

CHAPTER 5

They landed with the softest of thuds, both of them careful to make as little noise as possible. One dim torch cast flickering shadows around the room. It was small, barely large enough to fit them, and immaculately clean. *Cleanliness is close to godliness, I suppose.*

Neither he nor Rowena knew exactly what to expect, which was why they had their wands drawn. They’d waited a week before using the portkey to come to Inverness, “Seems we were right.” Rowena whispered as she went to the door. Cracking it open just a sliver, she checked the corridor to the best of her ability and seemed satisfied that there was no one there.

“Must have thought she failed or ran off and decided that it as a lost cause.” Harry agreed. It was what they hoped would happen by delaying, but there was no guarantee. It was the same reason why they waited until late in the night. *It should give us the best chance of success.*

“No doubt they’re planning something else for me now.” There was steel in her voice. Her earlier animosity toward the church and the people that harried her had only been exacerbated by the arrival of Mairi. Every new thing they learned from the young girl about the place they were now in only made them that much more keen to come.

Harry could feel the gentle magic of wards around them. Mairi warned them of the worst of them. They could detect foreign magic cast within the walls of the monastery, or more specifically any magic not from one of the priests or monks. Something like the Trace from his own time. And while he knew that some magic would need to be cast eventually, keeping their presence there unnoticed was their best advantage for the moment.

Opening the door wider, Rowena headed out into the corridor. Quick on her heels, Harry followed her out. It was cool in the corridor, as though they were underground. The sconces burning in the passage provided some light. There was a staircase that led up to their right while the one to their left went deeper. While they believed that Mairi told them everything she knew, they were certain that there were some things she couldn't know. *Like where exactly we would arrive for instance.*

"Up or down?" Rowena questioned with a glance over her shoulder.

"Down. Mairi said her brother wouldn't see the sun for days at a time." The very thought made him furious. It reminded him in some small way of his own time with the Dursleys. *But then, from everything I've been told, and know of them, I should probably count my blessings that Vernon is the worst that I had to deal with.*

"Bastards, keeping them locked away from the rest of the world." He could understand the vitriol in her voice. There was a deep-seeded disdain for them in his own heart, and it only grew the more he learned. *And given what I knew of them in my own time, I didn't think that was possible.*

They hurried down the corridor, quiet as a church mouse quite literally in this case. They bounded down the stairs, deeper into the monastery. The next corridor down was wreathed in an encompassing darkness. They stopped at the base of the stairs where there was just the barest hint of light from the floor above, "Should we?"

"Not yet." Harry said softly. He wanted to remain hidden for as long as possible. Walking around blindly in the dark was unpleasant, but they managed. Harry ran his hand along the stone wall, and Rowena followed by wrapping her hand around the crook of his elbow.

The corridor was only some thirty feet, and narrowed slightly as they reached the end. There was only one door with a hum of magic about it and predictably locked. Even in the dark he could feel Rowena's eyes on him, "Nothing for it now. We can't get in there without casting something."

"We'll need to be quick," He told her, "You give me the light and I'll get the door." She gave his arm a squeeze to show that she understood. There was no way to sit there and study the magic on the door and break it conventionally, at least not without being discovered. *And they've done more than put a simple locking charm on there.*

So, that left him one option. Breaking it open with the sheer force of his magic, "Now." A bright white light shone from the tip of Rowena's wand and revealed the door. It was heavy, made of solid oak and bound with iron that had runes etched into it.

A steady stream of magic left his wand, like a line of electrical current. There was a passing thought to send one explosive spell against it, but he didn't want to take the risk of harming those on the other side. The runes pulsed as they tried to repel him. They grew brighter and brighter as he funneled more of his magic into the door. The iron rent and twisted, deforming as it grew hotter, until finally, it broke with a tremendous snap. It would have been horribly loud if it wasn't for Rowena's foresight to silence it.

If they were discovered, there was nothing obvious to tell them. But they were both smart enough to continue as though they were on a deadline. Without delay, he pushed the door open, and Rowena followed behind with the light.

There were six people sleeping in the room, the youngest was a girl that looked no more than six while the oldest was probably in his mid-teens. They were not on beds, but on the stone floor with nothing to cover themselves. Their clothes looked tattered, as though they hadn't been changed or cleaned in quite some time. The thing that sent his blood cold with fury though was the chains. Each of them, even the youngest, had shackles wrapped around their wrists and their ankles. And it looked to him as though they were threaded through a chain on the wall that would allow them to be suspended.

The light pierced through the darkness and caused the oldest of the bunch to stir. The brightness caused him to cower away at first, striking him almost painfully. *When was the last time he saw anything more than dim torchlight?* After a moment, he chanced another look and Harry could only gesture for him to remain quiet. The lad nodded his head in understanding, and there was a glint of hope in his sunken eyes.

There was a seventh in the room, resting in a chair. It was a man in his forties if Harry were to guess. He was balding, but still had thin grey hair along his temples. Clad in simple brown robes, he was snoring softly. There was a soft humming then and Rowena snuffed out the light of her wand as it caused the monk to stir. With a wave of his own, he meant to hide them from view. But something in the wards of the building fought against it.

Disillusionment wasn't the only way to remain unseen though. As the monk rubbed the sleep from his eyes, Harry pulled Rowena close and cast another spell. The darkness wrapped itself around them as he moved to one corner of the room. They were like a piece of the shadows as the monk lit a torch and moved to a small basin of water.

It was holy water, and he approached the unfortunate captives, he spoke, "Domine Iesu, dimitte nobis debita nostra, salva nos ab igne inferiori, perduc in caelum omnes animas, praesertim eas, quae misericordiae tuae maxime indigent." With each word he doused the children in the holy water. It woke each of them in turn and they recoiled away from their captor with every word.

All except for the oldest. The young man just looked at the monk defiantly, "I have no need of your god's mercy if this what it's like."

From within his robes, the monk pulled something out quickly. There was a bloody red mark on the young man's cheek from where he'd been lashed for his insolence. From the scars on him, Harry would wager it wasn't the first time he'd been defiant.

The monk didn't linger though, moving to the next captor and the next. The youngest whimpered as he approached, and the man actually smiled at the reaction.

Unable to contain herself any longer, Rowena moved within the shadows that obscured them. A red stunner sent the man tumbling to the ground. The basin clattered loudly and left the stone glistening with holy water. The children jumped, and one even yelled out in surprise, "Shush now," the oldest told them firmly, but not unkindly, "They're here to help."

They all clearly had some level of respect for him as they listened without any trouble, he turned to look at him and Rowena, "You **are** here to help, aren't you?"

“Yes, we are.” The witch at his side said stonily as she stared down at the monk. She wanted to do far worse than simply incapacitating him and wouldn’t stop her if that’s what she decided. Shaking her head, she decided against, he would guess for the youngest sake.

Clack. To prove she was telling the truth, Harry undid their shackles with a simple spell, “What’s your name?” He asked of the young man while he moved to the youngest to help her free. She gave him a shy, cautious smile which he managed to return despite the circumstances.

“Euan.” The young man told him as he helped the others get themselves free of their chains.

“Mairi’s brother?” *Makes sense she was so desperate to help him free. If she’d known exactly what they were doing to him, it would’ve been worse.*

“Yes?”

“She’ll be happy to see you.” Harry assured him, “But for now, I need you to help us.”

“If it means getting out of here, I’d do just about anything.” Euan told him vehemently, the younger children nodding their agreement.

“Well, first thing you’re going to do is tell me where I can find the others.” He knew that these were just the worst of the young magicals, at least in the eyes of the people that were holding them. *Though what a six year old could’ve done, I struggle to understand. Couldn’t have been anything worse than some accidental magic I would think.*

“Some of them are a lost cause,” Euan said with a scowl, “Whether it’s because they’ve finally been broken or because they actually believe the weasel shit these bastards have been selling us... it’s hard to say.”

“But not all of them?” Rowena interjected with an almost frightening calm.

“No, not all.” He agreed slowly, “**You’ll** be hard pressed to work out the good from the bad though.”

“Lucky for us, you’ll be able to help us sort them out.” Harry assured the teen. A noise at the top of the stairs caused them all to look toward the door, “Seems we’ve been noticed.” Rowena moved to the door and pressed herself against the wall behind it. Two men and one woman came rushing into the room, looking alarmed.

“What in God’s name is going on here?” One of the men asked while the other two weren’t nearly so open to explanation. They approached Harry ready to pull him away from the children, but before they could get close to him, they all fell to the ground in a heap, joining the first monk in unconsciousness.

“Are any of them magicals?” Rowena asked as she moved over to them.

“I know he is.” One of the younger boys told them, poking the monk in question in the side. Harry summoned a wand from within the man’s robes. Looking it over, he glanced at Euan, “Any idea how to use this?”

“A bit.”

“A bit is enough for tonight.” Harry passed it to him, before looking to Rowena, “One fewer of them to deal with unless he’s any good at wandless magic.”

“One fewer for tonight.” Rowena corrected. They’d had this conversation more than once. He understood why she wanted to just level the entire place and he was in perfect agreement with her. But for tonight, there was something else they were worried about.

“First things first, we get them out. We worry about the rest later.” His companion scowled but nodded her head in the end. Turning back to Euan, he told him, “Show us to the others now, quickly as you can.”

He struggled on his legs after gods only knew how long down in that solitary room, but with every step it grew better. The younger children kept themselves close to Harry and Rowena as they made their way up one flight of stairs and then another and then one final one. As they traveled upward there were more rooms, at least one on each floor. They opened a door out into the cloister. Colonnades opened to the courtyard on the other side.

The building was no foreboding fortress, but it wasn’t small either. The courtyard was square about twenty by twenty with a small fountain in the middle. There was a set of large doors on the northern wall. The moon was a crescent in the sky, casting a pale light around monastery. It came and went though as clouds floated across the sky.

Luckily, things still seemed quiet, except for a light in one of the windows on the opposite side of the courtyard. *Hopefully, those were the only three that knew anything about what was happening down there.*

“This way.” Euan told them as he headed toward to the right. They walked to the nearest corner where there was another door. This one, much like the one below, was locked magically, though it was lacking the runes. Stopping there, Euan said softly to the pair, “If you take the stairs up, there will be a landing and two doors to the sleeping quarters for the rest.”

“Alright,” Harry could see that he was nearly dead on his feet. Considering he probably hadn’t had a proper meal, or a proper night’s sleep, in days, it was understandable, “Take this,” He handed him a simple stretch of rope. It was a portkey set for five minutes, but that wasn’t a measurement used in his current time, “Get outside of the ward line, and this will take you somewhere safe. Somewhere your sister is waiting for you.” They made a little encampment in the Dark Forest for that very purpose a good distance away from her keep.

“There will be more near the entrance.” He said, concerned.

“I’ll take care of them.” Harry looked to Rowena, “Then I’ll join you up there.”

“We’ll send the rest along after you,” Rowena told Euan, “You know better than us which ones to trust, so stay alert. Keep that wand with you and use it if needs be when we send the rest your way.” None of them should be awake when they arrived but it was better to be cautious.

Harry went with the children toward the other side of the courtyard, as Rowena went to work on the door. He heard it creak open as they crept in the shadows toward the gate. There was a large wooden door with a window to check for visitors. It was barred by a large wooden plank. There was

one monk, sitting there whispering to himself as he went about his guard duties. This was the one important door that he'd seen lacking any wards. *Must not want to cause any questions if they have visitors not in the know.*

A flash of light filled the darkness of the night and the monk slumped to the ground softly, "Hurry." Harry commanded the children as he opened and ushered the children out, "Not long now, the wards shouldn't extend too far. If you get to the bottom of the hill, you should be fine." The monastery sat at the top of a hill that overlooked the rest of Inverness where it rested along the River Ness not far from the Moray Firth.

The children hurried along but, Harry didn't have the time to watch them go. Heading back along the courtyard, he heard voices then, "Taking too long, far too long. Come with me. We'll have this dealt with ourselves in just a moment."

There were three people that came striding into the courtyard, one of them clearly the superior to the others from the fineness of his clothing. *Bishop Oran, I would guess.* According to Mairi, the man in charge of this monastery was a deeply devout Christian, who also happened to be a magical practitioner of some skill.

He wore fine linen robes and had rings upon three of his fingers. He had copper hair that was beginning to grey. The bishop was short, even for the time, and skinny.

Hiding himself behind a pillar, Harry watched as they headed toward the stairs that would take them beneath the monastery. *We need to finish here.* He hurried to the door that Euan showed them and made his way up. Just as he described there were two doors, both already open.

The room was magically expanded and lined with simple cots from the door to the back wall. There were eight girls in the room, each of them asleep. There were two small windows in the room, too small to crawl through, but big enough to point a wand through and that's all that mattered. *Not that I couldn't remove the wall if needed.*

Rowena worked quickly, placing another of the portkeys from within her expanded bag in the hand of each of the children. Each of them had already been put into a magical slumber, but she cast another spell to make sure they wouldn't let go of the portkey. Harry got to work helping her.

"How long?" He'd taught Rowena the way of giving it a timer. And since she knew the time, he let her do that final bit of magic on them.

"Soon."

"Hopefully soon is soon enough," Harry whispered back, "The bishop is awake. And will be on his way up soon, I'm sure."

Rowena didn't have anything to say to that as she placed the last of the portkeys on the girls, "Shall we do it now then? Might not have a chance if we leave it until the last second."

Knowing she was right, he headed toward the window. He stabbed the Elder Wand in the air, unleashing an arc of bright white light. It shot out through the night, lighting up the ground outside. At the crest of the hill, it collided with the wards. They were well-made, and tied into a wardstone somewhere if he were to guess. But this wasn't the first time he'd used the blunt force approach to

break through wards, and bolstered by the Elder Wand, it took only a moment. The dome brightened for just a moment before shattering. The magic dripped to the ground like snow, dissipating before it even reached the ground.

There was movement at the bottom of the stairs, and they both moved toward it. Bishop Oran bounded up the stairs as they reached to the landing. There was a wand in his hand, and he sent a spell their way that Rowena deflected away.

He shielded from the spell that Harry sent in his direction and brought the tip of his wand to his throat before either of them could stop him, "Heathens! Heathens in the monastery!" His beady black eyes alighted on Rowena, "The pagan from the highlands! She's here!"

Harry sent an overpowered banisher at the bishop. He wasn't quick enough to shield and he went tumbling down the stairs. There were yells and knocking as more than one person ended up piled at the bottom of the stairs, "Well, so much for getting out of here without them knowing we were here."

There was a wooshing from within the two rooms behind them as the rest of the young magicals were whisked away from Inverness. *Well, at least that's done.*

"Suppose this will just save us a trip back." Harry commented as she shielded to catch another spell that came rushing toward them. Over the years, he'd grown accustomed to small skirmishes like this and more importantly, what it meant.

Rowena gave a little smirk as she sent a bright orange spell down the staircase. It impacted with a loud bang. Screams of pain followed and the two found their path unimpeded as they headed down the stairs. There were a few limbs sticking out of the rubble at the bottom of the stairs. With a wave of his wand, the whole lot of it was swallowed down into the floor.

At the bottom of the stairs, he sent the door off its hinges. It went splintered in two against the stone pillar. As they stepped out into the corridor, spells came from both sides. A cascade of colors washed against the shield he cast. It strained against their assault, but didn't break. Their eleven assailants kept up the attack, doing everything they could to break through his defense.

But they weren't idle behind his shield. Rowena spun her wand in the air and the ground in front of her rippled like water. The stones that made up the floor broke away as the tidal wave headed toward the monks and nuns. *That's about half of them dealt with.* It sent them off their feet, all save Bishop Oran who stumbled away into the courtyard.

As Rowena followed after him, she sent precise spells in the direction of the other five she'd put on the ground. None of them were quick enough to defend, and it meant the end of their lives. They had no intention of allowing these people to do the same again, which left only two options. Harry considered this the kinder of the two.

As his companion rounded the corner into the courtyard, she started trading spells with the bishop. Harry turned his attention toward the other five in the other corridor who were still bombarding his shield. Letting the shield shatter, he apparated behind them, and enveloped himself in shadows. They looked around bewildered for a moment, some of them even fearfully.

They were right to be fearful because from the darkness shining metal spikes came rushing through the air. Three of them found their marks as the dull thud of metal piercing flesh could attest. One of the monks and one of the nuns managed to bring stone barrier to protect themselves.

They fired into the shadow as he stepped out, but he just deflected their spells away. They weren't without skill, and they were fighting to win. The sickly purple spell he swiped away with his wand looked to him like a Maddening Curse. Had it hit home it could have driven him to claw out his own eyes.

He returned fire with a dark blue spell of his own that whipped through the air faster than the monk could hope to shield. All the air was pulled from his lungs in a second, as impossible pressure pressed upon them. The next second he dropped to the ground, dead.

In his next movement, a flame whips emerged from the tip of his wand. It burned hot, so hot that all but the very tip was a deep blue. It slashed through the air, and horrible scream came from the nun as it cut through cloth and skin and bone. The wound was cauterized immediately, but it didn't matter as it slashed her through from clavicle to sternum.

With that dealt with, Harry turned his attention to the courtyard. Rowena traded spells with Bishop Oran, but it looked to him like she was merely toying with him. He was limping slightly on his right leg, as though it had been broken.

Every spell he sent her way was either deflected or avoided with a casual ease. Then he surprised even Harry, "*Avada Kedavra.*" The light wasn't nearly so bright as the one he remembered so vividly from his own childhood. And Harry wagered that even had it reached her, it wouldn't have done the job. It would do worse than a nosebleed though.

Harry didn't wait to find out. Faster than seemed possible, he conjured a stone slab between the holy man and Rowena. The spell destroyed the stones and they fell to the ground as rubble. Unwilling to give him any more chances, he cast a Severing Charm that took the man's hand off in a spray of blood.

Crying out, Bishop Oran hunched over his stump. As he fell to his knees, he reached for his wand, but Harry summoned it away before he could grab it, "You've lost. Accept it."

"I have never lost so long as I walk with God." The bishop said almost deliriously. *Well, he is losing quite a bit of blood. Not that they usually need that excuse for their zeal.*

"Tell him that in your heaven." Rowena said bitterly as she fired off another curse. It was a bright yellow and as soon as it hit the bishop, his eyes widened in alarm. With that single spell, she stopped his heart. Without a wand, there was nothing he could do to counter it and a few seconds later, he slumped to the ground dead.

"Less than he deserved." Rowena said, a frown on her lips.

"True, but we still have work to do." There was still the matter of cleaning things up. There were others still in the monastery, mundane individuals cowering away from the fighting.

Taking a deep breath, her shoulders slumped. When she opened her eyes, she gave him a small smile, "You're right. We should finish this... it's been a long night." She took a few steps before she looked down at the body of the bishop. He could see it then, the way it all caught up with her.

She grew unsteady on her legs, and he caught her in a hug, "Row, just breathe." It wasn't the first time he'd dealt with something like this. Most of his friends became killers, out of survival rather than choice, and some handled it better than others.

"I'm... I'm alright." she said, looking up at him with vulnerable eyes.

"No, but you will be." He assured her, "Just remember, they would've done far worse to you. And they were doing far worse to those children."

"I know." She gave him another small smile and squeezed his arm to show that she was alright.

With that they went about the last of their work. Their one kindness to the mundane monastics was to send them into a deep sleep.

When they left, the sun was just coming over the horizon. And the fires they left behind ate timber, and flesh, and even bone, until there was nothing left but blackened stone.

The one thing they didn't account for when they arrived back in the highlands near the lake was cowardice. One monk, magical of course, popped away in the chaos to a place further south. And, while neither of them knew it...with that, the shoe dropped.

CHAPTER 6

"Better! Much better, just a little bit more firmly now." Rowena gushed, ecstatic for Mairi as she managed to successfully perform her first Stunning Spell with some small issues though, "Can't have your own wand go flying when you're trying to disarm your opponent, can you?" They were in a small clearing in the Dark Forest, the sun just peaking through the trees. The tent where the former captives were staying sat on the outside edge.

"*Néalic.*" It was enlightening to learn that young future founder didn't use the pseudo-Latin that made up the entirety of spellwork in his own time. *Instead, it's something closer to bastardized Gaelic or Norse. And even then, it's only meant as way to help visualize and direct the will of the magician until they can do it with the force of their will alone.*

Of the twenty-three they'd brought from Inverness, including Mairi, thirteen remained. Seven had been too far gone, zealots with the priest's poison dripping from their tongues. They'd taken their memories, locking them behind strong barriers before sending them away. Three more decided to find their families believing, right or wrong, that they'd been stolen by the church rather than given to it.

Harry and Rowena didn't intend to keep anyone against their will and so had given those three leave to go. *Hopefully they don't come to regret it.* Most of the thirteen that remained were from across the British Isle. Two were from Wales, Caerwyn and Aelwyn, a boy and girl both with dirty brown hair though not related. One from Ireland, Tadc, another from the Orkneys, Rorik. Two from the lowlands of Scotland, Donal and Culen, both boys of eleven years. The oldest was Haeddi, a young woman of sixteen from Northumbria. Three more were from Mercia, Halig, Goode, and Esla. Of course, then

there were Mairi and Euan. The most surprising though was one Frankish girl of thirteen, Adela. Taken when the Danes went Viking, the church bought her from the raiders two years before when they traded near St. Andrews.

All and all, they made for quite the ragtag bunch. *But better a ragtag bunch here, safe and free than languishing away in Inverness.* Sitting on a large boulder, Harry watched as Rowena taught four of the kids. Esla, the youngest girl that they'd taken from the dungeons of the monastery, sat next to him, playing with the fingers on his right hand. She'd taken a liking to him in the two weeks since they'd been to Inverness. *Easier to trust the person who removed your shackles.*

"That's good, very good." Rowena complimented as Haeddi managed to rip the stick she was holding from her hand, "And once we get you a proper wand of your own, it'll only get easier." The Saxon girl beamed at her new teacher.

There was rustling from the trees, and Halig, Rorik, and Euan came in with a deer tied to a stick between them. Harry stood and helped the boys, easily able to heft it himself, "Looks like your hunt went well." Moving over, he set it down on a nearby table to skin it.

"Aye, took us a damn sight longer than we thought it would though." Euan smiled as he cracked his back. He stopped and blushed when he noticed Adela looking at him. Harry smirked but didn't say anything as the young man scurried away. *Doesn't seem to matter what time you're in, young men still get tongue-tied when they're around a girl they fancy.*

"I think that'll be enough for now, kids." Rowena told her four eager pupils, "Looks like there's some other work needs doing." They all nodded excitedly and went to help prepare the lunch.

Esla stuck to his side like a shadow as Rowena came over to them. Harry couldn't help but smile at the joy that seemed to be emanating from her, "You're a natural you know."

Blushing slightly, Rowena replied, "I'm doing my best. But it would help to develop a bit of structure. You know, make sure that there's a curriculum depending on their ages. There are certain things that Mairi simply isn't ready for that Heiddi is. I'll have to write it down, make sure that they're all well taken care of. You might have to teach certain things that I can't, and vice-versa. You seem to have a knack for combat magic, after all and..."

Harry chuckled, "There's plenty of time for that, Row. We'll figure it all out, I'm sure. And you know that I'm always happy to help."

Esla giggled as Rowena stopped, looking a little embarrassed. He did so enjoy it when she got going and couldn't seem to stop, "I know, my minds just been racing. I want to do right by them, but there's just so much to think about."

"The important thing is that they're safe," Harry reminded her as he started sliding a blade through the belly of the deer, "They're no longer captives destined only to hate and destroy the very thing that they are. And the more we can teach them, the less likely it is to happen again in the future."

The beautiful brunette had a fire in her eye that very nearly took his breath away, "Never. I won't allow it." She'd quickly developed a fondness for the younger magicals, some more than others though. Mairi in particular was quite a quick wit, and had become a favorite of hers because of it,

“And I’ve been thinking... that was just one monastery in one town in the north of Alba. How many are there like it? And what are they like in places like London? Or Winchester? Inverness is tiny in comparison.”

The same thing had been on his mind, every night before sleep finally took him. For everyone they saved there were dozens more who suffered. *Either turned into zealots or killed when their usefulness is at an end.* “More than I want to think,” he said softly, squeezing her hand comfortingly before returning to his work, “Even one is more than there should be.”

“Exactly!” She agreed vehemently, “There must be something we can do.”

There will be. The voice whispered softly in the back of his mind. It was almost eager, waiting for something but what it was, he couldn’t say. At least to some extent, he knew what the founders did. *Or might’ve done now.*

Hogwarts was the obvious testament to it, but he also knew that in the end it was meaningless to the well-being of magicals. *If anything, it only made us more vulnerable, congregated with no influence or connections to the rest of the world. We were seen as the demons the church portrayed us as because of it. Though, they couldn’t have known that.*

“You’re a brilliant witch, Rowena.” He told her, not noticing how much the compliment pleased her as he went about skinning the deer, “We’ll think of something.”

“We will,” Rowena squeezed his shoulder, fingers lingering there. Harry turned and gave her a smile, but that brief distraction resulted in him making a bad cut with the knife.

Esla squeaked then as a bit of blood spurted from the dead deer, staining her cheek. Trying to contain her amusement, Rowena offered the girl her hand, “Let’s leave Harry to it. Don’t want you covered in blood because he’s gotten clumsy.”

“Hey, you’re the one who was distracting me.” He never minded her being a distraction, but he wasn’t going to tell her that when she was teasing him.

“Funny,” Rowena snickered over her shoulder, “I must have overestimated you. I was certain you’d be more than capable of doing two things at once.” Knife still gliding beneath the skin of the deer, he pulled his wand and sent a weak stinging hex toward her bum.

With a little yelp, she jumped and turned back to him with rosy cheeks and a fierce scowl. He just threw her a cheeky grin, “Look at that, I guess I can do more than one thing at a time.”

“You’re not funny.” She struggled to keep a straight face though, especially when Esla giggled next to her.

“I think you’ve just been outvoted two to one, Row.” He winked at the young girl which only made her giggle more.

With a roll of her eyes, she kept heading toward the kid’s tent with a soft smile on her lips while he just went about cleaning the deer. The process was quick enough. A bit of magic and it was drained of blood and ready to eat. He handed the meat off to Adela and Rorik. The young lady was a hell of a cook, while Rorik had some impressive knife skills.

As those two went about cooking the meal, Euan came over to him where cleaned up on the other side of the clearing. He looked... uncomfortable with whatever he needed to ask, "Harry... I was wondering if I could get a bit of advice." He glanced furtively in Adela's direction, and he had a feeling he knew where this conversation was going.

"Right... what do you need?"

"Adela... I quite like her."

"Really? I didn't notice." He told the young man, unable to hide his amusement.

"Not helping." Euan replied with a frown, "I just don't know how to tell her."

Harry resisted the urge to outright groan. *Of all the things I would've expected to be doing in the past, giving relationship advice wasn't one of them. I was bad enough at getting a girl when I was at Hogwarts... and famous. I don't have any idea how people do this sort of thing in the tenth century.*

Running a hand through his hair, he could only shrug his shoulders, "Tell her you like her. You don't have to make it complicated."

"Is that what you did... with Rowena?" Euan asked anxiously.

Harry quirked an eyebrow, "I... have no idea what you're talking about." While he could easily acknowledge that the young woman was gorgeous, they certainly weren't together.

"She's your woman." The younger wizard said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"She isn't."

"Nonsense!" He sounded almost offended, "She's clearly your woman, there's no reason to lie to me about it." That's when he noticed the look on Harry's face, "You're serious?"

"Yes. Rowena isn't my woman." Something about saying that felt wrong, like there was a lingering, unsaid 'yet' just at the end. But that wasn't something he was going to dwell on it with Euan there.

"But... but, you two are so comfortable together! Everyone knows you're together! You both sleep in the same place!"

"In different rooms," Harry pointed out, "in one that was built specifically for me."

Euan just waved that off, "You do nearly everything together! And then there's the way that you look at each other." For some reason, that brought him up short, "Which only seems to happen when one of you thinks the other isn't looking... now it makes sense."

"I don't look at Rowena when she's not looking." He denied quietly, aware that they might be overheard. Though, a part of him knew that wasn't true. He'd caught himself doing it more than once, but he didn't think he'd ever been so obvious in his appreciation that their new arrivals would notice.

Euan scoffed, "You're talking absolute shite!" He said it loud enough to get the attention of a couple of the others. Rowena even popped her head out from the tent looking concerned.

Harry swatted him in the back of the head, "Say that louder next time, won't you?"

Glancing around the rest of the little encampment, he whispered, "Sorry..." They got more than one curious look before everyone went back to what they were doing.

Heaving a sigh, Harry struggled with what else to tell him, "Tell Adela how you feel. Get her a few nice flowers when you do it. There's plenty in the forest. Women tend to like that sort of thing." He clapped Euan on the shoulder, "If she likes you back, it really is that simple. If not, it's best to know so you can move on."

He was silent for a long moment, brow furrowed in thought, "It's just that easy?"

"It can be."

"Right... so, what about you?"

I'm out of my time by a millennium and smitten with one of the most famous witches in history. So, I don't think things are quite that simple for me. There was no way he was going to tell Euan that though. With a wry chuckle, he told him, "Nothing with me is ever simple, lad. I've just gotten used to it."

"Sounds like an excuse to me."

Harry stared at him unnervingly. The intensity of his emerald gaze made him squirm before he finally said, "I'll keep it in mind. But maybe I just need you to show me how simple it really is." He gave Euan a small smile and one last squeeze of his shoulder, "Sometimes it's easier to give advice to others than to follow it yourself."

With a nervous nod, he accepted that and headed over to Halig. Harry was lucky enough not to be left alone with his own thoughts for too long as they were called for a lunch a few short minutes later.

The fifteen of them sat in groups, of threes and fours. As had become their habit, Harry found himself sitting with Rowena. Esla and Mairi were with them as well. Between bites of venison, Rowena asked him, "So... what happened with Euan?"

"He wanted some advice... on Adela." Harry told her softly, which made Mairi snicker.

"Oh... he's in love with her... or at least he thinks he is. It wasn't just his magic that got him thrown down into the dungeon but his distraction with her."

Rowena ruffled the younger girl's hair, "Well he's allowed. He's not the first person to be in love, and he's certainly not the first person to think it. There's every chance it'll happen to you someday, too."

Mairi scrunched her nose up in distaste, "It won't."

"Your brother probably said the same thing when he was younger. And look at him now." They all turned to see that her brother was casting furtive glances in Adela's direction, who seemed none the wiser as she spoke with Heiddi.

"So... what did you tell him?" Rowena asked, curious.

“Tell her.”

“And the yelling?”

“He didn’t think it was that simple. And he let me know... loudly.” It was only half a lie, and he wasn’t going to tell her the real reason with Esla and Mairi right there. *Or ever for that matter.*

“Right...” Something about the way that one word was said made him think she didn’t really believe him. Esla’s giggle only confirmed it to him, but she let it go anyway.

The meal was nearly done, when Harry felt something just on the edge of the wards to the south. *More than one something, in fact.* He’d set them up himself. After years and many opportunities to practice in his own time, he considered himself quite skilled at it. Noticing his distraction, Rowena asked, “What is it?”

“There’s something in the forest, on the edge of the wards.” He told her. While he didn’t know for sure, his mind went straight to danger. *They were bound to come again at some point. It wasn’t just Bishop Oran that wanted her but the King and Bishop Cellach as well.*

That sent her into action, “Everyone, into the tent.” The wards alone should be enough to keep them covered, but the tent could be completely hidden on top of it. One by one, they filed into the magically expanded space before they tied the tent behind them. With that done he then disillusioned the tent as well.

“Show me.” Rowena commanded. Together, they moved through the trees to the edge of the wards. What they found there was not what either of them expected. Trudging through the forest, there were men, women and children all. Very few of them looked like warriors, and those few didn’t look ready for a fight. Some of them were limping, others were covered in soot and all of them looked exhausted.

There was one man, older than the others, with salt and pepper hair and a long beard. He was missing a few teeth, and the ones that remained weren’t in the best shape. There were fine furs around his shoulders and a red tunic with gold embroidery. The red did a good job of hiding the blood that stained the tunic from a gash in his side. While it was still cool in the north of Scotland, Harry thought it looked much too warm.

“I know him, Gamelin.” Rowena said, sharing a look with Harry, “He is toiseach in the southern part of the Dal Riata. My father would meet with him...” She saw another man younger but in the same sort of fine clothing, “So does he, but further east. Inan, is his name if I remember right. They’re both good men.”

He had every confidence that she did, “What’re they doing here? And in that state?”

“I don’t know... but I think we should find out.” Without any further warning, she stepped out of the ward line. Seemingly from nowhere, she appeared before them. A child yelled and woman shrieked. Swords were drawn by the beleaguered warriors, but they didn’t look like they had the strength to wield them and they relaxed when they saw it was a lone woman.

Inan and Gamelin stepped forward and quieted their kinsfolk as Rowena spoke, "What are you doing here?" The older man's breathing was labored, and as he brought his fingers away from his wound they came away stained with blood.

So, it was Inan that answered the question, "You don't know? Bishop Cellach has been preaching at St. Andrews for the last two weeks, calling every able-bodied man to arms. Arms against the heathen highlanders that refuse to embrace their god."

"They... they say..." With a wave of his wand, the open wound knit itself up. Gamelin didn't look surprised by the casual use of magic. If anything he looked relieved. *The Statute of Secrecy won't be enacted for another seven hundred years. These people might not know of the intricacies of magic but they must know it's there. All their legends must have come from somewhere, after all.*

"Thank you." His voice was still raspy as he continued, "They say the pagan witch that lives deep in the highlands, hidden with the trees and shrouded by the devil himself, committed a great slaughter at Inverness. And that it should be met with a great slaughter of its own. "

Fuck. Someone survived. Someone that made it back to St. Andrews. Neither he nor Rowena reacted outwardly, knowing that the situation could be volatile if they admitted the truth of the matter. It didn't change the fact that Rowena was incensed, "Why attack you though? They know where I am, they were welcome to come and find me. It wouldn't have been the first time that they tried."

"Because they blame it on all heathens that still stain this land." Inan spit out the words, "Your crime is our crime, and they mean to make us pay for it. People that have traded with us, who have shared in our harvest and our festivals took up sword against us. They burned our homes and killed our people."

White hot anger bubbled in Harry's chest. *The bastards.* Furious as he was, it was tinged by no small amount of grief and guilt because he knew that had they not razed the monastery to the ground, there would have been no slaughter. There were mothers without children because of them. **Mothers lose their children every day. It is the way of things. Many more will be lost before it's over.**

Harry didn't expect such a direct response from the seemingly ever present voice. *Am I any better than Tom? My own actions have led to the death of magicals... same as him.*

You needn't lose as he did. And you didn't do it out of vanity or pride, but out of a need to protect your own. You aren't the same. The voice spoke clear and without doubt. It did more than a little to assuage his own doubts.

He could feel Rowena's magic cloying against his own, her anger making it push against the surface. It was enough that even the mundanes could feel it. Both toisech standing before them swallowed nervously as the two magicals' eyes glowed bright and eerie. The young witch calmed herself enough to ask, "Why come to me?"

"We didn't." Gamelin rasped, "We mean to make for Varrich on the northern coast. The fortifications still hold, and we don't believe they would pursue us so far north. With time, we might return south. If not, we will join with the people on the coast."

“You can’t just concede your homes! They’ve done everything in their power to take our gods and our stories and now they want the land your fathers and their fathers called their own!”

“What would you have us do?” Gamelin sounded every bit a broken man.

“I would have you fight!” Her voice echoed through the forest.

“With what men?!” Inan gestured behind them, “Do these men look like they are fit to fight? How many more will follow behind? They will not stop! And even if we did find the men to fight the mob, Causantain need only make the call and we’d be against every Christian in all of Alba. All Cellach need do is whisper it in his ear and we’d find ourselves facing down an army. And should we win by some twist of fate, what comes next? Aethelflaed? Edward? They wouldn’t let the loss of a Christian kingdom stand!”

Rowena looked like she wanted to scream in frustration, unable to argue against the weight of his loss or reasoning. But she knew that she was watching the slow, steady victory of the church as they chipped away those of the old religion piece by piece. *And now in one great swoop.*

It was only then that Harry spoke up, “The Norse-Gael, in Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, the Isle of Man, would they not fight? They are heathen, too.”

That brought both Gamelin and Inan up short. But then the elder shook his head, “They wouldn’t fight. The Danes and the Northman do nothing unless they have something to gain.”

Voice dark, tinged with some small hint of her magic, Rowena told them, “No, my uncle serves the Jarl of the Hebrides. Should I go, he wouldn’t abandon me.”

“The Hebrides alone wouldn’t be enough.” Inan waved her off.

“With them will come others, maybe even Fairhair.” Rowena argued.

Inan made to argue but Gamelin put a hand on the younger toiseach’s arm, and contemplated her for a long moment, “Do you truly believe you can do it?”

“Yes.” That single word came from somewhere deep in her soul, and it seemed enough to convince him.

He nodded and stepped closer to them, before asking, “Did you do what they claim?”

“We did.” Harry stood straight, waiting for the anger to come. When it didn’t, he explained, “They captured and indoctrinated children gifted by Freyja or the Dagda or Lugh, whichever you prefer. We couldn’t allow it.”

There were tears in his eyes as he thought on the dead. The people that might still be alive if not for their actions. When he spoke his voice was soft and wet, but there was conviction there, “Perhaps...” Gamelin looked to Inan, “Perhaps there is a touch of fate about this. Perhaps, we should fight for our people and the beliefs of our forefathers”

Inan looked between him and Rowena, before he finally spoke up, voice hard as iron, “I would rather die on my feet than hide away until my last day knowing that my beliefs die with me. We’ll go to Varrich and gather any other Highlanders that are still alive. If you succeed, we’ll wait for you there.”

With that the two toiseach led their people through the wood. Once they'd all passed them by, Harry and Rowena remained.

For what felt like ages, the pair stood there with nothing but the singing of birds and the rustling of leaves between them. Finally, Rowena spoke up, "Harry, did we just start a war?"

"It does look that way, yes."

"Right." She looked at him with those big blue eyes, and a second later she threw herself into his arms and hugged him with all her might. All he could think to do was squeeze her back.

CHAPTER 7

"You're leaving us?" Mairi sounded distraught at the idea. She wasn't the only one either, the rest of them were far from pleased by the news.

"For a short while, that's all." Rowena comforted her, "We wouldn't do it if it wasn't important." It wasn't what either of them wanted to do, but speed was vital and dragging along a baker's dozen worth of young magicals would make things more difficult. They'd considered one of them staying behind, but since they could return without any trouble, they decided it would be better if they did it together.

Meanwhile, Harry pulled Euan aside and instructed him, "Just keep your head down and look out for everyone. Make sure no one leaves the ward line alone, and that the younger ones always have one of the older ones with them. We won't be gone for more than a few days at a time. Hell, we might even be able to come back each night and sleep here." There was no guarantee, and they wouldn't want to risk the ire of the lords hosting them by going missing, but it was possible, "And if we're lucky, it won't take too terribly long." *Please let us be lucky.*

The younger man gave him a stern nod, but despite the brave face, Harry could see his concern, "Don't worry, I'll take care of them. I promise."

Harry gave his shoulder a squeeze, "I know you will. It's what you did in the monastery, so I wouldn't expect anything less now." While he only knew Euan for a short time, it was honest praise. Not everyone would show such defiance and bravery in the face of the hopelessness with the priests.

Proud of that praise, Euan asked, "Will we stay here?"

"For now, yes. In a week's time, depending on how things have gone, we'll move you to Varrich with the other Highlanders." It was a reasonable amount of time for Gamelin and Inan to reach the northern fortress and while there should be others there already, Rowena didn't know them and wouldn't be willing to trust them. Neither of them liked leaving the children in the forest because they knew that it was likely there were Church-loyal magicals amongst the mob that might find them. But it was out of the way, and they intended to add to the wards before departing. *And at least there's no Taboo that'll give their location away.*

"And if they find us?" Given everything they'd been through, Harry could understand the trepidation in his voice.

“I’ll know, and I’ll come back.” Alarm wards existed for a reason, and there was nowhere in the British Isles that he couldn’t apparate to in a moment’s notice.

More than anything, that reassured him, and he relaxed slightly, “Alright, I understand.”

Harry clapped his shoulder, “Everything’ll be fine.” *At least I hope it will... as we go about organizing a war.*

“When are you leaving?” Mairi hugged around Rowena’s waist, head pressed against her stomach.

Rowena patted the girl’s hair, “Now, I’m afraid. The quicker we do this the better.” There was no guarantee that they’d be successful anyway. *There’s every possibility they tell us no without a second thought.*

Mairi nodded her head before she gave Rowena one last squeeze, “Don’t worry,” the young woman told her, cupping her cheek, “We’ll be back before you know it.”

“Be careful while we’re gone,” Harry spoke to all the children, “And look out for each other.” With that, Harry and Rowena walked away together. When they reached the ward line, they stopped, each of them taking to a different task. He turned back to the wards, and new layers fell over the top of the clearing. Meanwhile, his companion grabbed a simple branch from the ground and turned it into a portkey since she was the one who knew where they were going. It was always odd to him that such a useful spell could be performed using such non-descript objects.

Silently, she came to his side and offered him the branch. There was that unpleasant feeling behind his navel and a rush of air. He landed solidly on the ground, but not without leaning unsteadily into Rowena. *You’d think at some point, I’d figure out how to get that right every time.* He’d managed it on the journey to the monastery but wasn’t quite as lucky this time.

Blushing slightly, a little from embarrassment but more thanks to the feel of her pressed against him, he mumbled, “Sorry.”

The young founder didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it, “Lucky for me, you’re steadier in a fight.”

“Had a bit more practice with fights,” he agreed with a bit of chuckle.

“Well, I’d say that’s a wee bit more useful most days... but, hopefully we don’t have another one waiting for us here.” Rowena was looking toward the town that sat along the water’s edge. There were houses made of lumber, wattle, and daub and roofed with straw. *Pretty sure you could destroy the whole town with some blue-bell flames.*

Still, it was picturesque, sat in a natural harbor with a gravel beach along the shoreline and a lush green landscape behind. They were stood on the arm of the harbor across from the main town, “Where are we?”

“Stjornavagr, in the Outer Hebrides,” she told him as she started walking, “It was founded by the Norse a hundred years ago, and it’s the primary trading point out of these isles.”

“And your uncle’s here?”

“Yes,” Rowena faltered and bit her lip, glancing at him almost nervously, “Or at least he should be.”

“Should be?”

“I haven’t seen him in years, and since my mother died...” She frowned, “He didn’t hate my father, but he didn’t call upon us as often. He loved his sister, but with her gone, he had his own life to lead and his own family to build.”

“Is he not magical?”

“No... not in the same way.” Harry could only guess that meant he was a squib with some small modicum of magical ability. *Or maybe the magic manifested in some other way... something that went entirely out of practice in my own time.*

“Right... so, there’s every possibility he’s not here then?”

As she worried her lower lip, he already had his answer, “Yes... but I hope he is. And if he’s not, I’m sure we’ll be able to find someone who can tell us where he’s gone.”

Harry could only shake his head, not at her, just at the situation. *One of these days, I’m going to have more to go on than a bit of good luck and hope.* But considering what they were trying to do, they would probably need plenty of it anyway.

They made it into the town quickly enough. There were no walls or gates to bar their entry. People didn’t give them any mind, as it wasn’t uncommon for people to come from further inland on Lewis and Harris to trade in the port town. All the pathways led toward the port, there were longships moored there.

When they reached the town center proper, Rowena approached an older woman, her once dark hair was almost completely greyed, and she was missing two of her teeth. Dental hygiene wasn’t exactly a priority of the times after all, “Excuse me?” He felt her quietly cast the translation spell that he’d taught her.

“Yes?” The woman said warily.

“I’m looking for Torgils, he once served the Jarl Asbjorn as his helmsman.”

Frowning, she pointed down to one of the buildings along the shore, “In there, you can usually find him wherever you can find the ale.”

Rowena frowned slightly, “Thank you.” Harry followed behind as they passed through what was ostensibly the market. They passed a fishmonger and a fur trader as they made their way to the tavern.

Harry found himself looking at everyone they passed because there was no knowing who they could trust. More often than not, there were Thor’s Hammers around their necks, which put him at some ease. But he couldn’t help the feeling that they were being watched.

There was laughter coming from within as they opened the door. There were maybe thirty people pressed together and it smelled of cooked fish and strong ale. One bear of a man was at the counter, yelling loudly, “I tell you... I shoved a spear right through the things gut!” He took a long pull of drink from his flagon, and some of it spilled into his beard. His hair was in a messy braid. There were gold and silver rings around his tree trunk sized arms. And he must have been at least half a

foot taller than Harry and strong enough to cut a man clean in two. *Looks like the sort of lad who can get in a fist fight with a troll and have a half-decent chance of winning.*

“Well, at least we found him...” Rowena had a fond, slightly exasperated smile for her uncle. Unbothered by his boisterousness, she walked up and placed a hand on his back.

Turning at her touch, seeing her face brought a dopey grin to his own, “Asa... is that you... my word you don’t look like you’ve aged a day! Come, come have a drink with me!” He was clearly drunk, and Harry could only wonder how much ale it took to manage it.

“I’m your niece, not your sister, uncle.” Rowena told him gently. He looked at her again but didn’t seem to manage any recognition. That changed when Harry saw her tip her wand out and cast a quick spell.

Sadness came to his eyes, which were very much like his niece’s. Sobered from the spell, he told her “Of course, how could I have forgotten, I miss her every day.”

They shared a sad smile, “As do I, uncle. But, in her absence, I’d be happy to share a drink with you.”

“Of course, how could I refuse. It’ll give you the chance to tell me what you’re doing here.” He gestured to the barman for another drink and offered it to Rowena before turning to go to a table. It was only then that he noticed Harry standing there, “Who’s he?”

“Harry,” Rowena told him simply as she took a seat.

The older man looked him up and down, appraising him. Whatever he saw at least didn’t displease him as he gave a nod and sat down beside his niece, “You look just like her, you know. More beautiful than any man deserves.” He glanced at Harry as he said it. *Well, that’s not too bad as far as warnings go.*

Rowena’s eyes flitted to Harry too, before she looked down to the raven’s claw on her chest, “I think I’m the one who gets to decide that.”

He boomed a laugh, “Aye, truly just like her.” He gave a shake of his head, and took a quick drink of ale, “Now, you didn’t just come to visit, nice as it is... so, tell me why you’re here.”

“What’ve you heard about Inverness?” She asked him. News spread a bit more slowly to the Outer Isles, so there was no guarantee that they’d even heard anything yet.

“Nothing new, why?”

“We...” She hesitated, not sure exactly how to explain this to her uncle.

“We raided a monastery in Inverness because they were holding our fellow magicals captive,” There was no Statute of Secrecy to worry about, and he was family anyway, so he didn’t hesitate in telling the man, “We killed the bishop that was overseeing it, and we thought, all the priests and nuns there, too.”

Torgils eyes got big, before he slapped a hand down on the table with another booming laugh, “Good on yeh! Protect your own.”

“Yes,” Rowena cut back in, “But we didn’t get them all. One of them scurried away to St. Andrews.”

“So, I’m guessing they retaliated.”

“Against any pagan they can find.” Rowena confirmed, “Whether they be Scot, Dane, or Norse, if you hold to the old gods of your forebears, they don’t discriminate.”

The man looked incensed. His grip on the flagon in his hand grew tighter and Harry could hear the wood protest as he did it, “Why come to me? I can offer you a bed to sleep in and some small safety if that’s what you’re after, but not much more.”

“Because we mean to fight.”

“Of course, you do.” Torgils looked between them, seemingly pleased at the news, “But you didn’t just come here for me then, did you?”

“No, the highland chiefs that still hold to the old gods won’t be enough to fight Causatain when he raises his army,” Rowena explained, “We know that we’ll need others. I’m hoping that you might help us convince Jarl Asbjorn to raise the Hebrides.”

“A year ago, I would’ve taken you to him...” He shook his head, “but now, he’s a changed man. I always knew him as loyal to the gods, a raider, a captain, a man that others were proud to call Jarl. But since the priest arrived...”

“The priest?”

“Aye, Father Gideon,” his distaste for this man was palpable, “he’s wormed his way into Asbjorn’s confidence.”

“They always do.” There was nothing but cold contempt in her voice.

Her uncle agreed, “Asbjorn has grown quiet, weaker, and the man seems to always be at his side. I’ve been his helmsman for three decades, raided together, stood in the shield-wall side by side. All with the gods on our shoulder, but now... Now he’s agreed to build a church here in Stjornavagr.”

“Have there been many converts?” Harry asked. It’d be good to know if they could expect a confrontation.

“Half a dozen, no more.” Torgils shrugged, “There might be more who have considered it, but there are many more who are furious with him.” If it weren’t for the years of respect he’d built, it sounded like he’d already be facing a coup.

“Take us to him,” Rowena all but demanded, “I’d like to see for myself.”

“I...” He saw the look in her eye and shook his head, “You’ll just go yourself if I don’t take you?”

“Yes.” They didn’t necessarily need her uncle, they’d known that. He just represented the best opportunity. *Though apparently not anymore.*

“Come.” He stood and they followed, though not before the barman stopped him.

“Now, I know better than to let you out of here without paying. Come on now.”

The mountainous man took off one of his armbands and threw it down on the counter, "That should settle me up for some time, yes?" The barman looked at the band and gave him a nod.

"Really, uncle?" Rowena said as they exited.

"I haven't been on the sea in two years now," He told her, "I've nothing better to do with my wealth. I'm no lord, no men follow me, and my own sons have made their way in the world."

"When did you last see Dagfinn and Magnus?"

"Five years ago, now," he smiled, "I don't blame them, they both had a restlessness and love for the sea. And since their mother passed, the call of the waves is stronger than the call of home."

They made their way through the town and ended up in front of a hall. It was half again taller than anything around it. Just a little further along was something else that caught the eye though. The beginnings of a new building, its footprint was bigger than the jarl's hall. *I suppose that's the new church.*

There were guardsmen outside of the hall, but they didn't stop Torgils as he made for the door. They actually gave a respectful bow of their head as he passed. Opening it, he led them inside. The ceiling was high and arched. There was a hearth in the center of the room, but no fire burning. Long tables ran from the front near the door to the back of the hall where there was a large ornate seat. Animal reliefs were carved into the back and the arms.

Sitting on that cushioned seat was a man. His beard was neatly trimmed, but he looked gaunt and pallid. He was staring at the door without really seeing. He was so deep in thought, he didn't even notice their arrival.

"Lord," Torgils walked down the long table to come to his side.

Asbjorn shook himself and finally took note of them, "Torgils, my friend, I didn't see you there."

Harry couldn't help but notice that the priest was nowhere to be seen as the two men spoke, "I'm sorry for intruding, but there's someone who'd like to meet you. This is Rowena, my sister's daughter, she was hoping to have a word with you."

"Of course, any family of yours is welcome here. Sit, drink with me." He gestured to a young woman standing over at the side of the room and she filled three goblets with ale, "What word would you like to have with me?"

Rowena visibly steeled herself, "We learned a monastery at Inverness imprisoned and tormented children with Freja's gift. We freed them and killed those who tried to stop us." She refused to start this war on a lie, such things only led to bigger problems in the future, "In response, there's been slaughter of pagans happening in Alba and the highlands, Lord. Bishop Cellach in St. Andrews has called for it and Causantain supports it."

While she talked, Harry found himself performing a bit of magic. If Torgils followed this man, Harry doubted that words alone were the sort of thing that could turn him from his gods. *No, I'd wager every galleon I ever had that there's something else at work here.* Wandlessly, he looked for traces

of magic, of some influence being done upon him. There were traces of magic, but nothing actively affecting him.

Closing his eyes, the Jarl took a deep breath, "That's... horrible to hear."

"It is," She agreed, looking briefly between her uncle and Harry, "And we don't mean for it to go unchecked."

He nodded his head, "You mean to make war, against Causantain, and you've come to me that I might raise men for you."

"It was our hope, Lord." The Jarl wrapped a hand around the necklace on his neck, and Harry was happy to see it wasn't a crucifix there.

"I..."

"It sounds to me," A new voice spoke from above on the balcony, "that King Causantain is doing God's work, and that the pagans who refuse to see his light are simply getting what they deserve. The fire's will cleanse their souls."

Torgils and Rowena looked up, but Harry found himself looking at Jarl Asbjorn. He looked haunted by the mere mention of the fire's, and he grasped all the more tightly to his pendant. The priest walked down from above. He was young, of middling height with hair down to his shoulders. There was nothing but disdain in his eyes as he looked them over.

Rowena returned that feeling in equal measure as she bit out, "Those people were innocent, men, women and children who did nothing wrong!"

"Paying for your sin, yes, I heard." His voice was melodic, almost hypnotic, "I can't imagine the guilt."

"We feel no guilt for doing the right thing." Harry spoke up, there was an undertone of magic in his voice that caused the priest to falter if only for a moment, "We only regret letting one of your lot get away."

"No guilt at all?" He sneered at them, "I shouldn't be surprised. I'd expect nothing less from heathens."

"Out," Asbjorn rasped out before they could continue, "All of you out! I wish to be alone."

"Lord, I..." Father Gideon tried to interject but was stopped.

"No, you too." He turned to Rowena, "I'll give your proposal some thought, and you'll have your answer in the morning."

"Thank you, Lord," She bowed her head, "That's all I can ask." He gave her a tired smile, stood and made for his private chambers. None of them, not even the priest, wanted to draw his ire, so they left.

When they were outside, he turned to Rowena looking smug, “You’ll fail here, whatever little plan your scheming up will die in its infancy... just as you should’ve.” Torgils looked ready to rip his head from his shoulders, but Harry managed to stop him, which really was no small feat.

“Now’s not the time.” The best thing could do was determine what exactly he was doing to the Jarl and expose him. *Even if half the people in the town want him dead, it’ll mean more if Asbjorn is the one to do it.*

“Just the other day, Jarl Asbjorn was telling me he’s thinking of getting baptized.” That brought all of them up short, “Once he’s a Christian, he would never dare raise an army against Causantain.” Satisfied that he’d won this little confrontation, he walked away toward the church’s building site.

“He’d never.” Torgils sounded horrified.

“He might, especially with whatever magic is being done to him.”

“Magic?”

“The priest, he’s one of us, and he’s doing something to your friend.”

Harry saw then the countenance that had no doubt put fear into many men across the battlefield, “We must put a stop to it.”

“We don’t even know what he’s doing,” Rowena rubbed her uncle’s arm, trying to comfort him.

“No, not with any certainty,” Harry agreed, “But I think I have a pretty good idea.”

“What’re you thinking?”

“That Asbjorn looks like he hasn’t had a good night’s sleep in months. Almost like he’s been suffering from nightmares.” Considering the magic wasn’t actively affecting him, that meant that it was probably happening when he didn’t know it. *Like when he’s sleeping.* “Torment a man long enough, and eventually he’ll become desperate for a reprieve. Especially when you whisper in his ear that all it’ll take is embracing God to do it.”

“Tonight,” Torgils demanded, “You deal with it tonight.” To know that his friends decline was not a simple case of trusting the wrong man, but because he was actively being influenced made him furious.

“Tonight,” Harry agreed. The sun was already setting on the edge of the horizon, casting a beautiful light over the harbor. They wouldn’t need to wait long.

They stayed in Torgils home until the moon hung high and clear in the sky. The paths were quiet, the guardsmen were the only ones out. But even then, Harry and Rowena meant to take extra precautions. Hidden beneath disillusionments with their footsteps silenced, they moved together through the town. They told Rowena’s uncle to wait and watch, only intervene if it looked necessary.

Entering the Jarl’s hall was simple, they levitated themselves up to the second story and entered through one of the windows. From there, they made their way down and into his chambers. For a moment, Harry wondered if he’d been wrong, if this had all been futile attempt at catching the priest out. *Or maybe he was just wise enough to stop while we’re here.*

But then, that would've raised questions from the Jarl. *Why would the nightmares stop only when we're here?* So, no, he wasn't wrong. He just wasn't expecting the invisibility cloak. If it weren't for the little light, no bigger than a pin prick coming from Asbjorn's temple, he wouldn't have known.

Reaching out, Harry took hold of the translucent fabric and pulled. The priest startled, stabbing his wand into Asbjorn's temple and waking him instantly. There was blood dripping down his face as he looked around frantically, his eyes narrowed as they landed on a nervous priest, "Gideon?"

"Don't worry, Lord, you won't remember a thing." He raised his wand no doubt to oblivate the man.

But neither he nor Rowena had any intention of allowing that, His wand flew from his hand and into Harry's before he had the chance to get out the words. Both men jumped at the spell before they revealed themselves, "Apologies, Lord," Rowena said deferentially, "but we had certain suspicions regarding the father, here."

"What's going on?" He demanded.

"He's a magical, just like us, but raised by the Church, to manipulate and subvert." Father Gideon looked furious, eyes scanning for any means of escape, "I'd guess he's been giving you nightmares, ones that were meant to drive you closer to him and the Church."

Asbjorn looked utterly haunted, "It started six months after he arrived, at first it was just once a week at most. But then... every night... every night I saw the fires... the screams and the torment. And in the middle, my beloved Alof." His terror turned to fury as he looked toward the priest, and in that moment the man that he used to be shone through, "And you offered me comfort, claimed that I could see heaven if I just accepted your God, that I could even free my wife from the pit!"

"For a sizable portion of your wealth, I'm sure." Rowena sniped.

"It's the truth, lord." Gideon managed through his fear, "The dreams were meant only to guide you down the path."

"Liar! Rat!" Asbjorn bounded from the bed as others in the hall stirred awake. The first to arrive was the same young woman from that afternoon, "Inge, bring me my axe. Now!" The girl didn't question it, just hurried off.

Gideon could see the writing on the wall, and tried to run, but Harry stopped him, "Where do you think you're going?" The young priest looked truly fearful. *Some of them are made of sterner stuff than others I suppose.* "Not quite so smug now, are you?"

"With me." Asbjorn threw on a shirt and walked from the room. He spoke to the guards, "Rouse the people. Everyone should see this." A cry went up across the town as people were stirred from their beds. Inge arrived with the Jarl's axe and handed it to him as he pushed open the doors.

People were making their way down the streets, gathering together where they reached the hall. There were murmurings and confusion, as they saw their lord standing there axe in hand. To one of his guards, he said two simple words that made Gideon shudder in Harry's hand, "The block."

"Lord, please, no. I beg of you... don't do this. Don't do this!" The priest grew hysterical but his cries fell on deaf ears.

A stump of black wood, stained even darker from blood, was brought and placed at his feet. With the town gathered, he finally looked to Harry, "Bring him." Gideon struggled, but stopped as Togils came and punched him hard across the face. *I imagine he's wanted to do that since the moment he met him.* After that, Harry easily drove him to his knees with his neck across the block.

Asbjorn put his foot on his back to keep him in place. The terrified priest whimpered pitifully, but no one heard as the Jarl roared, "This man is a liar! For months, he's used and manipulated me. Just as he wishes to use and manipulate you! But no more!" He brought the axe down hard. While he wasn't as strong as he once was, the blade was sharp. It cleaved through flesh and bone, burying in the wood beneath in the blink of an eye. There was a dull thud as the head went tumbling to the ground.

"I've been weak but no more! I'll remember my gods, as should you. And never let another poisoned word reach my mind." He threw the axe down to the ground, and turned away from crowd. The conversations grew loud as he addressed his friend, "Torgils," the big man nodded his head, "In the morning, we ready for war."

"Yes, lord." The loyal helmsman gave nothing away, but pulled two of the guards inside and started talking with them.

It left him and Rowena with the Jarl, "So tell me, how do I know you won't lie and manipulate, same as him? Why shouldn't I take your heads to save myself the trouble?"

This would always be a problem when dealing with the mundane. They feared what they didn't understand, especially when it could so easily control them. It was an entirely different problem that would require a different sort of solution. But that was for a different time, "We're nothing like him, lord. We're pagan same as you and we understand ours is a gift from the gods meant to aid, not to hinder.

He regarded them for a long moment, before giving a chuckle. It sounded like it was the first time in a long time that he'd done it, "And if not for you, I would've been baptized within the week." He gave a wry shake of his head, "There's one more thing, I'd have you do for me."

"Lord?"

"Destroy that fucking church over there for me." He spit the words out like they tasted sour in his mouth, "I imagine you could get it done faster than any of my men."

Harry saw no problem with it but Rowena didn't respond right away, and even he wasn't sure what she was thinking, "Lord, if I might offer an alternative."

"What?"

"It isn't consecrated ground, so it isn't a church, yet. Build a temple there in its place, to revere the Aesir and Vanir."

He turned and looked down the road to the unfinished building, and snorted, "I like it. I imagine the weasel shit would've hated that." He made to walk for the door, but stopped and spoke to them once more, "I'm not enough, you know? And I won't lead my men into a massacre."

They shared a look, before Harry told the Jarl, "We know." *But it's a start.*

CHAPTER 8

There was a shake against his shoulder that stirred him awake. Blearily, Harry looked up to see a smirking Euan over him, "Mornin'... didn't expect you back just yet. Or to be sleeping here for that matter." They were in one of the tents at the kid's encampment. It took him a moment to remember why he was there.

"Things finished up quite late in Storjnavagar, after some rather odd turns. Once things were settled, we decided to come back and check on everything." As he made to rise, he became acutely aware of what was causing the look on the younger man's face. There was a weight against his chest, dark hair fanned out across it. There was a noise of protest as Rowena clearly wanted to sleep a bit longer, and he ran his hand up her back to soothe her.

Considering they'd both been rather tired after a trying day, they'd just taken to the nearest bedrolls once they knew everything was fine. At some point in the night... they'd clearly ended up in this position. Euan snickered, drawing a glare from Harry. It did absolutely nothing to stifle his amusement, "There's food on... when you're ready of course."

"We'll be right out." The way he said it made it clear that it was time for Euan to go. He didn't protest, but his shoulders shook with laughter as he went. *Cheeky little bastard.*

Sighing, Harry looked down at the young woman against his chest. She snored cutely and mumbled something in her sleep as she pressed closer to him. Pressing his hand harder against her back, he spoke softly, "Row..."

She wiggled against him as she tried to move away from the intrusion, but his hand drifted up to the nape of her neck and her eyes finally snapped open. For a second, he could see her confusion and then her eyes widened slightly, and she blushed, hiding her face against him. *Again, cute.*

Fighting down his own smile, his hand drifted down to her back again and he ran his tips along her spine, she shivered as he let her know, "Some of the kids are up, they have breakfast going."

"Oh, that's good." They were quite good at taking care of themselves. *Though considering the times, and their previous situation, that really shouldn't be that surprising.* Neither of them made to move right away, and Harry could honestly say he was quite comfortable having her right there. He could only guess at her feeling on it, but the fact she made no move to leave spoke volumes.

"Think we should join them?"

Nodding, her hand spread against his chest as she pushed herself up. Looking down at him with those midnight blue eyes through the curtain of her raven-black hair, he was reminded, not for the first time, that she really was a timeless beauty. He felt warm and a fluttering low in his stomach. The corner of her lip turned up before she finally pushed away, "Come on then."

Harry popped to his feet and followed her out of the tent. Most of the younger magicals were up and about already. There was porridge cooking over the fire and eggs frying on a pan. Mairi rushed over to Rowena and hugged her leg, "Hello, I'd say you missed me?" The young girl nodded her head and took hold of her hand and pulled her toward the food.

As they sat down to eat, they were bombarded with questions about what they'd done the day before, all of which they took in stride. Adela was the one who asked the most important one though, "But you succeeded? They'll fight?"

"They mean to fight." Harry told them, "But they won't do it alone."

"Where to next, then?" Heiddi asked, the Northumbrian girl almost seemed eager for the news. The kingdom she came from was hotly contested between the Scots and Saxons, so he had to wonder if she had any personal interest. *But then, she doesn't seem to mind being here with Rowena, and she's a Scot, so... just a strong distaste for Causantain?*

It wasn't something he was going to get an answer to now though, because Rowena informed them, "Holmtown on Man. It's where the Norsemen settled there. There is a sturdy harbor along the River Neb for their longships." He knew it as Peel in his own time, but he couldn't say when the name changed.

While they knew they'd at least have Torgils to lean on in the Hebrides, that wasn't the case on Man. They would be going in blind to some extent, though they'd learned a bit from her uncle the night before. Tadc spoke up, "Gofraid rules there since the Norse were driven out of Dublin. He's one of the grandsons of Imar."

The name meant nothing to him, and if it meant anything to Rowena she didn't let it show, "Regardless, it's where we need to go." Tadc didn't look particularly pleased with that answer but didn't fight her on it either.

Harry felt a tug on the sleeve of his shirt, and he found Esla looking up at him with big eyes, "You'll be back again tomorrow though, right?"

"We'll do our best," he assured her, "but there's no way of knowing if things will go as smoothly." From the way that Tadc snorted at that, Harry figured he had a rather strong opinion that it wouldn't. Esla seemed to take that in stride, even if she didn't fully comprehend the scope of just what they were doing.

"Just be careful." Mairi said from Rowena's side to a general murmur of agreement.

"We will if you are." Rowena ruffled her hair, "And if you promise to practice while we're gone." Mairi nodded her head enthusiastically. Once they all finished their morning meals, their students, as they were, went about getting to work.

There was a quick conversation between Mairi and Rowena before the younger girl went off and retrieved her broom for them.

They moved to the edge of the wards together, and just like the day before they summoned a simple branch. Though this time, it was him that was casting the spell not her. He'd never been to Peel before, but he'd spent about a week hiding outside of Glen Maye just to the south of there. It was the closest they could get with a portkey and then it was only a quick broom ride from there.

With a simple pointing of his wand, the branch became a portkey. Before they left, there was a piercing, echoing screech followed by the departing frantic cries of some unfortunate critter. His companion gave him a little smile, "Well, sounds like Aerna found herself breakfast, too."

“I was never worried about that. I know that eagle can take care of herself.” Harry could only remember the warning he’d been given the first time he met her, and he was still certain it wasn’t an empty threat. Offering her the portkey, she took it and a few seconds later they were whisked away to the south.

This time, Rowena caught him before he even had a chance to stumble. Her hand was on his shoulder and kept him upright, “Thank you.” She gave him a smile as they looked around where they arrived. It was even less populated than his last time on the island. They were on a hill surrounded by low bushes and trees. In the near distance, they could just make out the rushing water of the glen. The clouds above their heads were dark, and there was a roll of thunder from the west.

“How far is it?” she asked, trying to hide the fact that she was nervous. *And I don’t think that it’s because of the impending storm.*

“Not far if I remember correctly. A couple miles at most.” That didn’t seem to set her at ease, and he could only think of one reason why. *Rowena Ravenclaw is scared of flying. Or at least heights.*

“Could just walk...” she mumbled under her breath, but another boom of thunder caused her to jump and think better of that idea. Offering him the broom, her hand shook slightly, “Do you think you could...” He took it without a second thought and threw his leg over the top. It certainly wasn’t his old Firebolt, but it would get the job done.

“Just sit in front of me,” he instructed, “I promise, I won’t let you fall.” He opened his arm to give her space, and she listened. Throwing her own leg over the broom, she nestled back into him as he circled his arms around her to keep her in place. There was a part of him, a rather big one, that couldn’t help but notice just how nicely she fit against him.

“Hold on tight,” she turned her face into his chest, just like they’d been when they woke and closed her eyes. Her right hand found his forearm and squeezed tightly. Pushing off the ground, there was a rush of air around them. He didn’t go too high, or too fast, but far faster than they could’ve gone on foot. Light rain started falling around them as he raced across the isle.

In their brief journey, he noticed that Rowena focused quite intently on her breathing and even took the chance to open her eyes. He knew because the grip on his arm became even tighter, but she didn’t close them again.

They crested a high hill, Peel Hill, just ten minutes later as the storm continued to pick up. Down below was Holmtown. Just off the coast and connected by a causeway was the Isle of St. Patrick where a cathedral sat, and Celtic round tower jutted up. In the harbor were rows of longships bobbing up and down in the harsh waves. Harry glided toward the banks of the River Neb and landed there.

Helping Rowena down, he shrunk the broom and stowed it within a pocket. They pulled their cloaks about themselves as the rain poured around them. A bolt of lightning lit up the dark sky, and Harry took her hand and led them into the town. There was no one out to speak to, the rain driving everyone inside. It didn’t deter them in the slightest.

Together, they made their way into the fishing village. The streets were narrow and muddy and there was fire light coming from more than one open doorway. They knew quite well that the first place to go to get information was the nearest tavern, and there was bound to be one near the harbor.

In the end, it wasn't that difficult to find. With the storm growing fiercer by the minute, there was no sane man out at sea, and so even early in the morning, people filled the building.

They could hear the ruckus coming from within even over the steady, heavy pitter-patter of the rain from a hundred yards away. Opening the door, they hurried in. The place was packed, filled with laughter and shouting. *It's barely morning, have they been going at it all night?*

There were men as old as sixty and young as thirteen if he were to guess. And far more men than women. There were warriors amongst them, with rings around their arms and weapons, whether it be axe, dirk, or sword, on their hip. There was a barmaid walking around with ale in her hand, passing them out as she went.

Rowena yelped and pressed in close to him. Looking around, Harry found her glaring at some bearded blonde man, no older than him, and a warrior if he were to guess, "Don't be like that." He told her trying to grab for her hip, "I was just trying to say hello." *Is he blind or just a fool?* Dropping his hood, Harry gave the man a look that could kill.

"Touch her again, and you'll lose the hand." The few people around them who paid them any mind all went quiet, at the severity of his threat... and the chilling calm with which he'd delivered it.

The only person who wasn't disconcerted by his threat was the man who should've been. Instead, he scoffed, looking him over with contempt, "Like you could." Harry could care less about being underestimated. Instead of wealth to show the scope of his experience, he had scars, and none of them were anywhere this numpty could see them.

Still, while he'd happily intervene on her behalf, he knew he wouldn't need to, "Who said anything about me?" He could feel Rowena's magic bubble to the surface, and anyone who was paying attention would've seen both of their eyes glowing in the low firelight of the tavern. That was enough to finally make the arrogant bastard see reason.

"Not worth the trouble," he relented, and pushed through the crowd. More than one person gave them a wide berth as they walked through the tavern. People watched them, curious, and he couldn't blame them considering they were strangers that arrived out of nowhere in the middle of a raging storm.

They made their way to the bar, and the woman behind it gave them a surprisingly cheery smile, when everyone else was so wary, "What can I get for ya?" She was maybe forty and plump around the middle.

"Nothing, I'm afraid," Harry told her, "But you can tell us where to find Gofraid." The woman frowned, clearly not the fondest of the man in question. *That seems to be the prevailing opinion.* At this point, he'd be foolish if it didn't worry him. Of all their potential allies, it was Gofraid who should be able to bring the greatest number to their side. *Save Harald from what Rowena said.* But he had his own concerns in Norway.

Regardless of her opinion, she didn't mind telling them what they needed to know, "He's in the same place he's been since he was driven out of Dublin, in his hall up the road, just turn right out the door. Shouldn't be too hard to find if you go looking." She couldn't hide her disdain, "And if I were you, I wouldn't. I'd steer well clear of him."

"I'm afraid, there's nothing for that." Harry dropped a silver coin down onto the counter. It was stamped with Causantain's relief on one side, "But thank you for the warning."

They left the tavern as quickly as they'd come. The rain was bucketing down outside, as they stood beneath the overhang, Rowena spoke up, "My uncle warned me that Gofraid is the unpleasant sort, but it seems he undersold him."

"Unpleasant or not, if what we offer is in his self-interest, he'll aid us." That didn't mean that he was remotely pleased with the prospect, but when the church inevitably stirred Causantain, they wouldn't be nearly as worried about the quality of their allies.

"I suppose we'll find out soon enough." She didn't sound entirely convinced, and he couldn't blame her. *I'm having a hard enough time convincing myself.*

They set off again, rain beating against their cloaks. The clouds above them were dark enough that anyone could be excused for thinking that it was night. They hastened down the road until they came across the hall. Larger than Jarl Asbjorn's in the Hebrides, it was alive with people. There were stables outside where the horses were huddling scared from the storm.

A massive crack of thunder shook the very ground around them as they stepped up to the door. A part of him wondered if that was a warning sent to them by Thor, but if it was, need ensured that he ignored it. Pushing open the door, the atmosphere inside wasn't dissimilar to the one in the tavern.

At the far end of the room, there was a man with dark hair, just beginning to gray at the temples with cold, grey eyes. Sitting in an ornate chair up on a dais, he was thin and tall looking out apathetically to the reverie that was going on around him. There was a young woman sitting in his lap, no more than fourteen or fifteen, and there were tears in her eye. Given there was a woman sitting to his left deliberately ignoring him, he didn't imagine that the younger girl was there by choice. There was an Irish wolfhound, brindle coated, and gnawing on a bone at his feet.

Before either of them had the chance to speak, his eyes were on them. Gofraid's voice was surprisingly high-pitched, and while he didn't yell, everyone fell silent, "I do not know you. What are you doing in my hall?" His eyes flicked between them, and he saw something in them when he looked at Rowena, a dark desire of a man who wasn't accustomed to being told no.

"We have news you will want to hear, lord." Rowena got right to the point, calm and respectful, "An opportunity."

"King, girl!" Gofraid snarled, while looking at Harry, judging him, "Do you let your woman speak for you? Any man that weak would surely sell her, too. How much?" Many of the men in the hall laughed at his expense, but it wasn't a joke. The woman on Gofraid's lap looked almost hopeful, while the woman at his side looked murderous. Harry's blood boiled, and he had to physically restrain himself from simply whipping out his wand and letting Death sort it out.

Toward the front of the room, sitting around a man of no more than sixteen with all Gofraid's bearing but none of his disposition, there was a group of men who didn't laugh at his insinuation. If anything, the good humor they'd had disappeared in an instant.

"She is **not** for sale." His voice radiated magic, and it took Rowena's hand on his shoulder to fully calm him.

Gofraid was unmoved by his anger, "Perhaps we should make the square instead, and I'll simply take her once you're dead."

Contemptible bastard. He was starting to understand why they'd been getting nothing but warnings about him since the day began. *And considering it'd barely been an hour, that really was saying something.* He was surprised to hear the echo of his seemingly ever-present companion then.

Patience.

He was never known for his patience and even the urging of that voice wasn't enough to make him see reason, "You..."

Before he got a chance to get going, the young man cut in, "Why are you here? What opportunity do you offer?"

Gofraid glared down at him, "Ragnall... quiet." But it seemed that his voice was respected by the others in the room, and the whispers that followed couldn't be ignored. So, finally he relented, "Speak!"

"The Bishop at St. Andrews has called for the eradication of the pagans in Scotia. The Christians have taken up the call... whether it be their fellow Scots or the Norse-Gael, they don't care." Harry explained, deliberately stepping in front of Rowena as he did, "The toiseach of the Highlands have fought back where they can, but they've been taken by surprise. They mean to fight this aggression, and it's only a matter of time before Causantain calls his men. He won't take it lying down. We mean to gather an army, and Jarl Asjborn has joined with us." There were murmurs amongst the men. Eager whispers at the thought of battle and blood, and the wealth that would come after.

"Last I heard, Asbjorn is a broken man often as not unable to lift his own cups, let alone his sword." Gofraid laughed mirthlessly, "You came like a beggar with his hand out, so I'd fight your battles for you."

"We came because Alba seems a better prize than Man, and since you've done nothing but wallow here since getting driven out of Dublin..." Harry knew he struck a nerve, as the man's eyes narrowed in fury. Though, he honestly didn't even know if it was true. *And I certainly don't mean for this bastard to take Scotland even if he does join us.*

"Careful, don't insult me again in my own hall." Gofraid warned, "You won't like the consequences." He thought himself threatening, and to most he would've been, but to Harry he would be nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

Everything about Gofraid irritated him, and, perhaps recklessly, he snapped back, "I don't fear the retribution of cowards. Nor fools, who can't see an opportunity for what it is." It was bold, maybe

too bold. He was surrounded by men that called this man their lord, but their laughter had long since died, and there was more than one of them looking at him with newfound respect.

Surging to his feet, he threw the girl in his lap to the ground. She whimpered and skittered away hiding behind the nearest pillar, "I'll have your head!" he roared, "And when I'm done with you, I'll fuck your whore bloody!" Most of the men in the hall looked at 'the king' as though he'd gone insane. Here he was, a renowned raider, rising to the challenge of somebody... meaningless, at least as far as they knew. Ending Harry's life would do nothing for Gofraid's reputation or wealth, and yet his rage, stoked by his own self-loathing for his failings, led him here.

"No." Harry's voice echoed in the silence that followed the outburst. A great white bolt of lightning lit up the world outside, "You'll die and spend eternity in the cold of Niflheim." For the first time since he entered the hall, he saw the woman at Gofraid's side look his way, and there was hope there. Ragnall, who he could only guess was the man's son, was silent... thinking. *Plotting if I were to guess.*

"Bring me my axe and my shield and make the square!" His voice cracked in his rage as he commanded his men. He strode down the long tables until he was standing face to face with Harry. He looked him over and smirked, "And a shield and axe for this little bastard as well. He doesn't seem to have any of his own." He gestured for a boy to come to his side and gave him a quick command that Harry didn't hear.

The doors were thrown open, the rain falling on the threshold, but no one seemed to give it any mind. Gofraid stepped past him and into the deluge. Men flowed out behind, shields in hand. Rowena took that moment to take hold of his arm, her voice was frantic, "What are you doing?"

If he was being perfectly honest with himself, he wasn't entirely sure. Still, he tried to come up with something to put her at ease, "What else is there to do, Row? He doesn't seem the sort of man to see reason. "

And in the end, none of them will wish to follow you into battle if you're without reputation. It was a good point, and one that he hadn't given any thought. Here they were gathering an army, but who would lead it? How many would fall to command when their only interest was the growth of their own wealth and reputation.

"Do you think they'll simply fall to your side after you kill their king?!" She tried to keep her voice even, but it quavered with worry, "Can you even fight?" He knew what she meant, he was formidable in a battle of magic, but this was something entirely different. *Not that I have any intention of fighting fair, mind.*

"Some might not, but these men are looking for a fight... and Ragnall seems agreeable to the idea. So, get rid of the father and we might find an ally in the son." Rowena bit her bottom lip, worrying it between her teeth. It was touching that she was so concerned for his safety, he knew that he'd be no better if the roles were reversed, "Everything will be fine, I promise." It was the second time he'd made a promise to her that day, and he punctuated it by leaning and placing a kiss to the top of her head. He didn't get the chance to appreciate the blush it brought to her pale cheeks.

“Bastard!” Gofraid roared, “Come and die!” He was standing in a square of his own men, ash branches at their feet, shirtless with an axe in one hand and a round shield in the other. His hair was matted down to his head from the rain.

Waiting for him at the door was the boy, no more than nine, holding a battered shield and a blunt axe. *Is that your game, really?* The child looked afraid as he handed Harry the weapons, but he just smiled. Gofraid howled, like he was celebrating Harry’s obvious stupidity. Dogs barked in return, and everyone was so caught up in the sudden spectacle that no one noticed as Harry exerted some small extent of his magic. The blade of the axe became razor sharp, and the wood of the shield didn’t visibly change, but he knew it wouldn’t splinter any further.

As Harry stepped out into the muddy yard, men stepped up behind him to complete the square. The first blow came faster than he expected, flashing through the air and shaking his body from his forearm all the way to his shoulder. The crowd roared at the spectacle.

Gofraid was a warrior of many battles, he’d stood in the heat and blood of the shield-wall and honed himself in it. Even if he disliked the man, there was no denying the skill. But, that didn’t mean he had any intention of losing either. The axe bashed against his shield, again and again, and he weathered it. Their footing was unsure, their movements stilted by the soft ground though neither of them slipped.

Harry didn’t swing back, hiding behind a shield he knew wouldn’t break and waiting for an opportunity. Every strike of the axe was met with the roar of the crowd around them. They were buying for blood, his blood. They wouldn’t have it, though, and they’d be happier for it.

Growing frustrated with his defense, Gofraid screamed and brought his axe down from above his head, a mighty blow that reverberated through Harry’s whole body... and lodged into the wood of the shield. Thunder rolled low and menacing as he took the opportunity. Bringing his own axe up hard, he pulled his shield toward him at the same time, sending his opponent off balance. The shaft of his axe met Gofraid’s a massive *thwack*. It was wrench from his hand and went tumbling into the mud.

Punching out with his shield, Harry caught Gofraid beneath the chin, there was a weak crunch as bone broke. As he brought the axe up in a low arc, there was a soft thud as it passed through flesh and blood and lodged deep in his enemy’s lung. A last crack of thunder rattled the world around him, farther away now and the rain petered out to a drizzle as Gofraid growled furious. It fell away to a gurgle as he spat out blood into his beard.

The excitement, the haze, of battle dropped away as he went through his death throes. He looked around desperately for his axe, for the promise of Valhalla, but he wouldn’t find it. Harry pulled the axe free and all the air left Gofraid. The light left his eyes a second later when the axe found home again in his clavicle. Blood spurted from the wound as he pulled the axe-head free, and it landed across Harry’s arm and face. The Norseman’s lifeless body wobbled for just a second before he fell backward into the muddy earth, dead.

Silence, that’s what followed. It was broken by the splashing of feet and then he was hugged about the hips and pulled close. He wrapped an arm around Rowena but didn’t drop his weapons. Looking around the group of warriors, he was ready for a fight that never came. Most of the men were

looking toward Ragnall who stepped forward, retrieved his father's axe, placed it on his chest, and closed his eyes.

It was only then that he looked to Harry, "He was a great raider once, a man to follow... but that was years ago. Still, tonight, we'll feast him." He expected people to cheer, but no one did. Instead, they just listened.

"And what will you do tomorrow?" There was every possibility he would speak of blood feuds and revenge, but he thought it unlikely. *Not every son loves their father... and I'd wager say there's was worse than mere apathy.*

"I'm not my father," Much as he looked it, Harry had to agree, "I'm no fool who'll ignore an opportunity. So, tomorrow we'll prepare for war." That brought the cheer he expected.

In the clangor and excitement, Ragnall stepped over to him, "Thor watched your battle, in the thunder and the rain. And Gofraid was a name known to many... People will tell the story."

"Good."

For the first time, he saw Ragnall smile, "I didn't get your name."

"Harry."

"Well, Harry," he said it loud enough that the other men heard it clearly, "I look forward to joining you in battle." With that he went over to the woman who'd been by Gofraid's side, Ragnall's mother if he was reading things right, and guided her inside. There wasn't a single tear in her eye.

On the horizon, light peaked through and bathed the coast in orange and yellow as the storm finally broke. Men gathered Gofraid's body as Harry finally dropped the axe and shield. Rowena pulled away from his chest and looked up at him, "I'm starting to believe that story of the basilisk, because surely you are the most foolhardy, lucky man ever born."

Harry burst out in laughter, and she couldn't help but join him, "It's been quite the morning, hasn't it."

"Mad and maddening." She gave him a little smile, and he couldn't help but agree. It'd been a hectic to say the least, and far from straight-forward... but, they'd achieved what they came to do. *Faster and bloodier than I would've hoped though.*

CHAPTER 9

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 been 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 laid 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 it. 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 up three of them in a cacophony of screams that were quickly snuffed out. 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 spell. 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 hurried over, 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 just not yet. 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, “Arnel 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.”

Arnkell 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.

CHAPTER 10

"Come on, pull!" Arnkel tried to rally the men on his side.

There was cheering in the yard of Varrich. It echoed all around the stronghold. Men were pressed in tight whether it was in the yard or on the ramparts, it didn't matter. There were even some children that had climbed onto the thatched roof of the stable. All of them watched as eight men a side pulled a rope above an open fire, each side trying to drag the other in.

There were men of the Highlands, Man, the Hebrides and the Orkneys all amongst the men competing. It had nothing to do with where they were from, and everything to do with building some rapport amongst disparate factions that had raided and fought against each other in the past. *And it seems to be going a far bit better out here than in there.*

Standing on the side, Harry watched and knew who had the advantage. While Arnkel pulled on one side, and was admittedly an imposing man to face, the other was anchored by Torgils. *And I'm pretty sure he could bend steel with his bare hands given the opportunity.*

Rowena's uncle just stood at the end of his men, feet dug in, entirely unmoving. It didn't even look like a strain for him. As he looked around the crowd, it was as though he didn't have a care in the world. When Harry caught his eye, he just raised one eyebrow and gestured his head as if to say, "Come on then."

His laughter carried over the roar of the crowd, even as he wrapped the end of the rope around his arm. Putting his whole body into the effort, he dragged the other side through the fire with one massive yank. They fell forward with a yell of panic, but everybody came away unscathed from the flames.

Torgils beat his chest for the crowd before grabbing a massive flagon of ale. The big man downed it without coming up for air and that only sent them off into another round of cheering. He tipped it toward Harry before joining with his fellow victors in celebration.

With a wry smile, Harry made his way through the crowd toward the hall. It was no simple thing as he weaved and occasionally pushed his way through, but he managed to make it to the doors and slip inside. It was not the fairest hall he'd visited in recent days, but there were long tables and a deer roasting slowly over the fire, so he couldn't scoff at it.

The room was far from full, but the people that were there were of some importance. Jarls Thorfinn, Ragnall, and Ansbjorn were there, as were Inan and Gamelin. There were seven other Taoiseachs there too. One was no older than fifteen, his name was Aengus and Harry wasn't sure if he'd said a word from the moment he'd arrived, while the oldest looked near enough eighty and was called, Rhun. Since his and Rowena's arrival two days prior, he hadn't gotten all their names, but he had gotten those two.

"There's no need to march all the way across the Highlands for days, only to meet them weak and tired." Thorfinn's voice carried over the soft murmurings in the room. It was the same argument that had been going on for days even when it was only Ansbjorn that first arrived in Varrich.

There was one other person in the room, standing against the wall, watching everything with a careful eye. Rowena tapped her foot irritably on the ground and a rather fierce looking scowl on her lips. She looked about ready to burst with frustration.

Making his way over, he leaned against the wall right next to her, "I take it things aren't going well."

She scoffed, "They're talking in circles. Every time it seems like some progress is made one of them raises another issue that put them right back where they started."

The conversation was still going on around them as they spoke amongst themselves, "You're welcome to take your men and sail them to Dundee," Rhun's voice was raspy and labored, as though he were constantly fighting the urge to cough, "or up the Firth of Tay to Perth, or even St. Andrews if you want, but our men won't be joining you." It didn't look like all the others agreed but there were a few nods.

“You’ll be worse for it,” Ragnall interjected. He’d had the furthest to sail and had been the last to arrive because of it, “What men remain to you will be weary from the march, Thorfinn is right. They’d be better served joining with us, manning our ships and sailing along the eastern coast.”

Trying to give her something to smile about, he told her, “Well, at least the men outside are finding fast friends.”

“If only this lot would realize that and put an end to this nonsense.” Rowena whispered, “Brining them together was one thing, even with a common purpose, getting them to truly work together is another thing entirely.”

“So you’ve said,” There was distrust obvious in Inan’s voice, “But what’s to stop you from sailing further east right along to your homes in Denmark or sailing west to your kin in Ireland? You could make slaves us without so much as a fight if we step one foot on your ships.”

Ragnall banged his hand down hard on the table, hard enough that it silenced the other murmurs in the hall, “I didn’t come here to be insulted. Throw them around again, and I’ll sail my men right back where they came.”

“No, you came for wealth and reputation...” Gamelin murmured. The young jarl looked murderous but didn’t get a chance to retort.

“You question our motivations,” Ansbjorn spoke up before Ragnall could get going, “What course we might take that would only advantage us, but what of you?” He stood and leaned across the table, looking each Scot in the eye in turn, “If we sail down to St. Andrews ahead of your march, what’s to keep you from holding back, eh? You could wait for us to die in our hundreds and weaken Causantin only to join the fighting when it’s nearly done.”

The simple truth was that while they were joined in cause, that didn’t mean they trusted one another. *And without a clear leader, there’s no one to put those worries to rest.* The hall devolved into shouting and Harry only sighed.

The witch next to him was tired of their stupidity though, and could no longer hold her tongue, “Enough of this!” Her voice carried over all of them like a boom, and they turned to her utterly shocked, “The Danes and the Norse haven’t left their homes just to secret you away to a slave market in Ireland.” She glared at the Taoiseachs, and none had the stones to meet her eye, “And nor did they come for reputation and wealth alone...”

“Even if it doesn’t hurt,” Erlend was there, sitting next to his brother, a cup of ale in his hand that had been seen off at least half a dozen times already. No one paid his slurred words any mind. *More’s the better.*

Harry wasn’t going to sit there and let Rowena take their irritation alone, “They came because they mean to defend themselves, their way of life, and their gods, same as you. They’re not fool enough to think this holy retribution called for by the bishop will stop at the Highlands.”

“And you,” Rowena turned her ire toward the Norsemen, “they’ve just lost their homes and those they love to people who were their friends, their neighbors. Do you really think they mean to cheat you when you’ve come to their aid?”

“They...” Ragnall made to interrupt.

“They’ve watched the gods of their fathers become nothing more than stories little by little, and they are the few that still hold to them. Unless you make this stand, how long until the same happens to you?” Harry couldn’t help the cold fury that tinged every word, “How many churches are there now in Denmark? Norway? All the time, you let more of your people fall to the influence of Rome. How long until your children or their children wear a crucifix around their neck rather than Thor’s hammer?”

Ansbjorn looked more shamefaced than any of the others. Because in his heart, he knew how close he’d come to converting thanks to Gideon’s machinations. But none of them were wholly innocent of Harry’s accusation. More churches sprung up in their homelands with each passing decade and while few of the jarls had adopted the religion, they allowed priests and monks to make homes in their lands. It was the same mistake that the Saxons made when the missionaries first came from the continent.

“Every day you sit here, bickering like children,” Rowena’s scorn was a thing to behold, and he couldn’t imagine that any of her student’s would want to face it, “is another day’s delay where Causantin and Cellach are given time to prepare.”

“We’ve joined together here faster than they could’ve anticipated, the worst thing we can do is lose that advantage.” His statement hung in the air with a physical weight as every man was cowed into silence.

It was Gamelin who finally had the nerve to speak up, “Were it not for you two, none of this would even be happening!”

“Which you knew from the beginning, and yet you agreed.” Harry reminded the man, “And the truth is, you should be thanking us. We’ve given you a gift, a chance to fight against the tide on your feet with sword in hand rather than face the slow death of their sermons and conversions.”

It was only then that the youngest of the Scots spoke up. He spoke slowly, as though he were worried that his voice was crack, “We’ll sail... at least the men with me will sail!” He nodded at the jarls across from him, “I don’t believe they’ve come to cheat us and they’re right, it will save the strength of every warrior who goes.”

“Aye...” Inan agreed with the younger man, barely a man at that. Each of the others agreed as well with Rhun as the last. The stubborn old man had faced raids in his life, from the Hebrides and Man, but even he could see sense in setting that aside.

They were interrupted then as the doors opened and in stepped Heiddi. Harry wasn’t expecting to see her, certainly not so soon. The Northumbrian girl volunteered to go to Perth, so that they could have some knowledge of Causantin’s plans. *Not that I was happy about it, but she did remind me she was plenty old enough to make up her own mind about such things.* He’d given her a portkey to return when she had news.

Coming to his side, she leaned into to tell him, “Causantin knows that we’re gathered here. He sent out riders from Scone this morning to call his men to arms. The people say they’ll be gathered within a week, maybe sooner.”

“Thank you.” While he trusted her to keep herself safe, he was glad that she was back.

“Plenty of men joined up to attack the highlands, so it’ll be no short march for them back to Scone.” Rowena heard every word that Heiddi said, same as him.

“What news?” Thorfinn watched their exchange with a keen eye.

“Causantin knows that we’ve gathered and he’s raising his army in response.” Harry told them. There were murmurs between the men, but it was Ragnall who spoke up.

“Then the sooner we sail the better! We sail up the Firth of Tay, and from there meet them in the field.” He seemed excited at the prospect of battle, “But tonight we feast because tomorrow we head for war!” The news spread quickly from the hall out into the yard. That much was obvious as the commotion of their revelry only grew louder.

“I will make the sacrifice,” Rowena told them, and from her tone there was no use arguing on the matter. Harry knew that there would be a sacrifice to the gods, he just didn’t realize it would be her that did it.

“Good, Odin preserve us if we forgot to honor the gods!” Thorfinn stood. Halland was behind him, as always, but had been largely quiet throughout the meeting, “We’re in agreement then. I’ll inform my oarsmen” There was an unspoken ‘finally’ there that Harry couldn’t help but agree with.

The noblemen, as they were, all parted then each to make the necessary preparations amongst their own men. It left Harry and Rowena alone with Heiddi in the hall. After a moment of indecision, the young woman told them, “I think I should go back. I won’t even need to fly now that I’ve been there once.”

“You’ve already told us what we need to know, what more could you learn?” It wasn’t that Harry didn’t appreciate her efforts, quite the opposite in fact, but the longer she spent there the greater danger of her being discovered.

“If I return, there’s every possibility I might learn where they mean to meet you in the field... it could be the difference between victory and defeat.” Unlike many of the others that they saved, Heiddi wasn’t really a child, and it did them no good to treat her like one.

That didn’t mean he liked it though, “You’ve never been to Dundee, how would you find us?”

“I know Dundee is east of Perth,” She took his obvious concern in stride, “And a ruddy great army shouldn’t be that hard to find from on top of a broom.”

It was a fair point, and Harry couldn’t find a ready retort. Rowena chuckled beside him, and finally told her, “Go, but keep your wits about you and stay away from any priests. If you think there’s even the slightest chance that you’ve been discovered, you use a portkey and bring yourself straight back here.” She wasn’t even that much older than the other young woman, but there was a distinct respect given from one to the other, “I’d rather not attack another monastery to come save you again.”

Heiddi didn't look convinced, and couldn't quite hide her snort of amusement, "Yes because it was such a torment for you... and I'm sure there will be no more monasteries burned during this campaign of yours."

"I didn't say that." Rowena smiled, "I'd just prefer if you weren't one of the people there when it happens."

"I won't be, I promise." It was said with a deep conviction, one that spoke to the years she'd already spent suffering, "I don't plan on spending another second of my life with those bastard monks."

"Good, as long as we understand each other." Rubbing her arm, Rowena told her, "Now go, no use waiting around here... unless you meant to stick around for the feasting?"

That brought her up short and she smiled, "Well... maybe I'll wait until the morning?"

"That's what I thought..." With that she turned away from them and headed out into the yard.

Rowena took a deep breath and ran her hand along her face, "What a day..."

"Better than yesterday." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a side hug, "They're in agreement now, and the promise of battle in just a few short days will give them focus."

"I know, but the problem still remains." There was an odd look in her eye as she told him, "They need a leader, someone who commands respect, someone they'll listen to... someone that's neither Scot nor Norse nor Dane and yet is here to fight all the same. Someone who's already started building a reputation for themself."

He could see where she was going with that line of thought, and he didn't like it one bit, "Sounds like you're talking about yourself, Row."

That made her smile, as she leaned into his shoulder, "I'm not the one who killed Gofraid man to man."

"No, I guess you're not... but I wager you could've if given the chance." He knew that she was right, at least about the need for a leader. *I just don't think it needs to be me.* He'd tried to be that for people in the past, and it led to a lot of death.

"With a wand, sure." She giggled, "But not with an axe." Her hand rested against his chest, just over his heart and she gave it a pat, "Now, I need to go and prepare."

Harry didn't know exactly what the sacrifice would entail, but he had the patience to wait and find out for himself when the time came. He watched her go, his eyes drifting to the sway of her hips as she headed out. He had to rouse himself with a little shake of his head. *Not the time Potter.*

For a few minutes, he just sat there in the hall alone. The only company he had was when the pit master came in to turn the meat. There was a great cheer from outside, no doubt the end to another of the games that was taking place and the next moment the doors were thrown open. It was Torgils followed by a whole host of other men, the smell of juicy meat drawing them in.

They filled the tables as the big man came to his side. With a clap on his back that felt like it could have snapped his spine, he gave a full-bellied laugh, "You missed the best of it, but not for nothing! Things are finally settled?"

"After Rowena dressed them down a bit, yes." Harry told him, unable to hide his genuine fondness for her.

He laughed again, "Sounds like her mother then! I'd expect nothing less!"

As Torgils downed another great mouthful of ale, Harry was surprised as somebody knocked into his other side, "Euan?" He'd barely seen hide or hair of the young man all day, but he looked a bit haggard and a bit frantic, "What's going on?"

"Nothing... uh nothing at all... I was just hoping you could come with me for a bit." He tried to sound nonchalant about it, but there was an underlying nervousness that he just couldn't hide.

"Go, see what the boy's done. Just be back quickly as you can." Torgils told him without even looking over, "My niece won't be happy if you aren't here to honor the gods."

Confident that he was right about that, Harry threw his leg over the bench and hopped out of his seat before saying to Euan, "Alright, let's go."

Together they made their way out of the hall, and out of Varrich entirely. The encampment they'd set up for their young charges was along the coast between Tongue and the fortification, away from where the ships were anchored, and it was there that Euan took him. They considered keeping them in the forest, far away from everything, but there was no telling if more men had been sent to find Rowena and they weren't willing to risk it. *Not to mention they were rather insistent and far too curious for their own good.*

Euan didn't say a word on the way there, and seemed to grow quicker with every step until he was nearly jogging as they neared the encampment. While he feared no foul play from the men they'd gathered, there was no telling who else might have fled in secret with the Highlanders, and so they'd taken the precaution of setting up wards.

As they passed through them, he found a weight pressing against his leg. It'd become so common, he didn't even think as he placed his hand on Esla's head, "Alright, we're here... now show me what you're up to."

Euan made a face, "I'm not up to anything... it's someone else that was up to something." He walked over to one of the tents and Harry couldn't help but notice it seemed that Halig, Culen, and Adela were all standing guard at the sides of it. *Oh gods, this can't be good.*

Leaning in, he found a man bound, gagged and seemingly unconscious. He was no older than Harry with sandy brown hair and a patchy beard. He was wearing robes, but they didn't appear to be those of a monk. Harry could feel a headache coming on, "Euan... please explain?"

"He's been following us. I noticed him yesterday while I was in Tongue and Culen and Rorik saw him again today. Every time that one of us slips away from the camp he's been there not far from the wards." He offered Harry a wand. It had the marks of a fine craftsman, and Harry could only guess

that it was made by whichever of Ollivander's ancestors was around in London at the time, "He had this. We figured he was with the Church, and so..."

"Instead of getting me or Rowena so we could deal with it, you decided to take matters into your own hands." It wasn't a criticism, just an observation of what actually happened. It didn't change the fact that Euan looked down and wouldn't quite meet his eye. With a sigh, Harry placed a hand on his shoulder, "And it looks like you did a damn good job of it, too. You did well, I'm not upset, just worried." He smiled at each of them, "Trust me, I know that I can't be around to protect you all the time, sometimes you'll only have yourselves to rely on."

The tension left Euan's body as he finally looked at him, relieved. Harry learned a long time ago, that no matter how much he wanted to, there was no way that he could protect everyone that he cared about all the time. *Sometimes you have to trust them to do it for themselves.*

"Let's get to the bottom of this then." With a wave of his hand, the man levitated out of the tent, and Harry propped him against the rocky outcrop. Removing the gag, he enervated him. His eyes flew open, and he tried to struggle free to no avail.

Flailing around wildly for a moment, he finally stilled when he noticed Harry looming over him, "Let me go!" His voice cracked in fear, "I've done nothing!"

"I might... once you tell me who you are and what you're doing tailing this lot." He gestured to the group of young magicals around him.

"I wasn't tailing them... not really... I was just trying to talk to one of them."

"You have an odd way of going about it." Euan mumbled under his breath.

Harry could care less about his methods so long as they didn't hurt anyone, he was more curious about his reason, "Why?" He was willing to give the man a chance to explain before he simply took the answers from his mind.

"So, I could get one of them to talk to you!" That wasn't the answer that he was expecting, "You and the witch, Rowena have made quite a reputation for yourselves and it's causing problems."

"Problems? For who?" He felt entirely lost in this conversation.

"Why the Wizard's Council, of course." He made it sound as though that were obvious, but Harry only had a vague recollection of them. He knew they were the predecessor to the Ministry, but he didn't think they'd been founded quite yet. *Apparently, I was wrong.*

"They dispatched me to issue a summons." He sounded far too jolly about that job, and Harry found it incredibly grating and vaguely reminiscent of Percy and his brownnosing, "You and the witch, Rowena are required to present yourselves before the council within a fortnight to explain your flagrant use of magic, open incitement of the Church, and general meddling with muggles."

Harry managed to hide it, but he was genuinely gobsmacked by this supposed summons. It begged the question of how they knew about their movements to begin with, let alone so quickly, and where they thought they had any authority over either of them to make such a demand. *Not to mention the Statue of Secrecy won't exist for a good few centuries still, so what business is it of theirs?*

Taking a step closer to the man, the smile fell from his face at Harry's obvious anger, "What's your name?"

He blustered and stuttered for a moment before finally getting out, "Ecbert."

"Well, Ecbert, you can return to your council and tell them that they can take their summons and shove it right up their arses." More than one of the kids giggled at that, and he had to look around to shush them, "I'm sure I'll make it to London someday, and when I do, I'll be sure to pay them a visit."

"That's preposterous!" Ecbert raged impotently, "You can't simply ignore the Wizard's Council!"

"They're welcome to try forcing me..." The air became thick with magic as a smile came to his lips. It was dangerous, one that promised pain for anyone that tried. From the way Ecbert cowered away from him, he understood, "But it won't go well for them if they do."

With that, Harry severed the ropes that held him, "Now go... head back and tell your masters."

He hurried to his feet and made to beat a hasty retreat before he remembered something, "My wand..."

"Is no longer yours. It was won from you fairly by this lot." Euan gave him a cheeky wave that made Ecbert flush in anger, "You'll have to make your way back the long way."

He muttered under his breath as he whipped around, and Harry was sure that he heard the word, "Bastards..." before he stepped out of the ward and they could no longer hear him.

Euan spoke up cautiously then, "Was it wise to let him go back to them?"

"It'll make little difference because by tomorrow we'll be gone from here." They started muttering amongst themselves at the news.

"Back to the forest then?"

"Aye, for now. Causantin called his army to Scone. That should leave the Highlands safe, and best not to have you in the middle of a battle." Euan looked like he wanted to argue, but Harry squeezed shoulder, "Now come, there's a feast to be had."

Together, they made their way up to the fortress where the festivities were in full swing. Ale was drunk, food was eaten, and good time was had by all whether Scot, Norse, or Dane as the sun slowly made its way closer to the horizon.

As night fell, and the moon hung high in the sky a great pyre was built in the center of the yard. The people from Tongue lined the weathered track that led up to the fortress. Every fighting man, thousands strong in their number filled the fortress as the fire was lit. The Jarls and the Taoiseachs were all there, each on either side of the yard together.

And then she came up through the gates looking for all the world like something out of a story. Her gown was like silver starlight. Her feet were bare as she glided across the yard. One side of her face was painted blue, dark as the color of her eyes. Upon her head was a crown of pale white wood, dotted with new spring flowers. In one hand she carried a rope that was wrapped around the neck of a powerful ox. In the other was a knife, sharp and polished glinting in the light of the fire.

The beast made no protest as it was led right up to the fire. Every man, woman and child was silent as Rowena spoke, her voice echoing in the silence of the night, “We make this offering to the gods... to Odin, and Freyja... to the Morrigan and Neit... We give it that every warrior here finds good fortune in the battles to come. And should you fall let Valhalla... or Mag Mell await you.”

With that, she dragged the knife along the ox’s throat. The blood, crimson red, poured over her hand. The beast faltered, its legs giving way as it fell lifeless to the ground. The fire behind her roared, the light growing almost blinding. Many looked away, but Harry couldn’t take his eyes off her.

When she spoke again, it was as though another spoke with her. Her voice took on a depth and power that shook every person there to their core, “**Be a scourge unto the usurpers, the Christians that have taken your gods from the hearts and minds of your kinsman, Scot, Dane, and Norsemen alike. Remind them of the gods of their forebears! Of their might and glory... and when the time comes their grace as well. A heart and mind once turned can be turned again.**” Rowena’s eyes danced with the light of the fire, flashes of brilliant red, deep orange and flecks of bright blue reflecting in their depths.

She found him in the crowd as though she already knew where to look. Step by step, she made her way over to him, not a word passing amongst the crowd. She stared into his eyes as she brought her blood-covered hand to his temple. It was hot to the touch still, as though it had only freshly come from the ox’s veins. Gently, she dragged her fingers along his face.

Rowena gave him the faintest of smiles, the fire still dancing in her eyes as it roared bright and hot once more. It shouldn’t have been possible and yet it was there, he could see it. And then it stilled, the very air around them going quiet. Then she faltered, falling against him unconscious.

As he caught her the crowd grew loud as all wondered at what they’d just witnessed.

CHAPTER 11

The crisp air of the spring sea washed over his face as the ship cut through the water. The sea and the winds were kind to them, and they were making quick progress along the eastern shore of the island because of it.

Leaning over the side, Harry watched the Scottish coast pass them by as the winds pushed them along. Rowena was by his side, deep in contemplation, just as she had been since she woke from the night of the sacrifice. He didn’t push her, didn’t question her, despite his own desire to find answers.

Jarl Ansbjorn walked from the prow of the ship back to them at the stern. He looked between them almost reverentially before speaking nervously, “We’ll be at the Firth of Tay within the hour, and be outside of Dundee shortly after that...” He lingered, waiting for their word.

“Thank you, lord. If that’s all?” He dismissed the man and he returned to the prow as quickly as he came.

Nudging Rowena’s shoulder with his own, he said, “You know this is your fault.” The ship turned as the firth came into view. It wouldn’t be long before they had the earth beneath their feet again.

It took her a long moment, but she finally looked at him, her brow furrowed and her dark-blue eyes curious, "What's my fault?"

"Two days now, I've had people coming to me, whether it's the jarls or their men. All of them looking for my opinion or just trying to keep me in the know." They hadn't been distrustful of him before but since the night of the sacrifice, they'd been looking to him for guidance and leadership. It wasn't something that Harry wanted, but with the things that they'd done it felt unavoidable.

He expected to get a chuckle out of her, or at the very least a smile, but she just frowned, "It suits you... leadership, I mean. And these men will be better off if they have one voice to turn to, one person to trust."

There was a part of him that disagreed with that sentiment rather harshly, but only because he could remember what became of the last group of people he tried to lead. *Not this time though, things will be different.* And it wasn't just him this time, it was the pair of them.

"Besides, better their respect than their reverence." Rowena lamented. The people, whether Norse, Dane, or Scot, moved out of her path wherever she walked from the moment she woke the morning of their departure. She didn't care for it, preferring when people paid her little mind. *Though, she was happy that our students treated her no differently beyond a new curiosity.*

"And you still don't remember any of it?" It was that which worried her more than anything. Rowena remembered nothing from the moment the ox's blood poured over hand until waking in bed the next morning with Harry worried at her side.

"No, I don't. I've tried to wrack my mind for even a whisper of the memory, but there's nothing." It was something that no one who witnessed it would forget until the rigors of time stole it from them, but the person at its center would not. And for Rowena, that was simply unacceptable. She was a woman who prided herself on her knowledge, on her wit, and yet someone or something stole her voice without an ounce of struggle.

"Best not to dwell on it," Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder and hugged her to his side, "all you can do is live in the here and now and hope that you find an answer in the future." It was the same thing he told himself after walking through Death's Gate.

That finally made her smile, "I suppose you're right, we're only days away from battle. It'd be foolish to let anything else distract me from it." There was an unsaid 'for now' at the end, and he knew that this wasn't something that she could let lie forever. *Eventually, she'll want to find an answer, and I'll be sure to help.*

They remained like that, as the waters of the firth rippled around them. It wasn't long from their entrance into the waterway before they reached the town of Dundee. There were bells from within as they passed, men rousing along the wooden walls that surrounded it, but they had nothing to fear. They passed Dundee by some distance before they made ground on the Dog Bank not far from a small village called Grange. It was half the distance between Dundee and Perth.

They were well practiced in anchoring the ships, and within two hours every fighting man had made his way to shore. The first of them were the Scots, they didn't have their sealegs and Harry saw more than one of them lose their meals.

A perimeter was set with guards set to the ships by the time the leaders of their army gathered together, "There were few men in Dundee, their defenses looked sparse at best," Ragnall spoke up first, "There's little chance they could rouse enough men to attack us here, but our ships will be vulnerable while we're in the field." He looked to Harry for his opinion, they all did. *This... is going to take some getting used to.*

These weren't scared teenagers on the run for their lives looking to him for leadership simply because he'd seen the most horror in life. These were fighting men, men who'd seen battle and bloodshed with people of their own who called them lords, but still they turned to Harry.

"Enough men will remain here to keep them safe should they try anything." He knew that the ships were nearly as valuable to the Norse and Danes as their men. *And I'll be sure to leave a bit of magical protection for them as well.*

"We've sent out riders." Thorfinn told him, "Hopefully they'll find out where Causantin is camping his army, maybe even have an idea of where he intends to fight."

"They may not be necessary, there's one of my own already in Perth who should get to us first." As reluctant as he was for her to return, he had every confidence that Heiddi would arrive with the army before any one of their scouts could return. *I wouldn't be surprised if she's already making her way here.*

"Should we march, then?" Gamelin questioned.

"As soon as possible, yes. There's a risk waiting here by the sea that they might catch us unawares," Rowena answered him, "That they could drive us back to the ships. It would be best to make camp elsewhere." The Dog Bank wasn't completely undefendable, but they certainly wouldn't have the advantage if they found themselves attacked by Causantin.

Further inland the land turned into green hills, they'd be far better off at the top of one of them. It wouldn't take a long march, an hour or bit more to reach the ones in the near distance. Nodding his agreement, Harry set them to task, "Gather your men and ready them to move and set about a guard for the ships. We can't lose them if a retreat is necessary." He knew that retreat would be disastrous, that it would mean a crushing victory for the church, but he needed to accept that it was a possibility, too.

"We'll see it done." Ragnall agreed with no complaint from any of the other lords there. They left him and Rowena behind. The two of them just watching as men made ready for the march ahead.

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" Rowena asked him softly, her eyes taking it all in, "It wasn't that long ago that I hadn't even met you... a fortnight ago, I was happy to stay in my little home beside the lake with nothing but you and Aerna for company... And now... now here we are with an army."

"I know." But he couldn't help but think that a victory against the King of Scotland would only be the beginning. There were Christian Kings to the south in England, across the Irish Sea in Ireland, and across the Channel in Europe, and he couldn't help but wonder if they would let this stand. *Even if they wanted to, the priests in their ear will speak of retribution, and glory, and the death of pagans.*

“It isn’t what I expected for myself. But I can’t say I’m disappointed... we’ve done good, and if this is the cost of saving those children... I’d do it again, whatever end comes of it.” She grabbed his hand, it was small and soft in his, “And I want you to know how glad I am that you stumbled upon me that day.”

“So, do you trust me now then?” He couldn’t help but tease her.

She rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t hide the beaming smile on her lips. It was more than enough answer for him, “It’s getting there.” The smile fell though as she continued, “I think about how things might’ve been if I hadn’t met you. The Church very nearly captured me with Mairi, and I shudder to think what would’ve become of me.”

That simple thought gave Harry pause. He’d not considered that his actions had effectively kept her out of the clutches of the church, but he knew the history of the founders well enough that there was no mention of Rowena Ravenclaw being held captive. *But then, Hogwarts: A History was more concerned with the founding and the feats that followed. It didn’t discuss their young lives.*

Perhaps she would’ve escaped without my presence. Still, there was something that rang hollow about that reasoning in his own head, but he doubted that he’d ever know the whole truth of it. There wasn’t exactly anyone around who could give him the answers when the world and history that he wanted to know was being reshaped around him.

“You would’ve survived.” He assured her, honestly believing it, “You’re too strong not to.” She squeezed his hand tighter as she looked at him with her big, blue eyes.

The moment came to an end as her uncle joined them there, “Come on then, you two. You brought this army together, you ought to be marching with it.” He was right, the army they built was ready to move, ever closer to battle.

They made the march amongst the men, beside her uncle for a time. They came upon no resistance, no sign of the enemy as they made their way further inland, toward Perth. It took just over an hour before they found a suitable hill. It was large with a rather flat surface that let you see out along the Firth of Tay.

Camp was made, tents erected, and fires lit as the day slowly faded into night. Harry found himself nearly in the center of the camp, his tent bigger than he would’ve expected before the events of the sacrifice. The smell of fire roasted meat filled the air as the leaders of their army sat together, waiting.

“There’s been no news from the scouts yet, but it’ll only take time.” Thorfinn reported, “We know he called his men, and there’s only so many places to hide an army.” Harry had little doubt that they’d have the news they were after soon. It would only be a short while before Heiddi heard of their arrival, and as she said, it wasn’t hard to find an army from the sky, even in the dark.

“We should make the battleground a place of our choosing.” Harry commented, even if it was obvious. None of them knew this part of the country as well as their adversaries. Even the men of the highlands rarely left them.

Though, that wasn't true for all of them. Ansbjorn was the oldest of them and had raided in the heart of Scotland in his time more than any of them. And so, he had an idea, "I've raided at Perth before in the time of Causantin's father when I was a younger man. We came in numbers, but nothing so great as this. They hid themselves in Muirward Wood east of the hill where Scone sits, they caught us unaware. Harder to hide this army though."

"There are a dozen valleys and hills between here and the city," Ragnall said, "It will be hard to draw them to just one. And there's nothing to stop them from retreating and holing up in one of their cities should the battle go poorly for them."

"They're looking for open battle, same as us." Rowena reasoned. Not a man among them questioned her presence at their war counsel, "They're enraged by the attack on their monastery, by the impassioned words of the bishop. They don't intend to hide behind their walls. They intend to crush the heathens."

"Aye, I'd reckon that's right." Thorfinn agreed, "And if their anger is a fierce enough thing, they won't think about the place of battle. They'll meet where we choose."

Humming his understanding, Harry told them, "Once we know where they are, we'll be able to make a decision." It was then that a pair of highland men came to them with Heiddi standing between them. They didn't mishandle her, but she looked disgruntled at their presence.

"Apologies, lord, but this girl says that she's one of yours, that she has information you'll want to know." In all fairness to the man, he was only doing his job even if it wasn't necessary. At seeing the young witch, he didn't even catch that the guard had called him 'lord'.

"Of course, let her be." Heiddi walked around the fire to come to his side, sitting between him and Rowena, "What've you learned?"

"Causantin gathered his army north of Perth, between it and Scone," she spoke only to them, but every man there was listening to what she had to say, "They know where you landed and mean to march at dawn. The town was rife with news of it."

The King is coming to us. All there is to decide is where he'll meet us. Smiling, Harry told her, "Thank you, you've done well."

For a second, she hesitated, looking at the other men around her, "There's something else..."

"What?"

"On my way here, I crossed a hill with a wood all about its foot to the east and west but not to the north or south. It seemed to me a good place for battle." Ansbjorn and Gamelin both snorted out a laugh at that but silenced as Harry glared at them, "It'll be a shorter march for you than them."

"It sounds as good a place as any," Harry gave her a grateful smile. He knew how much she wanted to help and he couldn't be prouder of what she managed, "You've done enough though now, get yourself some food and a good night's rest." Without a backwards glance at any of the lords, she headed off. Harry couldn't help but notice that Ragnall followed her departure.

"Are we taking advice on battle from some foolish young girl?" Inan spat when she was gone.

“No, but I’m taking advice from a young woman who put her own life at risk to provide us with information that could be pivotal in the coming battle.” Harry eyes glinted a dangerous green that made the older taoiseach shift uncomfortably in his seat, “We march tomorrow regardless, we make for the hill she described and assess it once we arrive.”

“It seems to me as good a plan as any,” Ragnall agreed, as did the others save for Inan and Rhun. The oldest of the taoiseachs had said very little in their discussions, but he looked displeased. *Though that seems to be a look permanently etched into his face.*

“It would be wise if all of us took your advice, I think.” Thorfinn made to stand, “A full belly and a good rest will serve us well in the battle to come.” That, at least, got the agreement of all the men there and they went their separate ways, each of them to their own tents. It was yet another time that day where he and Rowena were left alone together.

Playing with the raven claw necklace around her neck, Rowena stared into the fire, “It’s funny, but I cannot seem to find my appetite. I simply can’t stop thinking long enough to worry about something as trivial as food.”

“Worrying, not thinking.” He corrected her. He could tell from the line in her brow and the little frown that she wasn’t simply thinking, and he couldn’t blame her.

“I’m going to watch you and my uncle, and all these men go off to battle tomorrow while I’m meant to remain behind and do nothing.” Her frustrations, so carefully concealed, bled into every word, “I’ll be stuck here, waiting for news. How am I supposed to do anything other than worry!”

“Who said that you need to remain behind?” He certainly wouldn’t ask it of her, he knew her too well to even consider such a thing.

“I’m a talented witch, Harry, but this will be a battle of blades and blood. I have no place amidst that.” Her voice quivered; her fears impossible to hide.

“You’re wrong.” She quirked an eyebrow in utter consternation. He imagined that wasn’t the sort of thing that she’d heard many times in her life. She was the brightest witch of her age, after all, “Do you think that the King will be without his priests, or even the bishop himself? Do you think they won’t intervene, even subtly, with their own magic?” He was expected to be on the battlefield, anything less would lose the respect of the warriors that joined them, but Rowena could deal with the priests.

“I hadn’t thought of that…” She was blushing and hid her face against his arm.

“You’ve had a lot on your mind,” He consoled her, “and you’re allowed not to think of everything.”

Rowena giggled, “With all the thoughts running through my head, it’s hard to remember that sometimes.”

“I’ll be sure to remind you more often then.” They sat there in a comfortable silence, just staring into the fire for a time.

It was Rowena that finally stood, telling him softly, “We should rest…”

“Yeah,” While he knew she was right, just as he’d been when he said it to the others, he was enjoying the moment with her and was reluctant to let it go, “Goodnight.”

“Night.” His eyes lingered on her as she made her way to her tent. When the flap closed behind her, he sighed before making his way to his own bed.

It wasn’t as lavish as a wizarding tent, but it was bigger than he needed and far better than where the average soldier would lay his head. There was a bed with a mattress of sorts and a pile of furs, and candles on a small table that were unneeded. Waving his hand, a small ball of light appeared at the top of the tent and cast light about the space. He stripped out of his shirt and his boots until he was wearing only his trousers.

Laying down on the bed, it was comfortable, and made even better by a quick charm. He stared at the top of the tent, unable to find the comfort of sleep. His only company was his own thoughts, the distant chatter of men, and the chirping of crickets.

It felt like hours that he simply laid there staring as the chatter of the camp dwindled down to nothing. It would be reasonable to think that it was the battle that kept him up, but it wasn’t. He thought of Ginny and Luna, Draco and Neville, of the people that he couldn’t save that might have entirely different lives centuries from that moment because of what he could do.

And then, he thought of Rowena. Just her. Her beauty, her wit, everything about her that had made it easy to grow close to her, for the affection he knew he had for her to grow. There was a part of him that wanted nothing more than to invite her to his tent, even if just to sleep because he knew that his most restful slumber had come with her by his side.

The tent flap rustled, blowing open as a breeze went through the camp, and he swore he could smell the scent of her. Heather and bluebells. *You’re hopeless, Potter.*

“Harry...” He heard his name like a whisper and for a just a second, he didn’t just think he was hopeless but maybe mad too. His eyes snapped open, only to find no one was there in the tent with him. But he was wrong, because there she was, appearing in thin air as she ended the spell that kept her hidden.

Rowena wore her necklace, and a white shift. As the light left the material almost transparent, he could safely wager that was all she was wearing. Her long, dark hair hung loose around her shoulders, and it almost shimmered in the light of his spell.

“Row...”

“I couldn’t sleep,” She told him in a hurry, she looked nervous and shy, and gorgeous all at the same time, “I couldn’t stop thinking. I know I do that all the time, but this is different. I wasn’t thinking about the battle, or the kids, or the church, or anything else like that. I was just thinking about you...” At his little smile she blushed, “not that I don’t do that normally, too! I do it more often than I probably should if anything. You’re quite interesting after all, ever since that first day in the forest, it’s been hard not to think about you but...”

He let her go on longer than he usually did, but he couldn't help himself. He found it adorable, and even when he knew he had to stop her, he sometime struggled to do it, "Row... take a breath. It's alright."

Listening, she took a deep breath before looking him right in the eye. There was something there, a wanton need that he couldn't pretend he didn't find captivating. Rowena was a woman of conviction, and all the shyness left her at once as she reached for the sleeves of the loose shift. She pushed them down her shoulders for it to pool at her feet.

Harry felt his heart hammering in his chest as he took her in. Her skin was pale, almost lily white and a stark contrast to the midnight black of her hair. Her breasts were just bigger than a handful and perky with light pink nipples that were already stiff and begging for attention. Her legs were long and willowy, leading up to the soft curve of her hips. There was the hint of lines along her stomach as he could just barely make out her abs, and her ribs. A bush of thick dark hair was just above her tight slit. There was a hint of the rosy pink within, and he could see a glint of her arousal at the top of her thighs.

The sight of her was enough to take his breath away. Biting her lip, she broke through his stupor with soft words, "Should the worst happen tomorrow... I don't want to leave with any regrets. And I know I would regret not giving myself to you." She took a step closer, standing close enough to touch, she ran one hand through his hair, "I want you... I have for quite a while, now... and I hope you want me, too."

"I do..." His traitorous mouth refused to just leave it at that though, "But what if you don't feel the same way when the battle's done and we're alive to see our victory?" He didn't want her to feel pressure because of the battle to come, he wanted to know that this was entirely her decision and not one made from fear.

His concern brought a smile to her lips, bright and genuine, "I will, trust me... I've thought about it... a lot."

Taking her by the hips, she squealed as he turned her and dropped her on the bed. He fell to his knees between her thighs, pushing them up and apart with his hands on her soft skin. It caused her damp petals to part. Her plump lips were puffy with arousal as she looked down at him with curiosity.

Kissing his way up her thighs, her breath hitched as his breath washed over her warm sex. Then her back arched and she filled her hands with the furs around her as his tongue darted out and he savored her juices. It was clean and sweet, and he moaned as he dug his tongue in deeper.

"Oh gods... that's... oh!" Rowena scratched her one hand through his hair, as her hips bucked up involuntarily. He savored every second of it, doing everything he could to pull those delicious sounds from her body.

One finger joined his probing tongue. *Squelch*. She was so wet for him, her pussy so soft and inviting, but so perfectly tight. He felt the thin barrier of her maidenhood, as he massaged her sensitive walls. A second finger was a stretch, and he felt her walls quiver around him at the feeling.

He found her clit, no bigger than the tip of his pinky, hard and throbbing with pleasure. Pulling it between his lips, her entire body went stiff as she shuddered. His tongue flicked against that oversensitive little bud, and then he made her come completely undone.

His tongue vibrated and slithered against her bud. Her cries of ecstasy were loud enough he was sure that half the camp would've heard if it weren't for a casually cast charm. He wanted those sounds to be for him and him alone. *Others can only wonder.*

Her thighs were tight against his head as she held him there. Her juices dripped sweet and creamy from her little slit as he gave her languid licks as she went through the last of her peak. When control of her body finally became her again, she grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up her body.

Her kiss was demanding, without care for the juices that stained his lips. He was already rock hard, but her enthusiastic willingness had him throbbing in his trousers. When she pulled away, her cheeks and chest were flushed from her climax. Her words came out breathy and awed, "I thought I knew what to expect... but that was far better."

He pecked her cheek as he cupped one of her perfect breasts, "That's only the beginning love." Her dainty hands went to his trousers and she pulled on the string that held them up. They fell to the ground and his length hung heavy between his legs. Her hand wrapped around him, her grip tentative and exploratory.

Pulling away, she got her first good look at him. She didn't seem intimidated, just eager to feel him, to try him. He placed his shaft against her slit, her puffy lips hugging either side of him as he rested it there. His crown sat just below her belly button as Rowena opened her legs just that little bit wider invitation, "Please... I'm ready."

They both watched, utterly enthralled as his dome parted her. Rowena bit her lips as he stretched her before he stopped as he felt her barrier. He looked into her eyes as she gave him a nod, "I told you... I'm ready."

Her eyes watered and she whimpered in pain as he pushed through that thin membrane with a snap of his hips. Resting his hand on her stomach, there was a soft glow and she moaned as the pain was replaced with a pleasant warmth. Her voice was needy as she pleaded with him, "Keep going... I need to feel all of you."

The heat of her was exquisite as his cock *squelched* in her wetness. Her eyes were fixated on the point where they were joined as he buried inch after inch inside of her. When his balls finally rested against the curve of her bum, she rested her hand against her stomach. She pressed down, and they both could feel it.

Her walls tightened around him as she giggled giddily, "I feel so full... so good..." She twisted her hips experimentally and got a sexy little grin on her face as he bit back a moan, "You like that?"

"Row... I love this... every second of it." He took her hips in his hands and dragged his cock out of her grippy pussy, before pushing back into her with one steady, wonderful thrust, "I've wanted this just as much as you."

Her mouth opened in silent extasy before she commanded him, “Sh... show me!”

The tent became a melody of clashing bodies and breathy moans, whispered exultations and cries of passion. They moved against each other with an ease that belied their experience together. It came easy with Rowena as though it were just right.

She came around him, her arousal thick and creamy in a ring around the base of his cock. When she asked him to go harder, he went harder. When she cried out because he found a spot that made her shudder, he made sure to hit again. When she told him with sweat on her brow, and eyes glazed over in pleasure, “Right there!” He did it, until she came again and then again.

And every time it took great effort not to follow her right over the cliff. His cock begged for relief, for him to let go. But he persevered until she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close with what strength remained to her. Her perfect breasts were squished between them, her nipple hard against his chest, as she whispered in his ear, “Give it to me... please... I can’t take anymore... I’ll lose my mind if you don’t... just please...”

It was the sexiest thing he’d heard in his life, and he growled as he buried himself in her slippery sheath. The last thrust made her cry out as her cunt squeezed him in one last peak. His shaft swelled and bucked inside of her as he exploded, painting the deepest parts of her in pearlescent white. His vision went dark as he experienced the single most poignant euphoria of his life.

“Oh Frejya...” Rowena cried out. It was the last thing he heard before he lost track of all sense of time.

When he finally regained himself, he felt her nails gently scratching against his side. They shared no words as he turned with her in his arms and pulled her close.

They fell into a deep sleep that had eluded them, filled with pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER 12

They marched in lines of four all the way from the front of the column to the back. Harry was at the front with Ragnall on one side and Gamelin on the other. Rowena was at the back with Heiddi and Torgils. They bookended the line just in case of an attack, particularly of the magical variety.

The army had been marching since dawn and the sun was only just burning off the last of the morning dew as it made its way higher into the sky. They could see the hill that Heiddi described in the distance, the wood to the east was smaller than the one to the west, there was a small loch along the eastern side of the of the smaller forest.

“The hill is steep to the south.” Ragnall commented as they made their way ever closer, “It could keep them from flanking.”

“Aye,” Gamelin agreed, “it seems the girl of yours has a rather keen eye.”

“Not bad advice for some foolish young girl...” He said it loud enough that Inan and Ansbjorn could hear him. Inan stared stonily ahead with a scowl on his line face. The older taoiseach was more interested in keeping the pace than dealing with Harry’s rebuke. Rhun, the eldest of them, had remained at Varrich.

Ansbjorn chuckled at himself, "Aye, I'll need to offer my apologies when next I see her."

"We can hide men in the forest, let them think we have fewer men and then flank them when they've over extended." Ragnall counseled.

It was a reasonable thought, and one that he could see Causantin and his men expecting, "Perhaps, we'll be able to better plan once we're on the hill."

"We'll be there soon enough to find out." The steady plodding of boots on mud carried over the low hills of the Scottish countryside as they made their way north. The hill was steep enough to the south that they made their way around the eastern wood to reach the other side. To the north of the hill, directly out from the gap between the two woods by about a quarter of a mile, there was another loch, bigger than the one to the east.

As the whole of the army came to rest, tents were raised in the middle of the hill. The battle could come in hours or days, there was no telling until it actually happened.

Turning to Ragnall, Harry said, "Send out scouts to the north toward Perth. If they're truly marching and I'd rather know when we can expect them."

The Jarl of Mann turned to do as he was asked but came up short as he nearly crashed into Heiddi. The young Northumbrian didn't even flinch as Ragnall stammered out, "Apologies, I didn't know you were there."

She smiled at how flustered he was, "Not needed, lord. How were you to know?"

He gave her a nervous smile before stepping around her. Rowena was able to hide her laughter as Heiddi swatted her arm. The eldest of their students came up to him, bold as ever, and told him, "I'll take a broom and scout for Causantin. I'll find them faster."

He arched an eyebrow at that, "And if you're seen?"

"I doubt the priests are good enough to hit a dot in the sky, Harry." She argued, "I'll be safer than any of the men that are sent out, I can promise you that much."

He could only shake his head, knowing that the only way to stop her would be to bind her feet to the ground, "Very well."

She gave him a cheeky grin before turning on the spot and making for a tent. Rowena giggled at his expense, "They really grow up so fast don't they?"

"You're telling me," His hand found her hip and he pulled her closer, "Look how stubborn they become in just a couple months." Their short time with the young magicals they saved felt far longer than that.

"I'm quite certain that she was born that way." She pressed a hand to his chest, "I'm going to check on the others while I can. I'll be back soon. Try not to have too much fun without me."

He pinched her hip, "Standing here on this hill, waiting for a battle. I wouldn't dream of it."

Rowena poked her finger into his chest, "Oh, you know what I mean."

He did, but that wasn't going to stop him from giving her a hard time. They'd woken up that morning, after a night he wouldn't soon forget, and nothing felt different. Well, that wasn't entirely true as they had a quick repeat performance and they both found themselves being a bit touchier in their brief time together before marching. If anything, they just felt closer. It was a surreal thing to think that he'd found himself so tightly wound to Rowena Ravenclaw.

No one stopped the witch as she made her way toward the wood. He saw a fair few step out of her way and bow their heads. The luster of her sacrifice the night before they sailed had yet to wane, and he was doubtful that it ever would.

As Harry stood there, watching until she disappeared behind the line of trees, he was joined by Thorfinn and Aengus. The youngest of the taoiseachs looked slightly out of place on the soon-to-be battlefield. He was barely a man, even by the standard of the time. But Harry saw his confidence growing with each new day and the men that followed him after his father's death seemed fiercely loyal.

"We have enough men to form a line from wood to wood, three men deep." Thorfinn gestured to the bottom of the hill. The grass was green and bright but would soon be stained red with blood.

"Could they not hold back?" Aengus questioned, "Surround the hill now that we've dug ourselves in and wait for food to become scarce?" It was a reasonable concern under normal circumstances. *Most armies don't have magicals able to bring in more food in the blink of an eye.*

Thorfinn clapped the young man on the shoulder, "A fine thought, but I doubt Causantin has enough men to surround the wood even if he wants a protracted engagement. And retreat to the south is still possible if he tries it." The slope was difficult to climb but far from impassable.

"I doubt he means to wait us out anyway, Aengus." Harry reasoned, "This all started because they've been stirred into a fervor by their priests and bishop. They want blood just as badly as the men here and I can't see calmer heads prevailing."

"Then they'll have it." Aengus' hand found the hilt of his sword upon his hip. He'd lost a father to their mob, and he wanted them to pay for it.

"They will." Harry assured him, "But that won't stop us from thinking."

"You've considered the woods then?" Thorfinn asked him.

"I have, and I don't see the advantage." He wouldn't pretend to be an expert on warfare. He knew how to fight with magic, but that was an entirely different thing, an entirely different strategy. But still he thought he had the right of it, "If they were coming down the hill, I'd wager hiding within the trees would be the right thing to do. Let them think they broke us and then surround them. But we have the high ground."

"Aye, Ubba and Ivar did something similar when they took Jorvik almost fifty years ago." They were old names, revered by the Danes and Norse. Two sons of the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok, "So, we just stand our ground on the hill and let them waste their strength against us? That's the whole of our plan for this army?" There were worse plans that could be made, but he knew there was more to be done to tip the scales in their favor.

Looking out across the green expanse, his gaze fixated on the nearby loch, and he had an idea, “No, but I’ll need you to find me men, maybe two hundred. Men who have no fear of the water.”

Thorfinn laughed at that, “That should be easy enough, we’re not sailors for nothing!”

“It’s one thing to sail on the water,” he cautioned, “it’s entirely different to sit beneath it for gods only know how long.” That caused the two men to look at each other confused, “Just gather the men, and I’ll explain.”

They went to do as he bid, and it left him standing at the bottom of the hill alone. The air was still, not even a gentle breeze blowing through the woods. He felt a surprising sense of calm despite being on the precipice of battle. He could pinpoint the reason though.

In his own time, he’d had to cower and hide for years trying to escape the Inquisition and the Church. Now, he was standing on his own two feet, weapon in hand, ready to face them head on. *But will this one battle be enough?*

No, victory here is only the beginning. Harry didn’t question the voice because it was only telling him something he already knew. Victory wouldn’t bring them peace. Inan had said the same when first they devised this battle. *There are monarchs to the south, in England and beyond, who won’t suffer the loss of a Christian kingdom. And that’s to say nothing of what Rome will think when they hear of it.*

If the heathens won the day, they would come eventually. But those were concerns for another time. The only thing that concerned him as he stared out across the expanse of Scotland was the ever-growing dot in the sky that was headed for the eastern wood. Heiddi stayed high before diving down and landing.

He couldn’t blame her for trying to be secretive, she’d spent years having it ingrained into her by the Church. Her magic was only meant to be used in the destruction of heathens and hidden from all others. Rowena and Harry both detested the idea of secrecy. Their magic was a gift, one that, in the right hands, could do a great deal to benefit everyone, including the mundane.

Heiddi came running out of the trees and headed right for him. She would’ve run him over if he hadn’t put a hand on her shoulder to steady her. She took one big breath before she managed to get out, “They’re halfway here from Muirwood, probably been marching since dawn same as us.”

“They’ll be here my midday, maybe sooner.” Harry reckoned that they’d be able to see them in the distance from the top of the hill within the hour, “I feel like you’re probably getting tired of hearing it, but well done.” From the proud smile on her face, that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“What news?” Thorfinn and Aengus came with a whole rabble of men with shields on their backs and axes and swords ready to swing.

“Causatain will be here by midday,” He gestured for them to follow, “Hurry with me, there’s little time and much to do.” They followed him north to the loch. It took just a few minutes before they were all standing on its muddy banks.

“We have no advantage by hiding you in the forest, but here, you can attack them from behind and break their line once the battle’s begun.”

The men looked skeptical and one brave soul spoke up, "I don't know bout the rest of them, but I can't hold my breath that long, lord."

"You won't need to." His wand was in his hand, and one man took a step back out of fear. Most were just fascinated as he waved the seemingly innocuous stick. The water of the loch lurched forming a chasm in the middle, "All of you in, fast as you can." The bottom was dry despite the years spent submerged. Cautiously at first, the men fell to his orders until all two hundred of them were situated looking up at him.

"You'll be able to breathe, don't worry." They all were all too stunned to speak, "When I give the signal, you'll just need to walk right out of the lake and attack them from the rear, understood?"

"How will we know the signal?" The same man as before questioned.

"What's your name?"

"Ulf."

"Well, Ulf, this little ball," He waved his wand, and one appeared right in front of them, "will glow bright enough to light up the lake when it's time. There'll be no missing it." Something told him they'd be following Ulf when the time came, "It shouldn't be too long. Good luck." With that the water of the loch swirled back down and around them, but with a pocket that kept the men within dry.

Standing on the bank, you couldn't make out a single soul was hiding within. Thorfinn laughed heartily as the surface of the water stilled, "They'll walk out of the water, and plow them right in the ass!"

"If all goes according to plan... yes." Harry laughed right along with the jarl. Aengus stared at Harry, unable to fully comprehend what he'd just seen. The three of them made their way back to the camp, and as they retook the hill, looked back to the north. You could see them there marching ever closer.

A warm hand touched his shoulder, and he turned to find Rowena's midnight blue eyes looking back at him. "They're nearly here."

"Yes, soon." He pulled her round, and she rested her head against his shoulder, "They're well?"

"They're all accounted for," Rowena assured him, "though they're all too worried to say they're doing well. Esla wanted to come and see you, but Mairi and Adela managed to calm her down. Euan, Halig and Rorik all wanted to take up a sword and come join the battle."

Euan was nearly of an age, barely two years younger than Aengus was, "That time will come for them, no need to go rushing into it before they're ready."

Rowena nodded, "I managed to convince them of their foolishness... after a while."

Harry could only chuckle, knowing how strong headed those lot could be. Rowena's hand found his, and she pulled him toward the tent that had been made for him, "Come, you need to ready yourself."

Men were sharpening steel, tightening their boots, and their belts, and whatever pieces of armor they had, anything to busy themselves as they waited. As they ducked down into the tent, Harry saw a fine coat of mail. The metal of each ring glinting in the low light of the tent. He didn't know where it'd come from, but he wasn't going to question it. There was a helmet there as well, a shield, a sword and a saxe.

Rowena took it from the bed and placed it over his shoulders, followed by a coat of black leather. In silence, she tied the sword and saxe to his waist, and offered him the shield which he placed on his back. It left only the helmet, which she held in her hands as she stood before him.

Her eyes drifted from his eyes down to his lips and she pulled him down into a kiss. It was fierce, demanding of a promise. When she pulled away, her hand pressed gently to his cheek, "Promise you'll survive?"

He knew there were no guarantees, but if it gave her even a little peace of mind, he'd say the words, "I promise..." He gave her a little grin, "But I'm not the only one going to battle."

"True... though I worry more about you in the shield wall than I do about myself dealing with some priests."

"Don't underestimate them," Harry warned her.

"Never, I promise." With that they left the tent together, only to find themselves face to face with Torgils.

Rowena hugged her uncle, and commanded him, "Look out for him."

He hugged her back, but was looking at Harry as he told her, "Aye, I can do that."

With one last look back at him, they parted. Torgils stared at him for a long moment before gesturing toward the hill, "Come, they're nearly here." The men were gathered near the base of the hill, in three lines just as Ragnall suggested. There were more behind, further up the hill ready to reinforce the line as the battle progressed.

Harry found himself standing amongst them, nearly right in the middle. Torgils was to his right, Aengus to his left. Throfinn and his brothers held the right side, Ragnall and Ansborn the left.

The army came ever nearer until they stopped a hundred yards across from them. That's when the priests popped out from within their ranks. Carrying a crucifix, they went along the line blessing the men who served the king. Bishop Cellach was there too, but he blessed the king and the king alone.

Causantin was a tall man with deep auburn hair that was beginning to grey. He had a neatly trimmed beard. If the bishop hadn't been enough to mark him out from his men, the crown upon his brow did it. It was gold encrusted with jewels around the rim.

Turning his eyes to his own men, Harry saw no small amount of determination and no small amount of fear either. There were young men, some who'd never stood in the shield wall before, gripping tightly to Thor's hammer around their neck and praying to their gods.

Stepping out of the line, Harry turned to look at them and he found eyes of every color looking back at him. They waited for him to speak, "The gods are watching, can't you feel them?" He didn't yell,

but his voice carried all the same and for the first time that day a breeze rustled the leaves of the wood, “Every man here that bleeds and dies on this hill will be remembered. The skalds and the poets will write stories of this day, and your forebears in Valhalla will be jealous to hear of it when you meet them. For today, you will be a scourge that topples a king!”

A roar went up amongst their army that shook the very ground and halted the prayers of the priests. His words were as strong as any spell for courage. As Harry stepped back into the line, he closed his eyes and thought on the people he’d lost. *Today is the start of making sure it never happens again.*

He opened them as he heard the first thud of boots on the ground. Causantin’s army moved forward as the command went up across their line, “Shield wall!”

The man in front of him dropped his shield to the ground, Harry followed suit and interlaced his above as the third line came in over the top. There were a few breathless moments, the world filled only with the steps of the oncoming army and then...

Bang! Shield clashed against shield, and the force of it nearly took his breath away. The world became a cacophony of metal cutting against wood, of screams as the first men fell, of shouted orders.

The short sword in his hand found the gaps between the shields, darting out to press against whatever he could find. There was resistance on the other end of the blade, that yielded to its sharpness. A scream... a gurgling... and a thud from the other side of the wall. He killed his first man in the wall as every second seemed to stretch on for hours.

But even with the high ground, the enemy didn’t seem to falter backwards. Harry heard a grunt to his left and saw Aengus was missing a finger on his right hand, but still he pushed his blade forward.

There was a shout to his right, behind he could hear men panicking. The line had been broken. There was a pulse of magic beside him, and Harry looked at Torgils. The bear of a man’s eyes were wild, his voice a thunderous boom, “Hold here... I’ll take care of it.”

The ferocity of his attack nearly cut the first man in half from clavicle to hip. Another’s neck snapped as he struck them in the face with his shield. The breach closed as another man stepped through but Torgils shoved his sword straight through his throat.

They fell into the song of battle, the sword song, neither side ceding an inch. Blood stained the grass at his feet, and yet they didn’t move them. And through it all, Harry could feel it, some magic being worked in the favor of the Christians, and then... it just disappeared and they drove them back little by little.

From the other side of the wall, there was the thundering of fresh boots, and he knew it was time.

The spell splashed against her shield harmlessly, as did the next, the third broke it, and she had to slide over to avoid a Bone-Breaker.

“Heathen whore!” The priest in the middle was barely older than her with crooked teeth and a bowl cut, “You will pray for the mercy of Our Lord!”

They had a false sense of confidence thanks to their numbers. Alone none of them could stand against her, but there were six of them and they were well-trained in how to work together. So, she was kept at bay, too preoccupied with her own defenses to manage a meaningful attack.

There was a seventh too, the Bishop Cellach. He stood well away with two young priests to either side. Between his hand was a crucifix, that in truth was a staff. She could feel the magic pouring from it. And she knew, without even looking to the battle, it was a spell meant to bolster Causantin and his army.

She tried to shake the very earth around them, to at least cease his spell, but they had the forethought to put protections around him. That didn't stop it from affecting the priests. One to her right fell over and struggled back to his feet thanks in no small part to his robes. The magenta spell flashed across the space between them and left him screaming in agony for a few horrid seconds before he died.

The five that remained redoubled their efforts as they watched their fellow die. A bright white light filled her vision, so bright it was nearly blinding. And that was their ploy. It made it almost impossible to see the spells that followed it. The ground beneath her opened and swallowed her before they could hit their mark.

She traveled beneath the ground, though no sign of it could be seen from above. Deep gouges were hewn into the earth as they tried to strike her to no avail. She popped back up, silent and ready, just between two of them. The one to the left died to an ice blue spell. His skin turned the very same color as all the blood left his body in a rush. The one to the right died as a great gouge took his arm off at the shoulder and left a gaping wound all the way to his heart.

As she turned to face the last three, she felt something wrapped tight around her ankle and then she was looking up at the blue of the sky before the ground met her back. The air left her in a rush. Fear raced through her veins, fear that only made her move faster. The spell that was meant to finish her splashed harmlessly into the ground as she rolled away. As she popped back onto her feet, another of the priests dropped to the ground unconscious.

Behind him, Heiddi was standing there with her wand in her hand. The last two priests made to attack her, but Rowena pulled up a shield that stopped them cold in their tracks. There was a part of her that wanted to yell at her student, but there was another that was incredibly proud and even a little grateful. But there was a bigger part that knew it wasn't the time. There were more pressing matters to attend to.

The two left alone were outmatched. They raised a shield to her next spell, but it shattered at the strength of it. Each of them died with a spike sticking out of their chest.

As they thudded lifelessly to the ground, she turned her attention to the bishop. The spell that left her wand crashed like thunder as it collided with the barrier between them. It held fast for a moment before it started bending at the pressure and finally exploded like glass.

As the protection fizzled out around him, the Bishop Cellach portkeyed away without the two boys who attended him. They ran in the face of her fury, and she just let them.

There were thundering boots as Causantin summoned what men he had in reserve as the line began to falter without the bishop's spell.

Rowena could feel the venom on her tongue, "Craven bastard... didn't even have the stones to face what he wrought!" Even as the last word left her mouth, the loch glowed bright and blue and from within came two hundred more men to join the fighting.

As Heiddi came to stand beside her, she gave her a look, "We'll be discussing this later."

She didn't seem the least bit bothered by her anger, "Once we've won..." Rowena could at least agree to that.

Stepping through the trampled, blood-drenched grass, Harry took stock of the carnage. There were men from both sides still taking their last breaths. For every one of theirs, Causantin lost at least four.

"Gather the wounded, theirs and ours. Kill only those who have no hope." Harry commanded Ragnall and Gamelin, "and tell the men to rest. There's still a hard march to be had to Scone." Both men were sweat drenched and bloody. Ragnall was limping from a wound to his right thigh. Harry approached him and put his wand to the wound.

The jarl winced as the wound knitted itself back together, "It will be done." They fell to the task as Harry continued walking the battlefield. There was one man in particular he was trying to find.

His crown marked him out where he lay. His breathing was labored, his eyes bloodshot. In most circumstances, it would be a close thing whether he lived or died. As Harry kneeled beside him, his eyes widened in fear and he made to reach for a sword, "Lord king, there's no need for that now. The battle is over." Just as with Ragnall, he placed his wand upon him, and his breathing evened out. A red spell met his chest and he fell unconscious.

Rowena found him then with news of her own. Before she had a chance to speak, he pulled her close, just to feel her warmth and know that she was well. She hugged him back just as close before finally telling him, "The bishop fled."

"To Scone, or St. Andrews one or the other."

"I'd wager Scone, they'll want to name a new king with an army on its doorstep." She looked down at Causantin, "They surely think him dead."

"Wherever he's gone, we'll find him. He can only run for so long."

"Word will spread of what happened here..." Rowena bit her bottom lip, her mind working a mile a minute as to what that might mean.

"I know," And then he repeated the same words he'd heard that same morning, "Victory here is only the beginning."

CHAPTER 13

The walls surrounding Perth were some thirty feet high and made of pointed timber. The southern gate of the city was two great double doors, banded in iron. The city itself was situated on a hill that kept the residence safe from spring flooding on the River Tay.

After another day of marching, their army was situated outside of the city to the south, staring at that same gate. They'd passed half a dozen villages along their path, and not one of them was razed in their passing. What fighting men came from those places had either died in the battle or fled with the remnants of Causantin's army to the safety of the city's walls. What women and children remained cowered in their homes, and yet they were left alone.

It was an hour before midday as voices rose as every lord offered his thoughts on what was to come next. Rhun's raspy words were the ones that carried the most weight amongst the Scots, "The battle is won! We have their king bound and hostage right here amongst the men. What noblemen remain in Alba will pay a great ransom for his safe return, more than enough that every man here will go home with wealth and not another drop of blood spilled."

"Have you missed the entire point of this war, old man?" Thorfinn mocked the old taoiseach, "We're not here for their wealth, not that alone... We're here to protect what we, whether Scot, or Dane, or Norse, believe in as a people!"

"And how long will that fervor last, I wonder? We've come together in battle, yes. But how long before old slights fester amongst the men?" Gamelin's skepticism wasn't shared by all his fellow Scots, Aengus and Inan were noticeably unmoved by his reasoning, "Will they remain one for a siege that could last months? Years? Assuming that they haven't already sent word to the south to Mercia or Wessex."

"It's more likely that issues between we few here will fester than those amongst the fighting men." Sitting on a rock, Ragnall glanced toward Harry and Rowena, "The men haven't forgotten what happened at Varrich before we left, no more than I have, though it seems your memory is quite short."

Harry and Rowena were silent, their backs to the lords as they stared at the city before them. They were focusing on things that no one else among them could see. And what they found surprised them. The walls weren't fortified with any great work of magic, they were exactly what they appeared to be, simple wooden timbers. There were ruins etched into the gate, but they were merely to ensure its longevity. Further into the city, they could sense a greater font of magic, but it didn't worry them.

Meeting her eye, they came to a silent agreement before they turned back to the lords. Gamelin was standing over Ragnall, glaring at him, "I've forgotten nothing... and I don't appreciate your insults."

The Jarl of Mann wasn't perturbed "Whether you appreciate them or not, they're true all the same."

"There will be no siege, and there will be no ransom." His voice was enough to silence every other man there. Though, that had as much to do with the audaciousness of his claim as it did the respect they had for him.

“You mean to disband here, after our victory, with nothing to show for it but a captive king?” Ansbjorn was affronted at the very implication, and even Rhun seemed to agree despite the fact he was bordering on cowardice with his previous position.

“Of course not,” Harry could see visible relief from the likes of Aengus and Thorfinn, “I didn’t bring this army together to win a single battle when the real enemy is still hidden safely behind the cities walls.”

“Then what is your plan?” Battle had given Aengus a new confidence. It could be seen from the way he carried himself to every word he spoke since their victory, “Trees are abundant in the wood to the east of the city. We can have ladders ready for an assault by days end if needed.”

It was a good plan, and Ragnall only added to it, “The gate itself is strong, but a battering ram should see it broken in the end. We’ll lose men in the process but that’s the way of war. Attack them at the walls and the gate, and they’ll have their hands full.”

Inan spoke up against this new plan, “Even with their losses, they need far fewer men to defend a city than they do to fight in the open field. We’d be like water washing against a stone, slow in the breaking!”

“The water prevails in the end though.” Aengus pointed out.

The older taoiseach scowled at him, “Your father would’ve known better.”

“My father isn’t here and the man responsible is still hiding somewhere in Perth... I don’t intend to return home until justice is done.”

“The man responsible is right here in camp! If you want your revenge, simply go and take it!” He pointed toward the stockade where Causantin was being held.

Aengus stood his ground, “While he allowed it, it wasn’t the king that stirred up the mob, we all know it. It was their bishop.”

“Who could be halfway to St. Andrews by now!” Inan pointed out, though he was far from correct. *He could’ve been in St. Andrews from the moment he left the battlefield.* But Harry was willing to wager that he wasn’t. He was willing to wager the magic they could feel further in the city was the church, and some of that magic felt newly made rather than the older ones beneath it. The additions only felt necessary if they had something worthwhile to protect.

“We’ll break the wall, and the gate.” Harry’s words put an end to their pointless quibbling. Every man there looked between the two as though they were mad. While they understood they were capable of magic, gifted by the gods, they had no comprehension of the full scope of it. Moving some water aside wasn’t the same as tearing down a wall, and the chaos of battle had kept their attentions well away from Rowena and her clash with the priests. *But today they’ll get to see a glimpse, or more, of the truth.*

“You can do that?” It was Aengus who asked them, out of curiosity rather than fear.

“We can.” Rowena assured him, “They’ve no defense against it.”

“Rally the men.” Harry commanded, “It will be soon.”

“And remind them of the words they heard at Varrich, my lords.” Rowena added, “Kill only those who stand against us. The women and the children are to remain unharmed.”

Their deference to her hadn't waned in the slightest, and they bowed their heads. It was what she said at Varrich that stayed the hand of the army on their northward march. *Remind them of the gods of their forebears! A heart once turned can be turned again!* It wasn't possible if every man, woman, and child was dead to the slaughter or worse. And such slaughter only fomented hate in the hearts of the conquered.

So, Rowena had commanded them to be spared. It had been a point of contention since they landed. No slaves were taken save those in battle, and no women were taken against their will. That final thing had been the hardest for the men to accept, for some went to war solely for wealth and women. To be deprived by half was a bitter pill to swallow, but the awe that Rowena inspired was enough to keep them in check.

Alone, Harry took a step closer to the witch and asked her quietly, “So Row, shall you like to take the gate or the walls?” He was trying to add a little bit of levity to what was a demanding situation.

He reckoned he managed it as she snorted out a laugh, “I figured we'd take the whole lot of it out together. I wasn't going to be choosy about it, Harry.”

“Are we going to go more for shock and awe, or shall they simply vanish them where they stand?”

“I don't know.” Rowena turned to him with a little smile at the corner of her lip, “I was thinking we could simply rip the timbers out of the ground in one fell swoop. Why even bother with the gate at that point.”

The army was marshalling behind them, and it was obvious that the defenders inside the city were taking notice. They could see men scurrying about along the wall. The greatest number of them were near the gate, and they could see them hauling a cauldron of something. *Probably a pot of hot oil.*

Rowena watched them and commented, “I'm surprised the priests haven't done a better job of defending their flock.”

“Perhaps they couldn't risk someone discovering them putting the spells in place,” It was the kindest interpretation of the lack of magical defenses considering it would've been easy enough to make it look like they were performing a blessing, “Or the head of the church here doesn't have the skill with magic to manage it.” Not every church in every parish was likely to have a skilled magical at it, but he would've expected at least token wards.

“Or they're happy to leave the rest of the city to slaughter to ensure that they're safely ensconced.” Rowena's view was certainly the most critical, but it was still very much a possibility, particularly if the bishop was truly there. *He could've made some effort before we arrived.* Not that it mattered, he would rip through whatever defenses they'd built on their church just as he had at the abbey when he freed the kids.

“Harry...Rowena,” They turned and found Ragnall standing there, “The army is ready.” Assembled along the little hillock where they watched the city, the army spread out in lines. The men had been

anticipating it from the moment the lords came together. They were smaller than during their last battle, but they were ready to bleed and die, yet again, to win this war they had started.

Rowena thanked the jarl before looking to him, "Shall we?" At his nod, they walked together toward the gates of Perth.

There was commotion on the wall, and then they watched as archers drew their arrows. They didn't pay them any mind as they walked ever closer. The sun above them peaked out from the cloud, the air was oddly still, barely a breeze in the air. It made it all the easier to hear the loosing of the arrow as it shot through the air. It landed at their feet, whether through intention or a lack of skill it didn't matter.

A voice rang out from the rampart, "Come no further! You pagan, heathen bastards should return to your ships! Or you'll all die here wasting against our walls!"

Harry and Rowena stopped as the defenders of Perth laughed. At barely a hundred yards from the gate, they could see the man who yelled the commands. He was wearing a shirt of mail, his beard was cut short and neat and his hair was thinning. *Nobility, no doubt.*

For Harry, there was no need to shout as his voice carried to the ear of every one of the Scots defending their city as though he were standing just in front of them, "No. Throw down your arms and open the gate... do this and much can be avoided."

There was some nervous laughter from the defenders while others looked truly startled by the odd way he could communicate with them. The noble who led them gave a boisterous laugh, "You daft bastard... I'd sooner chop off my own bollocks then open the gates to the likes of you."

"Not even for your king?" Harry turned back to the line, and Causantin was paraded out in front of the army gagged and bound at the wrists. There was jeering as he was forced to his knees.

It didn't sway the man on the wall, "I know my king, pagan. He'd take my head clean from my shoulders if I let you through that gate."

"He won't be convinced," Rowena told him softly.

Harry could only agree with her. Once more he spoke to them, "Remember, I gave you a chance." With the last word he raised his wand as Rowena did the same. The wall around the gate was torn from the ground in two quick flicks from the witch, while the gates were blasted into splinters by a bright red spell that crashed against the iron. There were screams as timbers vanished and the men who stood on them fell to the ground in a heap.

Before the dust had even settled, the army charged to the breach without a command. The men that laid strewn about from the destruction of the wall fell like wheat before the scythe. One of the only men to die standing on his feet was the bold commander who so defiantly responded. He killed three men before Thorfinn's sword bit deep into his neck.

Harry and Rowena followed behind as those within the city panicked. Screams of pain rang out in the stillness of the air from every direction as the soldiers that defended the city found themselves overrun. Doors were barred tight, and as Harry passed some of the homes, he could see eyes

peaking out to watch as they passed, no doubt terrified of what would befall them if they were discovered.

Blood stained the dirt paths as they made their way further into the city. Rowena sliced the throat of a man gurgling out the last of his life propped up against a wall. He was missing a leg and was pierced through the stomach. It would've been a slow death.

Their army fanned out around the city before pressing inward. Their goal was the hill and the town square. The men of Perth fought to their last, but in the end, the last of the defenders fell outside the doors of the church, banging on the wood for salvation that didn't come. The sacking of Perth was over almost as quickly as it began.

In the square across from the church, Harry found Ansbjorn and Aengus and set them to a new task, "Everyone who remains in the city is to be brought here now. I want them to see what comes next."

When he returned to her, Rowena was staring at the doors of her church, tapping her foot impatiently, "We have no idea how many of them might be in there, or if Cellach is even amongst them."

"If he's not here, then we make for St. Andrews and we drag him back ourselves." His eyes lingered on the door, and he just knew it wouldn't be necessary, "And as for the other priests, I have every confidence in your ability to deal with them." Rowena shook her head but couldn't hide the smile at the corner of her lips.

There were screams in the city as doors were broken down. Women and children shrieked as they were forced from their homes, but no great violence was done to them. And slowly they started to fill the square. It took nearly as long to finish that task as it did to win the day.

Mothers kept their children close, fearful that at any moment they might be taken from them. Young maids eyed their new conquerors warily, confused as this was far from what they were expecting from the heathen barbarians. There were some fighting men there, still alive but wounded.

Aengus hurried over to them, "If there's anyone else in the city, we can't find them."

"Very good, thank you." The young man bowed his head and moved to join his men. Their army filled the streets that led to the square, all of them doing their best to see what was happening. The citizens were nearer, surrounded by them.

Gliding to the center of the square, every eye followed Rowena. She was dressed in blue, and her hair was loose. She spoke normally, but it was loud enough to carry to all who were gathered thanks to a bit of magic, "The bishop lied to you." Murmurs passed between the citizens, but they were silenced by the next words, "As has his god."

"Liar!" There was a woman with grey hair, holding tightly to the crucifix around her neck.

Unbothered by the interruption, Rowena continued, "Since the Norse and Danes first came to these shores, the clergy has told you they are God's punishment. That if only you have more faith, you'll be delivered from them. And even as they made those claims they sought to convert them... just as they converted your forebears away from their gods."

“Demons! Not gods. Just like you!” The woman was brave, boldly standing forward to speak for the Christians.

Rowena’s smile held a cold steel to it, dangerous and grim, “Yes, they would call me ‘of the devil.’ Just as they have some of your own children, I’m sure.” Harry scanned the faces of the crowd, and while there weren’t many, he saw a few dour faces at that, “Many of you have heard of me, I’d wager. The witch of the highlands that massacred an abbey in Inverness.”

“Witch! Foul, loathsome witch!” Rowena had finally had enough and the next words the old woman made to speak died in her throat.

“There are so many things they don’t tell you, so that they can better control you with your faith!” She spat the word with pure venom, “That abbey imprisoned children... children gifted by the gods whether Freyja or the Dagda. They tortured them and deprived them, bending them to their own purposes until they hated their own nature. Those same children are the ones who go on to perform the miracles that keep you in check, that fill your stories, and make it all the easier to turn you to their god.”

“Their god, who promises mercy for his servants, victory for his soldiers, and yet...” She looked around to the army that came at their beckoning, “we’ve won, and the only mercy to be found is that which **we** choose.”

The crowd cowered then, not knowing what had already been commanded, “Your god wasn’t nearly so kind to the people of the highlands, I can assure you. The god-fearing men, spurred by your bishop, didn’t discriminate.” There was power in her voice. It was laced with magic as her anger came out in full force, “All your faith, all your anger, all the death, all of it spurred on by a man who is no less ‘of the devil’ than the people he detests.”

That set them off. The people of the crowd protested to her claims, vehemently. Insults were hurled at her, “Liar”, “Pagan”, “Witch” could be heard. But for every person that screamed there was another that kept their tongue, quietly contemplating her claims.

There was a bang, loud enough to leave the ears ringing that silenced the naysayers. Rowena’s eyes were nearly glowing as she told them, “Very well, you’ll see the truth of it for yourselves. Maybe then you’ll understand all they’ve done.”

It was only then that Harry moved to the doors of the church. He ran the Elder Wand along the line of the door. The magic was strong, well-fortified, but no greater than what he’d encountered at the abbey. Stepping back, a beam of pure white escaped from the tip and burrowed into the protections around the church. As he poured more magic into them, they became visible to the naked eye.

There were whispered words of astonishment flitting about between both the citizens of Perth and the men of their army. Then the cracks started to form, spreading out like a web from where he was focusing until the protections shattered like glass. As the wards fell apart, Harry stabbed his wand at the door once more and it exploded open. Those watching were so focused on him, they didn’t even notice as Rowena cast an Anti-Portkey ward behind him.

He was ready for spellfire, for even a token defense from the men inside, but it didn’t come. Standing behind the dais within, wearing the same regalia that he’d worn on the battlefield was

Bishop Cellach, "Mercy, please mercy!" He held his hands up in surrender as he walked through the church toward Harry, "There doesn't need to be any more bloodshed."

Looking back at Rowena, he could see the same puzzlement in her face that he felt. But then it hit him. *He means to make himself a martyr, one that will only bring greater strength to their faith.*

"The only bloodshed done here today was on those who drew weapons against us. It's more than can be said for the mobs you inspired." Harry moved behind the bishop and pushed him out into the square.

Rowena approached him then. Her eyes were filled with a genuine hatred that Harry had never seen before, "Tell them the truth, bishop... and we'll make it quick."

He spoke softly, so that only he and Rowena could hear, "Pain in the service of God, is no great hardship, witch. I welcome it. They'll see you for the monster you are, while I'll be welcomed through the gates of heaven." Even when he was beaten, he thought he could win. His arrogance made it difficult not to kill him right then and there. His voice rose so the crowd would hear, "There is no truth to tell. I'm a simple man of the cloth who wishes to see an end to this barbarity."

"Does your God abide such horrid liars?" Rowena growled. The crowd was deathly quiet, listening to every word.

"He should strike me down, here and now, if I've spoken a word of a lie." He was winning the crowd to his side with every word. He looked to the sky's expectantly, and when nothing happened, he smiled.

"He must not be here then, as nothing but falsities have left your lips." Rowena refused to back down, "If it meant saving your king, would you show them the truth?" But Harry had a feeling he knew what the answer would be and he was right.

"There's no truth to be shown, girl." He told her scornfully, "Not that I would trust a heathen to keep their word." The bishop intended to portray himself as a man of God until the very end. *In the hopes that the story will spread far and wide.* He wouldn't allow it.

Subtly was a simple thing for a wizard of Harry's skill. His wand didn't even move as he delved into the bishop's mind. His command was simple. *Attack them! Now... with your magic! Until they're beaten.*

A wand appeared in Cellach's hand from his long sleeves. Rowena saw it and conjured a shield between them before the first spell could land. It was bright yellow and went soaring up into the sky only to dissipate there. There was an audible gasp in the crowd as they began exchanging spells.

Having every confidence in her ability to handle herself, Harry waited. His desire to destroy the bishop was no less strong than hers, but he knew just how much it meant to her. So, he kept to the side to ensure that none of the onlookers were hurt by a stray spell.

Rowena was better, that much was obvious. But the bishop was no slouch, he attacked relentlessly, just as Harry commanded... at least until he regained control of himself. He shielded himself from a particularly violent purple spell of Rowena's that sent him reeling backward. It hit him with such force that his head snapped back, and his nose began to bleed. He stopped and shook himself,

glancing down at his wand in confusion. It was only then he took in the faces of the crowd around him.

Taking advantage of his growing horror, Rowena disarmed him... rather literally. The cauterized stump of his arm to the elbow was still clutching to his wand as it thudded to the ground. Cellach fell to his knees screaming in agony. He reached into his pocket, grasping for another portkey no doubt, but when he gripped it in his hand, it didn't work.

He crumpled in defeat. The silence of the crowd was deafening as Rowena loomed over the fallen bishop. When he finally looked up, he spat at her. The spittle was tinged red with blood and barely landed on her skirt. Her responding curse made him cry out in pain and marked the end of his resistance.

His words were stilted as he fought through the pain, "Do you think this changes anything, you heathen bitch? What you've done will have all the affect of a rain drop on the rise of the sea."

"Maybe," She leaned down and looked him right in the eye, "or it will be like the pebble that starts the avalanche." Her eyes flitted back to the crowd surrounding them, "Thanks to you, I've given them a story... and stories have a way of taking on a life of their own. If I'm lucky, it will stir doubt in the minds of every Christian who still remembers the gods of their ancestors."

The bishop turned to look at the crowd as well. In their faces he saw shock, anger, frustration, but most of all, judgment. They finally saw him for what he really was, and it forced them to look at all he said in a brand-new light.

"I..." Whatever lies he intended to spill died in his throat with a wave of her wand.

"Now you see the truth of him. He tells you to hate those with our gifts, takes them from their mother's arms wherever he can." She straightened and there was some sympathy in his eyes, "But even he is just a product of the church, one of those children who was once lied to and conditioned until they believed in the god of Rome, the only purpose left to him to ensure your devotion and supplication to the church."

Her wand slashed through the air. At first only Harry knew what she had done, then the thin red line appeared along his neck, seeping blood until he hunched over. *Thud*. His severed head went tumbling to the ground.

Rowena looked to the people in the crowd, "No more. The gods of this land were here long before the church arrived, and they know you still... it's time that you remember them." There was a commotion through the crowd as every crucifix disintegrated to ash whether they were clutched in hands or rested around a neck.

It was then that Harry turned his wand to the church. It creaked as the stones compressed in on themselves. In seconds, there was nothing that remained of the building save the stone floor.

"Go now, return to your homes." Many remained, staring in awe at the pair of them, but others retreated to their homes.

Ragnall was the first to approach them, "All of them are to live? Even if they still cling to their god?"

“The Vikings always leave one alive so they can tell the story,” Harry reminded him, “How many people will tell this one?” He took the point, “Now come, there is still wealth to be found at Causantin’s estates. I wouldn’t have the men denied it.”

There was much that still needed to be discussed. With Causantin captured and displaced, there was no king in Alba, and so a successor would need to be decided upon but those were troubles to be dealt with elsewhere. Looking between them, Ragnall inclined his head and went to command the men.

Moving to Rowena, she was staring at the dead body of the bishop. Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, he guided her away. None dared touch the corpse they left behind for a day, it served only to feed the carrion.
