

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 Asbjorn 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 baying 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.*