

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.