

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 Ansbjorn 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.

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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.

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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.”