

CHAPTER ONE

*The moors of Happrew, near Peebles
Sunday of Candelmas, the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin,
February, 1304*

Cold rain and Black John.

Not the recipe for a happy chevauchee at the best of times, Sir Hal thought, but if you add to that the grim cliff of Bruce's face these days, the endless plootering through February mud and the wreck and ruin and smoulder they passed through, then the gruel of it was all henbane and aloes.

The riders were dripping and miserable as old mud, the horses standing with their heads down, hipshot in a sea of tawny bracken and the clawed black roots of heather and furze; only the moss splashed a dazzle of green into the mirr.

They were quiet, too, Hal saw. The knights and serjeants were all concentrated concern on the coddled wrap of their expensive warhorses, setting wet and sullen squires to checking hocks and hooves which had already been inspected a dozen times. The rounceys the owners actually rode were splattered with mud and weary, but they were of no account next to the destrier, any one of

which could be sold for the price of a good manor in Lothian.

The Scots sat uneasily, talking so softly that the suck of feathered garron hooves pulling from the soft ground, the clink and chink and tinkle of harness and blade sounded loud against their hush. Hal knew why they hunched and spoke in whispers and it had nothing to do with rain or the suspected presence of enemy.

This was Sheean Stank, which no-one cared for, a place where the sheean – the sidhean – folk lived, a sudden knoll in a vast expanse of sucking bog and carse. No more than a score of feet higher than the land around, it seemed a great hill in the flat and everyone knew that this was where a man could be lifted out of this world and into the next, where the Faerie would keep him for what seemed a day, then release him, no older, into a world aged sixty or a hundred years.

Black John Segrave did not care for Faerie much. Cold iron, he had heard, did for those ungodly imps same as it did for Scotch rebels and it was probable that they were one and the same in a land whose features revealed the nature of it and the folk who lived in it – Foulbogskye, Slitrig, Wolf Rig, Bloody Bush. And Sheean Stank.

He glanced across at Bruce, Earl of Carrick and heir to Anandale and tried to keep his face equable, for this was the new favourite of Longshanks and the score of filthy Scotchmen on shaggy, mud-raggled ponies surrounding him were supposedly experts in scouting this sort of terrain. Supposedly loyal to King Edward, too, though Segrave was beginning to doubt both claims.

They were led by Sir Henry Sientcler of Herdmanston, whom everyone called Hal, even his own ragged-arsed scum of a mesnie, and captained by a grizzled hog of a man called Sim Craw, whom Segrave would have hanged at another time just for the insolence in him.

Segrave did not trust any of them and wished that Sir Robert Clifford's men had not become separated from him; there was a sudden sharp needle of fear at the last time he had split up a command, at Roslin the previous year. There had been ruin and death in it then - and a Sientcler involved, too, he recalled uneasily, another one of that arrogant breed this time from Roslin itself; then,

the Sientclers had been enemies and now they were, ostensibly, friends.

He did not trust any of the Scots, even the most English of them – like the Earl of Carrick.

“What think you, my lord?” he demanded, his voice rheumed with damp, “Is the enemy hereabouts? Is it Wallace?”

“So our intelligencers reported,” Bruce replied easily and Hal saw the smile force itself across the heavy face. There was a beard, black and close-cropped in a strange way that included the droop of a moustache and a nap on the chin beneath, leaving the cheeks bare. Hal knew this was because no hair would grow on Bruce’s right cheek, so he had been forced to tailor his chin hair to suit, though it made him look, as Sim Crow had muttered ‘like a wee Frenchie bachle o’ a music’ maister’.

A curlew piped somewhere and then, from the hill, a horseman flew out and down the slope in a flat-out, belly-to-the ground gallop that brought heads up. Hal’s men shifted in their saddles, flexed cold-stiff hands on Jeddart staffs.

Dog Boy came skittering up on the blowing garron, gasping harder than a whale in calf and started his mouth working, silent as a fresh-caught fish, black fuzz of beard dripping and the dags of his hair plastered to his cheeks. No iron hat could keep that thatch in, Hal thought with a wry smile to himself; he marvelled at what the years had made of the skelf-thin kennel lad he had found at Douglas – when was it? The eve of Wallace’s rebellion. Christ’s Wounds – eight years ago ...

“Take a breath,” Sim advised Dog Boy smoothly, “afore ye try to speak.”

“Though it would be good to learn what has sent you to us at the gallop,” Segrave replied, “before they come down on us.”

Hal saw Bruce’s eyes flicker.

“No Roslin Glen here, my lord,” he said, viciously gentle and Segrave jerked as if stung. It was almost a year to the day, Hal recalled, when Segrave made such a slorach of a cheveauchee similar to this that three separated English forces had been scattered in a few hours by Red John Comyn, Sir Simon Fraser and Hal’s Roslin kin

and namesake, Sir Henry Sientcler.

Who had all then gone on to Herdmanston and burned it out, Hal recalled, sullen as old embers at the memory. Kin or not, the Sientclers of Roslin had been in the Scots camp then and Hal Sientcler of Herdmanston was in the Bruce camp. And Bruce was English. Again.

The price for following the Bruce was high – though not for Bruce himself, who had gained the daughter of the powerful Earl of Ulster as wife, new lands and the new favour of an old king wallowing in the winter of his years and pupping his girlish French queen with, so far, two wee bairns.

Now, of course, the Sientclers of Roslin had also bowed the knee, kissed the king's foot and received back their own lands by a gracious Edward trying some velvet on the iron gauntlet.

Yet old wounds never healed in this country and Bruce saw Segrave unconsciously touch his side, where he had broken three ribs and been tumbled from his horse into the grin of Sir Simon Fraser and the other Scots lords, enriching them tenfold in ransom and shredding Segrave dignity as well as purse.

Worse than that was the moment when a second English force had come up and Fraser had argued for killing all the prisoners, fat ransoms or not. The screaming, belly-loosening fear of that lived with Segrave still, even after Fraser had been persuaded otherwise.

Now Sir John Segrave was close to Sir Simon, last hold-out of the Scots lords who had been at Roslin Glen that day and the burning reminder of those ribs and the fear Fraser had put in him grew more fiery the closer Segrave got to ridding himself of the stain of it. Bruce, however seemed determined to keep the memory of it alive and that made Segrave's scowls blacker than his oil-boiled maille.

"What have you seen?" he spat and Dog Boy, rain in his greasy new beard and filth-streaked face, finally managed to blurt it out.

"Weemin, my lord. Ower yon hill."

There was silence and the men uncovering their great cosseted warhorses to the rain paused, wondering if would be necessary. The grimy Scots looked on wordlessly, gripping the hafts of their Jed-

dart staffs, those lance-long weapons which combined spear, cutting edge and hook.

“Women?” Segrave repeated, bewildered by this.

“How many, Dog Boy?” Hal asked, seeing the slow blink of Segrave’s eyes counting down to explosive release.

“A shilling’s worth,” the boy replied, his breathing regular and then, with all the worldly experience of his bare score of years, added: “Fair quines too, in fine dresses.”

“What in the name of God are a dozen women doing out here?” Segrave snapped angrily and heard the low murmur from the men behind Bruce’s back. The Earl smiled, bright and mild.

“My lads mention Faerie, my lord,” he replied. “Perhaps these are they. Pechs. Bogles. The Silent Moving Folk. Sheean.”

At each word, the men behind Hal shifted and made warding signs, some with the cross, others with older symbols they tried to make quick and hidden.

“Christ be praised,” growled Sim.

“For ever and ever,” men muttered automatically. Hal sighed; he knew Bruce was provoking Segrave, but forgetting the effect it had on men who believed. Only Dog Boy had dared ride to the top of the hill in the first place and Hal was proud of the courage that had taken. More of it was needed now.

“Mair like a country event,” he said into the locked stare of Bruce and Segrave and, at last, had the latter turn his wet eyes on him.

“Country event?”

“Mayhaps a tait o’ virgins,” Sim flung in cheerfully. “Getting purified.”

The Dog Boy, still trying to control the trembling in his thighs at what he had done, was sure they were powrie women, for they were strange in their cavorting and one was almost certainly a bogle by the height and the raucous shouts. Still, he couldn’t be entirely certain and did not want to appear like a fool in front of Lord Hal.

“They were dancin’” he ventured and wilted as all eyes clawed his face. “In a ring.”

The thrilling horror of it spilled on them like bad honey, sweet and rotted. Women dancing by themselves would bring the wrath of the Church; only sinners, pagans and the De'il's own did such a thing. And any women moving as one in a secret circle was proof of enough witchery to get them burned.

"Sheean," growled Bangtail Hob from over Hal's shoulder and the men growled their fearful agreement.

"Christ be praised," repeated Sim, but the muttered response was lost in a sharp bellow.

"Christ's Bones," shouted a man from the pack behind Segrave. "Faerie? Silent Folk? If you are afear'd, my Scotch lords, then leave it to good, enlightened Christian Englishmen."

Faces turned to see Sir Robert Malenfaunt, his swarthy face darkened with rage and a scornful twist to his lips. Bruce looked at him and merely smiled lightly, which was enough to crank Malenfaunt's rage up a notch; here were all the men who had once tricked him over the Countess Isabel of Buchan's ransom and, even if it had cost him nothing but dignity, Malenfaunt's pride was worth any price.

Hal only remembered Isabel, who had been the prisoner ransomed from Malenfaunt into his arms for mere weeks before Falkirk's slaughter had ripped everything to shreds and tore her back to her husband. Hal had not seen her since and the dull ache of it was like cold iron in the heart of him.

Segrave regarded Malenfaunt with distaste, for he had heard things about the Berwick knight that were tainted. Yet he was forced to agree with the man's sentiment here and was aware of the others, already swinging up and settling themselves into the high-cantled saddles of their powerful horses, taking lance and shield from hurrying squires, settling domed bucket helms over their heads.

He wanted to wait for Clifford, yet he wondered if the women were whores for the rebels; if so, they would have information...

"Fetch me some Faerie virgins," Segrave said in French to Malenfaunt, "and we will purify them here."

"My lord," Hal began warningly and then stopped as the black look whipped him. Segrave saw, for a fleeting moment, the

spark of Hal's defiant anger from a face beaten to leather by wind and weather, fretted with white lines at the corners of his eyes. Segrave cocked one insouciant challenge of an eyebrow at the flare and saw the storm-grey eyes turn to flint-blue – then Bruce's voice cut through the twisting-rod tension.

“There's one of your Faerie women, my lord.”

They turned, in time to see a fleeting swirl of disappearing skirts; with a whoop and a roar, the warhorses surged forward in a great spray of mud. Someone yelled ‘til-est-hault’ as if it were a hunt.

“Now we will see,” Segrave declared throwing up one hand to ward off the goutts kicked up by the disappearing horsemen.

“I would not want that yin, my lord,” Sim Crow drawled and Segrave turned his wither on this one, seeing the white-streaked black beard and the broad, black-browed face it swamped. Beneath it, a great slab of body smothered in porridge-coloured gambeson nursed a powerful crossbow, wrapped against the rain.

“What?”

“I like my weemin with their chins shaved,” Sim noted casually. There was a moment as the realisation seeped in to Segrave, then he yelped and bellowed at a startled squire.

“Bring them back,” he roared. “Bring them back – God curse it ...”

He turned to Bruce, but had missed that man's silent flick of signal; by the time Segrave sought him out, all he found was the back of the chevronned jupon, trailing a tippet of riders behind him away to the west.

Treachery. The word sprang at Segrave and he felt anger and fear in equal measure. A trap, by God, with Clifford a good gallop behind and Bruce running away and leaving him with yet another Scotch battle against odds. The thought settled something slimed and cold in his belly and he turned to survey his last score of men as the first hundred breasted the ridge and vanished.

Malenfaunt spotted the women at once, breaking apart like scattering ducks, tucking up their skirts and running for the shelter of the woods beyond them. He gave a whoop, peeled off the constricting great helm and flung it away, dropping the lance to free up

one hand, then set himself flying at the runner, leaning sideways a little in the saddle to make it easier to reach out and grab.

Those immediately behind checked a little, mainly because his powerful warhorse kicked up a spray of muddy gobbets, those to right and left spurred on; lances and helms went bouncing, carelessly dangerous, as they followed Sir Robert Malenfaunt's example.

They saw him lean out as he galloped up, slowing to a canter so as to better judge the snatch at the fleeing woman's wimpled head. They saw the woman turn, the wimple and barrette flying away to free a wild tangle of infested hair, the face a bearded snarl; Malenfaunt, gaping like a baby bird, had time to realise the enormous horror of it before the man dropped to a crouch, brought round the two-handed axe he had held hidden in the skirts to his front and scythed out the legs of the destrier.

It was the saving of Malenfaunt. At the same time as he was reeling through the air in a tumble of moss and trees and sky, the edge of the wood spat a sleet of arrows from two points. Between them, moving ragged and relentless, came a clot of spearmen; the shrieking falsities in women's dresses hurled to join them, their lure complete.

Segrave, down at the foot of the small hill, heard the whoops turn to shrieks, almost felt the blows that rang like unseen bells on the shields of the other knights, audible even at this distance and through the muffle of the great iron bucket of his helm. He urged forward, feeling the huge warhorse surge up the sodden slope, the handful of men behind him.

Ruin was beyond and Segrave saw it in a single glance when he breasted the rise. Horses were down, screaming and kicking, others cantering in aimless circles, the riders struggling to get up. He took in the arrows sprouted from tussock and body, saw the dark, bristling hedge of spearpoints - 300 men in it if there was one - and that all the men who had ridden off with Malenfaunt were unhorsed. Every one, half a hundred at least, were crawling like sheep, with horses scattering to every part, or kicking and dying.

He saw, too, the figure on foot, black with surcoat and shield, the silver cinquefoiles bright as stars and his heart thundered

up into his head in a howl of triumph – Fraser, who had all but ruined him in Roslin Glen. By God, Segrave swore, he will not do it again.

It was then that a flurry of arrows took the man next to him out of the saddle and the great Frisian warhorse, screaming from the pain of another two shafts in its chest, bolted then crashed to its knees and finally ploughed its proud Roman nose into a furrow of bog, kicking and snorting blood.

Segrave saw it in an eyeblink of horror. A man to the right saw it, too, and immediately sawed at the reins of his horse, but Segrave had fire and rage shrieking in his head and was not about to stop.

Hal saw Segrave arrive, saw the men with him balk at charging a hedge of points backed by three-score of Selkirk archers, then Bruce, laughing out of his broad face with its music-master beard, pointed to the backs of the archers, took off his great helm and dropped it, then spurred his own warhorse forward.

He had led them in a perfect outflank and it was not a fight but a flat-out chase. The archers heard the thunder of hooves just soon enough to let them turn their heads from killing English to see a score or more of howling Scots on fast-moving little garrons come at their back.

Hal went through the wild scatter of them, trying to rein in the plunging horse and hack at a target, but he was sure he had hit no-one – the mount was no helpful destrier. He saw Bangtail Hob and others chasing running figures, circling in mad, short-legged gallops, for they were more used to fighting on foot than on horse, and he bawled at them, his voice deafening inside the full helm.

He pulled it up and off, pointed and flailed and roared until they all got the idea and started kicking their horses towards the clot of spearmen, who had started, frantically, to form a ring.

Too late, Hal thought, fighting the garron to a standstill, desperately trying to loop the helm into his belt – Segrave's knot of riders, trailing up in ones and twos, smacked into it, picking spots between spears, riding the men into the muddy grass; the spearmen suddenly seemed to vomit running men, like the black yolk of a

rotten egg.

Blades clanged, bringing Hal's head round. He saw Bruce, perfect and poised on the powerful destrier, which baited under his firm rein, huge feet ploughing earth on the spot. To one side Hal saw, with a lurch that took his heart into his mouth, a familiar figure.

The autumn bracken hair was dulled and iron-streaked here and there, the beard a wild, untamed sprout as it had been in the days when Hal had first seen him, before he'd had it neatly trimmed as befitted Scotland's sole Guardian. Yet he stood tall – Christ, he was even taller than Hal remembered – and the hand-and-a-half was twirled easy and light in one hand, the other holding a scarred shield with the memory of his heraldry on it, a white lion rampant on red.

Even as Hal watched, Wallace took a step, fainted and struck, then sprang back. Bruce, light and easy as Wallace himself, parried and the blades rang; the warhorse, arch-necked, snorted and half-reared, wanting to strike out and held in by its rider.

“Get you gone, Will,” Bruce said out of the coif-framed drip of his face. “Get back to France, if you are wise, but get you gone. The war is all but over and you are finished. Mark me”

“My wee lord of Carrick,” Wallace acknowledged lightly, a grin splitting his beard. “Get ye to Hell, Englishman. And if ye care to step aff yon big beast ye ride, I will mark ye, certes.”

Bruce shook his head, almost wearily; someone called out and Hal saw the scuttling shape of a figure he knew well – the loyal Fergus, his black boiled-leather carapace scarred and stained. Beetle, they called him and it was apt.

With Fergus and his broad-axe guarding his back, Wallace backed warily off. He was expecting Bruce to press, the surprise clear in his face when that did not happen. Hal saw Bangtail Hob and Ill Made Jock circle, caught their eye and brought them to a halt; if this was to end in a fight, then it was Bruce's own; he felt sick at the thought of it, sicker still at the idea of having ridden down men he might once have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with. This was what we are brought down to, he thought bitterly, to where even the best of

us can only find it in their hearts to battle one another.

“Get you to France, Will,” Bruce repeated softly. “If you remain, you are finished.”

“If I remain,” Wallace said in good French, sliding further into the dripping trees, “you cannot get started.”

Then, like a wraith, he was gone. Hal heard Segrave calling out to the newly-arrived Clifford and bellowing curses because, somewhere in the trees and confusion, both Wallace and Sir Simon Fraser had vanished.

Hal turned to where Bruce, his face a slab of wet rock, broke his stare from the hole Wallace had left in the air and settled it bleakly on Hal.

“Not a word,” he said and turned away, leaving Hal wondering if he spoke of personal censure or admitting to Segrave that he had let Wallace go. Sim Crow came up in time to hear this and sniffed, then blew rain and snot from the side of his nose, making his own mind up.

“Good advice,” he declared, “for if Black John hears that we had Will Wallace an’ let him loup away like a running hound...”

He did not need to finish. The rain lisped down as the sun came out and curlews peeped as if horror and blood and dying had not visited the Sheean Stank.

“Faerie,” growled Dog Boy to Bangtail, half-ashamed as he stared at the dead in women’s dresses.

Cambuskenneth Abbey, Stirling

Feast of St Terman, confessor of the Picts, June 1304.

“You missed your chance there, my lord earl.”

Bruce did not turn his head, merely flicked his eyes at the broad grinning face of Bishop Wishart, the shadows and planes of it made grotesque in the flickering tallow lights.

"There is one bishop too many in this game," he growled, which made Wishart chuckle fruitily and Hal, frowning with concentration, realise his inadequacy with chess. He was sure he had blundered, surer still that Bruce had missed an en passant; had he done it by accident - the rule was new and not much used - or was it some cunning ploy to lure him into even worse trouble?

"Aye, well," said the blade-rasp voice of Kirkpatrick, looming from the shadows. "Here is yet another."

Behind him, in simple brown robes and tonsure, a figure swept up into the light, swift enough to cause the flames to flicker and set shadows dancing madly. He was, Hal saw, astoundingly young to be a senior prelate, his smooth, round face as bland as old porage, yet his eyes black and shrewd, while the beginnings of a paunch were belied by slim, white, long-fingered hands, one of which he extended.

"Christ be praised," he said portentously.

"For ever and ever."

Bruce rose, kissed the fingers with dutiful deference, then scowled.

"At last," he said sullenly. "We have been waiting, my lord bishop and my time is limited away from the king's side."

"How is the good king of England?" Lambertton demanded cheerfully.

"Sickeningly well," Bruce replied with a wry twist of grin. "He sits at Stirling and plays with his great toys, while his wife and her women look on through an oriole he has made in their quarters. It is a great sport, it seems, for the ladies to watch huge stones being hurled at the walls while they stitch. His two new babes gurgle with delight."

"I hear he has several great engines," Lambertton declared, accepting wine from Wishart's hand and settling himself, with a satisfied sigh. "One called Segrave, I believe, which fires great heavy balls - now there is apt for you. I know this because of all the complaints I have had from wee abbots about the lead stripped from their roofs

to make them.”

“You had better pray for fine weather, else we will all be dripping,” Bruce replied sourly. “Cambuskenneth has also lost all the roofing, save from over the altar, so that God at least will not be offended. And Edward Plantagenet now has twelve war engines. One of them is my own, sent from Lochmaben – minus the throwing arm, mark you, which mysteriously took a wrong turn and will arrive too late to be of use.”

“He has Greek Fire, too, I hear,” Wishart added, with a disapproving shake of his head, “and weapons that burst with the Hellish taint of brimstone.”

There was silence for a moment and Hal did not know what the others were thinking, but his mind was on the stunning sight and sound of those very weapons, great gouts of flame and blasts that hurled earth and stones into the air, fire that ran like water and could not be quenched. Yet the walls of Stirling, pocked and scorched, still held.

“Aye, well,” Lamberton declared suddenly, rubbing his hands as if presenting them to a fire. “Be of cheer – Stirling holds out yet, when all else has given in. Young Oliphant has done well there.”

“Young Oliphant holds out because Longshanks refused to accept his capitulation,” Bruce replied flatly. “He offered it a week since. The king wants to see his newest engine in action, the great Warwolf. Fifty folk it takes to handle it and Edward is determined to have it fling stones at Oliphant’s head before that man is allowed to come out.”

There was silence, broken only by the soft, slithering sound of hesitant feet. Then Lamberton sighed.

“Then all are finally given in,” he said. “Save Wallace.”

Bruce shot the bishop a hard look; Lamberton owed his appointment to Wallace when he was Guardian and needing all the gentilhomme allies he could garner; Bruce wondered how deep the bishop’s obligation went.

Other diehards, finally persuaded to give in, had also been initially excluded from Edward’s conditions for submission - Sir John

Soulis, Sir Simon Fraser, David de Graham, Alexander de Lindsay and even Wishart himself. Yet even they had been forgiven in the end, by a Longshanks who had learned a little from all the previous attempts and was trying the kidskin glove as well as the maille mitten.

All forgiven - all but Wallace.

“That is one problem we are here to discuss,” Bruce began, then broke off as a new figure shuffled painfully into the light. Bent, with a face like a ravaged hawk and iron-grey hair straggling round his ears from under a conical felted hat, the man nodded and muttered thanks to Kirkpatrick as he was helped into a chair, then refused wine with a wave of one weary hand.

“John Duns,” Bishop Wishart announced and the man managed a smile out of a yellow face. Bruce knew the priest by reputation - a man with a mind like a steel trap - but was shocked by his appearance. The cleric was scarce forty.

“The new lord of Annandale,” said Duns, his voice wisped as silk, but his eyes steady on Bruce’s own. “Which title also brings you the claim to the throne of Scotland. Which brings you here.”

“I am here because the realm needs it,” Bruce replied. “It needs a king.”

“Just so,” Wishart said smoothly, before anyone else could speak. “Let us first offer prayers to God that each man here preserves the tone of this meeting, as it were, from the ears of those who do us harm. On pain of endless tortures in Hell - not to mention on earth.”

“And an agreed fine,” Lamberton added, just as smoothly, “that would cripple a nation never mind a wee prelate in it. Was that necessary?”

“It was - but let us pray to Saint Giles,” Wishart responded with some steel, “patron saint of cripples everywhere, that such a thing will never come to pass.”

The soft murmur of the bishops, moth-wings of holiness, brought the face of his father flickering across Bruce’s mind. Prayers would still be being murmured for him, Bruce thought, circling round Holm Abbey like trapped birds. He tried to remember the old man in a better light than the one which usually lit his memory.

Saint-hagged, heavy-witted old man was what he recalled. Burned books and a splintered lute was what he recalled. Beatings, was what he recalled, for paying 'too much mind to that auld reprobate's teachings'.

The auld reprobate had been his grandfather, dinning into him the Bruce claims to kingship and pointedly scorning his own son's inadequacy in that regard as he did so. With some justice, Bruce thought to himself - grandda worked tirelessly to the end to further the kingship cause of the Bruces - God blind me, was he not called The Competitor for it - and my father, apart from one timid plea to Longshanks, did little.

Yet, for all the marring of their relationship by mutual stubbornness and temper there was a last breathed message from his father, brought by Kirkpatrick. For a moment, Bruce's heart leaped at the promise of a final affection - then faltered, stumbled and fell for the last time.

Not before Longshanks is dead.

A simple and stark final advice, with all the love in it the elder Bruce was capable of bestowing. The last legacy of the Bruces; that, Bruce added silently, and the Curse of Malachy.

Hal saw the unconscious gesture, a brush of fingertips against the hairless cheek and knew at once what Bruce was thinking.

So did Kirkpatrick and he and Hal exchanged brief, shared glances while the candles flickered, each man knowing just enough of the tale - something about a previous Annandale Bruce thwarting Malachy the holy man by promising to release a condemned felon and then hanging him in secret. The said priest was angered and cursed the Bruces, a curse made more powerful still when Malachy eventually became a saint.

It had hagged Bruce's father, who had dedicated a deal of Annandale rents to endowing the saint's last resting place at Clairveaux with perpetual candles and masses in an attempt to ease the burden of it.

Bruce fought against the fear of it more often than he would allow - Kirkpatrick, that shadow of the Bruce who was more than servant, less than friend, knew it well enough to never admit

that the man who had breathed his last fetid breath on to that Bruce cheek years before had been named Malachy.

Everyone else here thought he had been called Manon, a dying stone carver Bruce was sure knew a secret and was taking it to the grave, so that he had bent close to him in the hope of hearing his last words. The man had vomited out blood – and the last administered Host, a white wafer floating like a boat in a flood into the Bruce face.

Afterwards, Bruce's cheek had flared with red pustules briefly, but they had faded to dots of white and now no beard would grow on it; Bruce already thought this little flaw a part of the curse – to know the full of it, Kirkpatrick thought, might cause no end of turmoil in the man's mind.

As if he had heard, Bruce's eyes flickered and he dropped his hand, dragged back to the dark room and the eldritch dancing shadows.

"I can count on your lordships' support," he said, cutting into Wishart's final amen. "I am sure of Atholl and Lennox and a great part of the lesser lords – Hay of Borthwick, Neil Campbell of Lochawe for some of the names."

"You are assured of the bishoprics of St Andrews, Glasgow, Dunkeld and Scone," Wishart declared with some pride and looked pointedly at Lamberton, who stroked his hairless chin and smiled.

"Moray, perhaps," he said. "Breachin more certainly. I have yet to sound out the abbot of Inchcolm, but I understand he esteems you well, my lord earl."

"You may have the Abbot of Arbroath," John Duns declared, "provided he is my clerk, Bernard of Kilwinning. A good man, who knows all my thoughts and deserves such an appointment – Longshanks threw him out of Kilwinning Abbey for his loyalty to the Kingdom's cause."

"You cannot crown pawns in this game," Lamberton rebuked sternly. "Only kings."

Duns shrugged.

"No game of chess here, my lords. A horse fair, perhaps, though Bernard is scarcely equine, albeit he works as hard as one –

and has the same appetite, that I can attest. He is, reluctant though I am to admit it, too fine to be my clerk and be taken off to Paris when I return.”

It was hard to take in, Hal thought. With the English king not a handful of miles away throwing stones at Stirling, last defended fortress of a failed rebellion, this wee room in the campanile of Cambuskenneth birkled with fetid plans and trading in favours to make another, with Robert Bruce a defiant king.

Yet it was not enough, Hal thought. Two earls, a wheen of bishops and a rickle of wee lords was not enough when a man planned to make himself king. He did not even realise he had said as much until the silence and the still cold of the stares jerked his head up.

“Kirkpatrick I know,” John Duns said softly, looking steadily at Hal with his black gaze. “This one is a stranger to me.”

“Hal – Sir Henry Sientcler,” Bruce declared brusquely. “Of Herdmanston.”

The black eyes flared a little and John Duns nodded.

“Ah, yes – the one who cuckolded the Earl of Buchan. I understand the Countess Isabel is locked up like a prize heifer these days because of it. The pair of ye had little luck from that sin.”

Hal looked at him for a moment, a grey stare that Bruce did not like, for he had seen it on a calm sea not long before a storm broke.

“You will be John Duns, expelled from university in Paris,” Hal replied eventually. “Hooring, I hear. Dying of the bad humours that has made in your body.”

It was softly vicious and Duns mouth went pursed – like a cat’s arse, Bruce noted with some delight. Then Hal offered a bitterness of smile.

“I am sure there is more to each of our haecceity than these singular events,” he said and Duns blinked in surprise. His face lost the rising colour and the tight mouth slowly broke into a smile.

“You know my doctrine, then?” he demanded and Hal made an ambivalent gesture of one hand.

“He is a singular wee lord,” Bruce interrupted and clapped

Hal on one shoulder, as if he was showing off one of his particularly clever dogs.

“You will know it yourself, of course,” Duns said wryly. “I ken your brother does.”

Now Bruce’s stare was sea-cold; young Alexander Bruce was the scholar of the family and reputedly the best Cambridge had. Bruce himself had arranged and paid for the obligatory feast that celebrated Alexander’s acquisition of Master of Arts the year before – but the implication that the youth was the only educated one in the family rankled.

“I know of your haecceity, the ‘thisness’ that supposedly makes each of us singular,” he replied, his voice a chill gimlet. “I am less convinced by your arguments for the immaculate conception of Mary. I consider it sophistry – but that is not why we are here.”

“Ye have the right of it, my lord,” Hal interrupted, making Bruce’s scowl deepen at the affront. “I know why each of us is here – myself an’ Kirkpatrick because the lord o’ Annandale commands, the bishops because their advice and support is necessary. I dinna ken why this Master Duns is here.”

Kirkpatrick, his sharp hound’s head swivelling backwards and forwards as he followed their exchange, bridled at the presumption of the wee lord from Herdmanston and, almost in the same thought, admired the courage that spoke up. He was sullen at Duns for his ‘Kirkpatrick I know’, the sort of dismissive phrase that was like the fondle of fingers behind a hound’s ear.

He started his mouth working on the sharp retort it had taken him all this time to come up with – then caught Wishart’s eye. The bishop’s frown brought spider-leg brows down over his pouched eyes.

“Master Duns,” he said before Kirkpatrick could speak, his smiling rich voice soothing the ruffled waters, “has a shrewd mind, which we will need for the essential task of squaring a circle.”

“Aye,” Bruce replied laconically. “Trying to get the Comyn to agree to my claims without actually telling them what we plan.”

“That is certainly one problem,” Wishart replied. “There is another.”

Lamberton sighed and waved one languid hand.

“Let us not dance,” he declared flatly. “We have to find a way to convince the Comyn that our cause is just and that the Earl of Annandale has claim to the crown. More than that, of course, we have to justify it to them and all the others.”

“Justify?”

Bruce’s chin was thrust out truculently, but the sullen petted-lip pout of old was long gone and now he looked stern, like a dominie about to chastise a pupil.

“Ye are about to usurp a throne, my lord,” Lamberton declared wryly. “It will take a cunning argument to convince Strathearn and Buchan and the Dunbar of March, among others, that you have the right to it.”

“Usurp a throne?” Bruce spat back and Wishart held up one hand, his voice steel.

“King John Balliol,” he declared and let the name perch there, a raven in the tree of their plans. Balliol, in whose name the rebellion had been raised and fought – the reason Bruce had quit the rebels and sought his own peace with Edward two years ago.

Hal knew that was when the rumours of Balliol returning - handed over by the Pope back to Scotland - had first been mooted by a Longshanks desperately fending off the French and Scots at either ends of his kingdom. The arrival of an old king into the ambitions of Bruce was not something the Earl of Carrick could suffer – so he had accepted Longshanks’ peace and rewards, in the hope of keeping his claims to kingship alive by persuading Edward that a Bruce was a better bet than a Balliol for a peaceful Kingdom.

Yet, not long after that, in a bitter twist of events, had come the Battle of the Golden Spurs, when the Flemings had crushed the flower of French chivalry at Courtrai. Common folk, Hal had heard, in great squares of spears, had tumbled so many French knights in the mud that their gilded spurs had made a considerable mound.

It had forced the stunned French to make peace with Edward and freed Longshanks to descend on the north – the result sat outside the walls of Stirling, hurling balls of fire and holding victory tourneys that the newly-pardoned Scots lords had to watch in

grim, polite silence.

It had also ended any plans to bring Balliol back to his old throne - yet the Kingdom had fought in his name until now. And failed; Bruce was determined to change this.

"Balliol was stripped of his regalia," Bruce reminded everyone, though his growl was weak and uncertain. "By the same king who made him."

"The lords of this realm made him by common consent," Lamberton pointed out and had a dismissive wave of hand from Bruce.

"Nevertheless," Lamberton persisted softly. "Balliol is still king of this realm in the eyes of those who have consistently fought to preserve it. Wallace among them."

"The community of this realm are finished with fighting," Bruce snapped back angrily. "Unless it is to be first in the queue for Edward's peace. Wallace is finished. No matter the harsh of it, that is the truth. This is no longer a Kingdom, my lords - in all the wee documents from Westminster it is writ as 'land' and nothing more. Edward rules it now and his conditions for a return to his loving embrace include charging each lord of this 'land' to seek out and capture Will Wallace. That man is not so well loved that such a command will go begging for long."

"The matter of Balliol is simple," John Duns said and all heads turned to him. His yellowed face was haughty, his fine fingers laced; Wishart felt a stab of annoyance at the infuriating arrogance of the man, tempered with respect for the intellect and steel will that went with it.

Duns had not been expelled from Paris for whoring, as Hal had declared, but for defying the Pope. And he was dying of some slow wasting disease that Wishart prayed to God to make slower still, since the loss of Duns would be a tragedy. Yet he was hard to suffer, all the same...

"We must remake the doctrine of the throne," Duns went on. "As a contract, between the king and community of the Kingdom, to the effect that the Kingdom itself reserves the right to remove an unfit king. Such an unfit king, of course, will be one who permits

the freedom of this realm to be usurped by an invader, as John Balliol does, preferring gilded captivity to a struggle for freedom. Which, gentilhommes, is something no man gives up save with his life. As long as a hundred of us remain to defend it, we will do so.”

They stared at him and he sat, head tilted and preening just a little, for he knew he had slit the Gordian of it – even Kirkpatrick, blinking with the effort of understanding of it, could see the breath-taking genius.

“That last is not my own,” Duns added lightly, “but Bernard of Kilwinning’s.”

Bruce cocked one warning eyebrow.

“That is the only part that is not mere elegant sophistry,” he countered levelly. “Dangerous, too. The best defence for this kingdom has been the confusion and discord of England, thanks to Edward’s own nobles and their attempts to foist Ordinances on his power. Think ye this realm needs such curb on royal power?”

“There is only one ordinance in such a contract,” Duns replied calmly, “and that is to defend the freedom of the kingdom. Hardly a curb of royal power, to insist that a good king do that which he would anyway.”

Bruce nodded, reluctantly. John Balliol had defended the kingdom and suffered for it – since then, of course, he had haunted the French court and the papal skirts defending nothing at all, so Duns’ sophistry worked well enough.

Yet Bruce was English enough to see that the crown of this kingdom was not the same as any other. Kings in Scotland, he had long since discovered, differed from those anywhere else because they had long admitted that God alone did not have the final say in who ruled. The reality for a King of Scots was that his right to rule had long since been removed from God and handed, via the noble community of the realm, to the Kingdom’s every burgher and minor landowner – aye, and even the cottars and drovers who lived there; it was a wise claimant who made his peace with that.

Not King of Scotland, but King of Scots and there was a wealth of subtle meaning in the difference.

Wishart saw Bruce acquiesce, slapped his meaty hands

together and beamed. John Duns was clever, Hal thought, but his kenspeckled words were not enough to convince the Comyn Earl of Buchan, or the Comyn Lord of Badenoch, whose kin John Balliol was. The Lord of Badenoch had his own claim to the kingship and, even if everyone else allowed that John Balliol was too much empty cote to be endured, it was unlikely the Comyn would step aside for Bruce.

Hal did not even have to voice it, for Lamberton did and the arguments swirled like the greasy, tainted smoke of the tallow until Bruce held up one hand and silenced them all.

“Red John Comyn is a problem,” he declared, “which we must address soon. Sooner still is the one called Wallace.”

He looked round the room of shadowed faces.

“He must be persuaded to quit the realm,” Bruce said. “For his own safety and because nothing can proceed while he rants and ravages in the name of King John Balliol. That rebellion is ended, my lords, and will never be resurrected; the next time this Kingdom wars against the invader will be under my banner. A royal one, lords – and against Edward the son, not the father.”

“If what you say is true,” Lamberton with a wry, fox smile, “that might see you with grey hairs of your own. Is Longshanks not in the finest of health, with a new young queen and two wee bairns tumbling like cubs?”

“Besides,” Wishart added mournfully, “Wallace is unlikely to be moved by the argument that he stands in the way of your advancement, my lord Robert. Nor has he been much concerned over his own safety in the past.”

“Leave Wallace and Red John Comyn to me,” Bruce declared grimly and then shot a twisted smile at John Duns. “God and time will take care of King Edward.”

“Affectio Comodi,” he added and John Duns acknowledged it with a tilt of his head.

Affectio Comodi, the Duns doctrine of morality, where happiness is assigned to ‘affection for the advantage’ and true morality to affectio iustito, an affection to justice.

Hal remembered the times the wee dominie his father had

hired 'to pit poalish on the boy' had lectured on that, hands behind his back and eyes shut. Hal had struggled with it then and was more than relieved when the wee priest had given up and gone off to find more fertile pastures.

Justice or advantage. Hal did not need to look at Bruce to see the choice made and had it confirmed later, when he and Kirkpatrick, obedient to the summons, went to the Bruce's quarters.

In contrast to the roomful of plots, this blazed with light from fat beeswax candles and sconces, the flagged floor liberal with fresh rushes. Herbal posies were stuffed into wall crevices and looped round the crucifix which glared malevolently from the rough wall at the men who lolled carelessly beneath it.

They were young men, faces full of impudence and freckles, half-dressed in fine linen shirts, rich-dyed tunics and coloured hose, lounging in a welter of discarded jerkins and cloaks, baldrics, sheaths and ox-blood boots of Cordovan leather with fashionable high heels. A couple of gazehounds nosed the rushes, searching between jug and goblet for the remains of roast meats and chewed fruit.

One of these languid men was Edward Bruce, a warped portrait of his brother, big shouldered, large chested and with the same face, only as if it had been squeezed from forehead and chin. It made his eyes slitted and his grin wider - unlike his brother, he grinned all the time.

Hal saw Kirkpatrick stiffen a little and felt a slight, sudden stab of justified satisfaction; for years Kirkpatrick had been the only retainer Bruce had closeted with him, a shadowy ferreter of secrets - aye, and worse - at Bruce's beck and call. This was the reward for it - supplanted by those Bruce needed more.

Let him taste the bitter fruit of it, as I have, Hal thought savagely. My father dead, my home burned by my own kin after the battle at Roslin Glen, good friends dead in the mud of Stirling and Falkirk. Little reward for the middling folk who had ended up in the Bruce camp.

And Isabel. Her loss burned most of all. Gone back to the Earl of Buchan on the promise that her lover and his home would not be harmed. For six years Hal and she had kept to the bargain,

though there was not a day he did not think of her and wondered if she still thought of him.

And for what? Buchan had found a way to burn Herdmanston to ruin anyway and would, Hal knew, seek a way to kill him. He will come at you sideways, like a cock on a dungheap – his father’s bleak warning echoed down the years.

Now all that was left was shackled to the fortunes of Bruce. Kirkpatrick shared the chains of it, Hal saw, though he had not considered the man an unwilling supplicant until recently, when this fresh mesnie had grown around the new Lord of Annandale and Carrick.

Not great lords, either, but an earl’s bachelor knights, fashionable, preened and coiffured – Alexander Menzies, Crawford of Ayr, Boyd of Noddsdale, Patrick of Skene, Peter of Graden and Robert of Annan, among others.

They stared at Hal and Kirkpatrick as if two aged wolves had stepped into the room, a mixture of sneer at what they considered to be old men out of touch with the new reality, the coming man that was Bruce, and envy that their lord and master treated with such a pair so closely.

Bruce showed the truth of it when he did not bother to announce Hal or Kirkpatrick and indicated that they should draw apart. Into the shadows, Hal saw with a sharp, bitter smile, where we belong.

“Wallace,” Bruce said in a voice so low it was more crouched than a sniffing rat. Neither Hal nor Kirkpatrick replied and Bruce, his eyes baleful in the dim, raked both their faces with an unsmiling gaze.

“Find him. Tell him he has my love – but he must quit Scotland before it is too late for him. If nothing else, he will end up making the name of his captors odious in Scotland, for they will be Scots men, mark me. That is part of Edward’s scheme.”

Kirkpatrick nodded and Hal jerked his head at the distant murmur and laughter at Menzies’ poor attempts to play and sing in the Languedoc of a troubadour.

“Finding him will be hard,” he said, more harshly than he

had intended. "He is a hunted man and unlikely to caw the craic, cheek for jowl, with any as declares they are friends."

Bruce smiled. There had been a time when this would have been as incoherent as a dog's bark, but time and exposure had improved his ear.

"You speak their way," he said to Hal in elegant French, "and understand a decent tongue besides, so you can walk in both camps easily enough. Better yet – you have dealt with Wallace before this and the man knows you. Trusts you even. In case he does not, Kirkpatrick knows what to do when men come at you from the shadows."

"A comforting thought," Kirkpatrick answered in equally good French, though his burr added a vicious twist to the wry delivery. "Why not ask Crawford there? Is he not kin to Wallace?"

Bruce merely looked at him until Kirkpatrick dropped his eyes. Only the auld dugs would do for this, he thought. At least it means he trusts us, as he does no others.

Hal cleared his throat, a sign the other men knew meant he had something difficult to hoik up on the way. They waited.

"Wallace kens what is hid in Roslin," Hal said flatly. Bruce said nothing, though the problem had nagged him. He had arranged for the Stone of Scone to be supplanted by a cuckoo and the real one carried off to Roslin. Murder had been involved in it and, in the end, Wallace had found out. He had done nothing then – Falkirk fixed that – and said nothing since; Bruce now wrestled with the problem of whether he would keep his silence.

The earl eventually shrugged, as if it no longer mattered.

"Mak' siccar," he said to Kirkpatrick and then turned away.

Later, in the cool breeze of a summer's night, Hal stood with Kirkpatrick and watched the flaring fire from Stirling, heard the sometime thump as the wind veered.

"Edward will be getting a lashin' from his young queen," Kirkpatrick noted wryly, "for keeping the royal bairns up wi' such racket."

"He is not short of pith for an auld man," Hal answered. "I fear our earl will have to be doucelike patient if he waits for

Longshanks to get kisted up afore he makes his move.”

“If Wallace remains it will be longer than that,” Kirkpatrick answered. “So we had better be on the trail of it.”

“What did he mean,” Hal said, “by his parting words?”

“Mak’ siccar?” Kirkpatrick smiled sharply. “Make sure Wallace is found and given the message, of course. That he stands in the way.”

Hal watched Kirkpatrick slide into the shadows and wondered.

Stirling Castle

Vigil of Saint James the Apostle, July 1304.

He knelt in the leprous sweat of full panoply, hearing the coughs and grunts of all the other penitents suffering in the heat – yet ahead of him, Bruce saw the straight back and brilliant white head of the king, rising up from the humble bow to look to where the prisoners knelt, humbler still; he could imagine the smile on Edward’s face.

Oliphant’s face was a grey mask, not all of it from the ashes dumped on his head; together with the hemp noose round his neck, it marked his contrition and the final humiliation of surrender. Behind him, as suitable a backdrop as a cross for Jesus, the great rearing throwing arms of the Berefay, the Parson, Segrave and the notorious Warwolf leered triumphantly at the pocked and blackened walls of Stirling.

“O gracious God, we remember before thee this day thy servant and apostle James, first among the Twelve to suffer martyrdom for the Name of Jesus Christ ...”

The Bishop of Ross was a pawky wee man with a matching voice, Hal thought, and then offered apology to God for the impiety, true though it was.

Still, he was also a prelate trusted by the English, more so than the ones he and Kirkpatrick and Bruce had quit only weeks before at Cambuskenneth. Better still, being full of his own self-importance, he had handled the entire affair of the surrender of Stirling fortress with suitable gravitas.

Just as well, for a single snigger would have undone the wonderful mummery of it – the stern, implacable Edward, ordering the gralloching of Olpihant and the other supplicants staggering out of Stirling with their hempen collars, draped in white serks and ashes. The beautiful young Queen, begging in lisping French for her imperious husband to relent and spare them, for the grace of God and on this day of days, the Vigil of St James the Martyr.

Three times she and her women, Bruce's Irish countess among them, had pleaded and twice Edward had loftily refused, perfectly coiffured silver head and rouged cheeks tilted defiantly skywards, while everyone watched and tried to remain suitably dignified.

And then, when the weeping and wailing had worked its inevitable magic and the rebels were spared, the collective sigh exhaled by everyone watching all but rippled the trampled grass.

“God be praised,” finished the Bishop.

“For ever and ever.”

The reply from a host of murmured lips was like a covey of birds taking flight and the rest of the Augustinians went off into chant and slow march, swinging their censers; the acrid thread of incense caught Bruce by the throat and he heard the subtle little catch of breath next to him.

Head bowed, draped so that he could only see the half-moon of eyelash on cheek, his wife was young and beautiful. Creamed flesh and black hair, a true Irish princess was Elizabeth and Bruce tried to think of her and not her powerful father, the de Burgh Earl of Ulster.

She was polite and deferential in public, a delight in private, so that love with Elizabeth was no sweating work of grossness.

He did what he wanted, feeling her writhe and knowing that she took pleasure in it, so that there was for him, too.

Yet, afterwards, there was always the memory of Belle, his hand on her small, heaving bosom, feeling her life drain away, seeing the baby she left. Poor Marjorie, he thought with a sharp pang of guilt and regret, I have not done well by that child.

And before, with Belle, in those times when he felt he could believe in the power of sheean magic, in that lazy hour of lying together when outlines hazed and a sunbeam slant, danced with golden motes, could make his heart ache; when the scent of her hair made the blood prickle.

Then there was the memory of her face, still as peached marble and the light gone from it; Bruce knew that a deal of light had gone from him, too, in that moment and it was a bleak wasteland of realisation, so long in seeping into him, that there was no way to get it back.

In the day Elizabeth de Burgh was dutiful. In the night, she was wanton and that was workable – in the night, he thought, I lose my ability to see. No hair colour. The glint of her eyes, sometime, as if they were looking; he knew they seldom did, either focused elsewhere or glassed as sea.

Yet she writhed, he thought. She gasped like a stranded fish and there was enjoyment. Did she, like him, bless the dark, all the same? For in the dark, mercifully, you can't tell one body from another.

Or almost so. Belle was slim as a wand, with breasts like nuts. Elizabeth is as lush as the lands she brings to me, Bruce thought. Lush as cream off the spoon and even so young she is heavy-breasted, wide-hipped so that even the dark cannot hide it all. The Curse of Malachy, he thought, to have the world and taste only ashes – would it be like this even when he was king?

She rose, smoothing her dress, adjusting her wimple, smiling at him gently, making an expression of winsome regret as she began to move to the side of the equally young Queen, who met his gaze and smiled with bland eyes below a pale forehead and brows almost blonde. For all her youth, three nearly invisible lines already

touched that brow, as if the age of her husband was leaching into her, too.

Ashes. The taste drifted to his mouth, palpable, so that he turned in time to see a brown hooded figure signing the cross at a man in white, neck-roped and clouded with flying ashes where he had shaken himself free of them. The ceremony over, Oliphant was smiling at the chance to wash and get back into decent clothes.

“Ave Maria, gratia plena,” intoned the monk. “Ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae ...”

Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Not that Oliphant faced death now or anything near it, Bruce thought. He had won himself a deal of fame by holding out so long and even managed to avoid serious injury or penance; Bruce nodded acknowledgement to the man and had back a grin that bordered on sneer from the grey-smearred face.

Bruce felt movement at his elbow and turned into the curious stare of Hal, felt unnerved as he often did when he found the man looking at him. He did it more and more these days, as if silently accusing, though Bruce did not know for what – unless the Countess Buchan, of course, the poor wee man’s lost light of love, who had been Bruce’s initiation into the serious arts of the bedchamber once.

Hardly that, all the same, Bruce thought, for he has known of that since the beginning and made his peace with it. Herdmanston, then? Burned out, it needed rebuilding and I promised him aid in it, but God’s Blood, the man was on wages for himself and thirty riders which took the rents of a couple of good manors. Surely he realised that rebuilding his wee rickle of stones in Lothian was no great priority when a throne was a stake?

Yet he smiled, at him and Kirkpatrick both; they were useful, though not the pillars to support a man who would be king. Still, he needed their questing-dog purpose even if, so far, it had come to nothing; he knew they smarted over their failure to find Wallace, knew also that they would not give up if only because of their rivalry in it. Bruce smile widened; divide and conquer, the first rule of kings.

The monk and Bruce watched the prisoners stumble off,

then the monk turned and Bruce gave a start, for he knew the face. So did Hal, coming up on his elbow and into the smeared smile of the little man he remembered as one less than holy.

“Benda ti istran plegrin: benda, marqueta, maidin. Benda, benda stringa da da agueta colorada,” the monk intoned with a grin as brown as his robe.

“Kirkpatrick,” Bruce called and the shadow was beside him instantly, scowling; Hal became aware of the rest of Bruce’s mesnie, suspicious and sullen, closing in.

“Lamprecht,” Kirkpatrick said, as if the name was soiled fruit in his mouth. The man admitted his name with a bow and a quick flick of his head left and right, to see who was within earshot; he did not like the presence of so many armed men and said so, then repeated the phrase he had used before.

“Andara, andara, o ti bastonara,” Kirkpatrick growled and Hal saw the looks Bruce’s noblemen gave one another – but none asked what they all wanted to know, namely what tongue the man used.

Hal knew, from the last time he had met the little pardoner; it was *lingua franca*, the old crusader language, a patois of every tongue spoken along the Middle Sea, with more than a dash of heathen in it. Pilgrims used it and the last time Hal had seen this Lamprecht he had been claiming himself to be one, with shell badge in a wide-brimmed hat and a collection of relics and indulgences; the meeting had not been profitable for him and Hal was suspicious – what had brought him back here, of all places?

“What is he saying?” Bruce demanded and Kirkpatrick, who was the only one who spoke the tongue, revealed that the little man, his pouched face shrouded in rough brown wool, was begging alms. Kirkpatrick had told him to go or be beaten.

“Peregrin taybo cristian, si querer andar Jordan, pilla per tis jornis pan que no trobar pan ne vin.”

Good Christian pilgrim, if you want to journey to the Jordan, take bread with you, for you will find no bread or wine; Kirkpatrick translated it and someone laughed as the priest held out one grimy hand with half a chewed loaf in it.

“Is he trying to sell you bread?” demanded Edward Bruce, his voice rising with incredulity. “Be off, priest,” he added though he did it politely, for there was no telling what powers a pilgrim friar had – or what such a one might become after death. The Curse of Malachy, Bruce thought wryly, seeing his brother’s scowling fear.

Hal saw the gleam in Lamprecht’s eyes, like animals in the dark of the cowl. He glanced at Bruce and saw he had seen the same. There was a moment – then Bruce reached out, took the bread and turned to Kirkpatrick.

“Give him a coin.”

Lamprecht, with obvious delight, took the coin from under Kirkpatrick’s scowl, frowned at how small it was, then made it disappear.

“Cambuskenneth,” he said, clear as new water, then he was gone, leaving bemused men looking at his scuttling back. Edward Bruce looked at the bread, then smiled his broad, slit-eyed grin, his cheeks knobbed as late apples.

“I would not eat that if I were you, brother.”

He went off, hooting, while the others trailed after him. Bruce looked at the halfloaf, rough maslin with a grey dough interior, indented as if someone had poked a finger in it. He scooped, found something hard and pulled it out; Kirkpatrick whistled, then looked right and left while Bruce closed his fist on the object and moved on, nodding and smiling as if it was the everyday thing for the powerful lord of Carrick and Annadale to be holding one half of a poor loaf.

But all of them had seen the red gleam of a ruby, big and round as a robin’s egg and that itself would have been marvel enough. Bruce knew more, knew that ruby and its eleven cousins when they had been snuggled up next to each other along the length and breadth of a reliquary cross last seen tucked under the arm of an English knight heading south to Westminster.

Inside the jewelled and gilded crucifix casket, Bruce knew, had lain the Holy Black Rood of Scotland.