

PROLOGUE

Douglas, Lanark

Feast of St Drostan the Hermit, July 11, 1296

The worst part had been the dark. No moon, no stars, just the whispering of lost souls searching the wind for a way home, or a body to slither into for the memories of warm blood and life. There had been owls and he did not like owls, for they shrieked like Cyhiraeth, goddess of woodland streams, who wraiths through the dark screaming at those about to die.

Gozelo knew he should not allow himself to believe in such matters, being a good Christian, but his grandmother, old Frisian that she had been, had stuffed his head with such tales when he'd been younger. It only came out when he was ruffled and fretted and even God would have to admit that this country He had clearly forsaken did ruffle and fret.

Not the country so much as the Cloaked Man. Gozelo shivered and dragged his own cloak tighter round him, moving on into the silvered dawn and happy to see the light. He had been heading for Carnwath, held by the Lord Somerville – English or not, he was at least light and heat and, above all, safety – but the dark had put paid to that

and Gozelo was now certain he had missed that place and was headed for Douglas.

He worried that a man limping in on foot would be sent away with a curse and a waved spear. A man on a horse had status while one slithering through the wet summer dawn on ripped shoes, with a cloak and tunic stained with hard travel, was nothing at all, even if he was a Flemish Master Mason from Scone. Not only that, Gozelo knew that Douglas was home to a nest of former rebels, who could not be trusted to keep out the ones he was sure now hunted him.

Something whirred and Gozelo started, looked wildly round and hurried on. He should never have taken the task but that old mastiff-faced Bishop Wishart had cozened him into it with flattery and promises of a fat purse. Not that making the piece had been difficult and Manon had seen to the carvings; Gozelo did not doubt now that the poor stone worker was dead.

Then the Cloaked Man had appeared with a cart and a worn horse for it and the Fleming realised that they were taking the original and leaving the cuckoo in its place. Manon, he had been told, was paid and gone already; that was when the chill, cold as altar stone, had sunk into his very soul.

‘We take this to Roslin,’ the Cloaked Man had said in French. ‘There you will be paid, both for your skill and to keep your mouth closed on this matter.’

If it had just been the Cloaked Man who had schemed all this, Gozelo would never have countenanced it at all – but it had been a bishop, no less, who had broached the subject of it. Gozelo thought Bishop Wishart a singular churchman at the time, had basked in the warm flattery and the promise of riches until the long struggle after the cart, the relentless wet – Christ in Heaven, was there no other weather in this Scotland? – and the gibber of his own fears had melted his resolve like gold in the assay. The Cloaked Man, grim as a wet cliff, became more and more sinister with each passing mile until, no more than

a good walk from Roslin, the last of Gozelo's courage crumbled and he ran.

The Cloaked Man had thought hard about it. Gone off without the fat purse and in a panic for his life, having finally worked out the possibilities. Aye, well – smart wee man that he was, he would work out more when his legs stopped long enough to let his mind start running. Like how to make up the lack of fat purse. He would head for Lanark and the English sheriff, Heselrig, where he would tell all he knew.

It was, the Cloaked Man noted, just as Wishart had said, calling him aside with a quiet: 'If you trust *os vulvae*, then you are a fool. Go with God, my son.'

The Cloaked Man had to admit the bishop had been right, both about the Fleming's character and how his mouth, wet-lipped and surrounded by a silly fringe of beard and moustache, did look like a woman's part if you turned your head sideways. The Latin of it, *os vulvae*, the Cloaked Man decided, sounded better than the English – cunt face.

Of course, the Cloaked Man reasoned, clucking the weary pony up to the castle at Roslin, this Fleming may just head on to Dumfries and the English border. He was a Master Mason, after all, and would not be short of work for long.

Sir William Sientcler, the Auld Templar of Roslin, gave him a good, fast hobin horse and a sharp, meaningful glance when this had all been laid out to him.

'Mak' siccar,' he said and the Cloaked Man nodded. He would make sure.

Gozelo could see the faint lights in the dark and almost sobbed with the relief of it, for he was now close to Douglas and could find shelter there before going on to Lanark. He would tell all he knew, he thought viciously, for what the Cloaked Man had put him through. He had convinced himself that he had been right to run before he had been black murdered in the dark. He would never return to this country again and would tell all he knew to the English, even after

what they had done to the Flemings – some of them kin – in Berwick. They would pay, too and offset the loss of the promised purse. What was a silly stone to him, after all?

The shape rose up from behind the last fringe of trees leading to the water meadow that ran down to the shrouded bulk of the fortress and the so-near lights. Gozelo screamed, high as an owl, but it was all too late.

‘You went off without your due,’ the Cloaked Man said mildly and Gozelo fell back, babbling wildly, in French, English – any language that came to him. He was only vaguely aware of his bowels running down his leg, his mind a mad whirl of pleas that his mouth could not get out quickly enough.

‘You’ll say nothing?’ the Cloaked Man repeated, catching one of them as it spewed out, and saw the Fleming nod so wildly it seemed his head would fly off.

The Cloaked Man nodded sympathetically, then reached up with both hands to draw back the hood and show himself to the moon. The pallid light of it did nothing for his face and made the four-sided sliver of steel in one fist wink; Gozelo shrieked so high only dogs could hear him.

‘Best mak’ siccar,’ said the Cloaked Man into the Fleming’s bewilderment, stepping close and punching once; Gozelo leaned against him like a spent lover, then was gently slid to the mulch and the undergrowth.

The Cloaked Man wiped the dagger clean on the Fleming’s cloak, took what he needed from the unresisting corpse and left, leading the horse until he was sure he was clear away.

It was, he suddenly realised, the day after Longshanks had decreed for all Scotland’s community of the realm to meet at Brechin and witness what happened to a king who defied English Edward.

There had been, no doubt, humiliation and lies and viciousness. Edward would already have packed up the Rood and the Seal and the Stone as he had threatened, stripping both King John Balliol and kingdom of authority.

But Longshanks did not have all of Scotland in his grasp – one small part of the Kingdom had been taken from his fist.

The Cloaked Man smiled, warmed by the thought even as the summer mirr soaked him.