

THE CREAM OF CHIVALRY

A Short Story By

James Vella-Bardon

Tearaway Press

TEARAWAY PRESS

Copyright

Published by Tearaway Press 2022

PO Box 477, Belrose West, Sydney NSW2085

Copyright © James Vella-Bardon 2022

James Vella-Bardon asserts the moral right

to be identified as the

author of this work.

ISBN: 978-0-6451230-4-3

This novel is a work of fiction.

The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to read the text of this book. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of the author.

Typesetting by Rafael Andres

To our mate Dery and his big heart.

Historical Backdrop

On 19 March 1286, King Alexander III of Scotland dies after falling off his horse. His granddaughter and sole heir, Margaret the Maid of Norway, also dies unexpectedly four years later. Upon finding itself without a monarch, the Scottish parliament appoints six Guardians of the Realm to select the next king of Scotland. Due to the looming threat of civil war, the Guardians invite the neighbouring King Edward I of England, renowned for his warlike nature and huge ambition, to help them choose the next king of Scotland.

Upon receiving the Guardians' invitation, Longshanks travels north to meet them with a huge English army. He accepts their invitation to choose a new Scottish king, if they recognise him as overlord of Scotland. Longshanks' attitude instantly worries the Guardians, who fear that he has designs to control his smaller neighbour to the north.

The main rivals to the Scottish throne are the Comyns and the Bruces, who are Scotland's most powerful families. To the Bruces' great dismay, Longshanks decides to choose John Balliol as the new Scottish king, who is supported by the Comyns. Yet the English king proceeds to treat Balliol like his vassal, while involving the Scots in wars that do not concern them. The Scots rise up against Longshanks under both Balliol and eventually the famous patriot William Wallace. Yet all Scottish uprisings are quashed by Longshanks, with Balliol fleeing to France and Wallace torn to pieces by the English in 1305.

With Balliol gone, the leading bishops of the Scottish

church eye the learned Robert the Bruce, a powerful knight in the court of Longshanks in London, as the next Scottish king. With the secret blessing of the Scottish bishops, the Bruce enters into a secret pact with his rival the Red Comyn, with the Red agreeing to support the Bruce's claim to the Scottish throne to effectively become the second most powerful man in the realm.

Yet the Red proceeds to reveal this secret pact to Longshanks, who is enraged. The Bruce barely manages to flee England with his life, then slays the Red Comyn in a chapel in Dumfries. This outrageous act turns half of Scotland against the Bruce, who proceeds to obtain absolution for the slaying of the Red from the Scottish church. The Bruce is also crowned King of Scotland at Scone on 25 March 1306, an act that further enrages Longshanks in London. The Bruce is instantly declared an outlaw by the English king who also convinces the Pope in Rome to excommunicate the new Scottish king.

Longshanks also orders the Earl of Pembroke, brother by marriage of the late Red, to lead an army to Scotland. Pembroke's invasion is as swift as it is unexpected, as his army proceeds to capture two of the leading Scottish bishops before taking the city of Perth. Meanwhile the Bruce hastens to assemble an army in those Scottish domains that recognise his kingship. No sooner is this accomplished, than the new Scottish king marches south to Perth to face Pembroke and protect his kingdom from the invading English force...

I

Perth to Methven, 18-19 June 1306

It was late afternoon when Clifford was summoned to the city gates. The soldiers found the Warden of the Marches in bed, recovering from his exertions over recent days. For the English had only recently taken the city of Perth after a long journey north. Yet although Clifford was tired, he was soon on his feet. For he was nothing if not always keen to attend to his duties. The flint-faced, battle-hardened veteran served the Crown in every way no matter how arduous or trying, earning himself a solid reputation among his peers. So he never once complained as his squire helped him into his mail. Yet no sooner was his sword belt fastened, than he issued a low sigh upon learning that the Bruce approached the Red Brig Port.

The city was all astir at the sight of the Bruce's approaching army. On the parapets men could already be heard yelling and pointing beyond the walls. Clifford did his best to ignore the awful stink of tanneries as he and his men silently made their way down the length of the Skinnergate. They next climbed the steps to the top of the gate where English and Scottish lords were already gathered. Clifford ignored the knaves who bowed reverentially to him, then spotted the azure lion on the yellow surcoat of the Earl of Percy. Percy scowled and wrinkled his nose as the Warden stepped alongside him.

'Trust the damned Bruce to approach from the north,'

said the Earl, for the stench of the tanners' pits just outside the city walls was as bad as that from the Skinnergate.

Clifford nodded politely, as he took in the view of the countryside beyond the city walls. Hundreds of men could be seen making their way towards Perth, after fording the rivers Almond and Tay that sparkled in the sunlight. To the right of the Tay, the Warden could make out the old Augustinian priory in the village of Scone, where the Bruce had been crowned king of Scotland less than three months earlier.

Clifford frowned at the approaching force and at the first grey clouds to the west which were being blown inland. He quickly crossed himself and hoped that the rainclouds, together with the stench of the pits and the approach of the Bruce's army, were not a bad omen. Yet he next berated himself for his little faith, since he knew that the English cause was righteous and they had much on their side.

The previous days had, after all, been glorious summer weather, ever since the earl of Pembroke had led them past the Borders. The English advance north had been a rapid one, as they even surprised and captured the Scottish bishops of Glasgow and St Andrews. Both clerics were loyal supporters of the Bruce, so that they were both sent to England in chains to meet with Longshanks' justice. The Warden was also reassured by the many Scottish lords who had joined the English army, causing it to more than double in number. These nobles were all supporters of the Comyns who hated the Bruce.

As the Bruce's army drew nearer, men drew their breath at the sight of the Scottish king's standard bearer, as the banners of the Saltire and the lion rampant flapped wildly in the summer breeze. The Warden studied the other riders in the vanguard, noting with a scowl that many of the Scottish king's knights wore white linen shirts over their surcoats, so that they could not be recognised.

Yet we'll find out who they are, soon enough, thought Clif-

ford, *'in time all will pay.'*

'It seems,' remarked Percy, 'that the Bruce rides to the city gate to address us.'

'So it seems, my lord,' replied Clifford.

'Chivalrous,' observed Percy with a note of mild astonishment, 'for an excommunicated, outlawed, murderous usurper.'

'Tracherous dog!' bellowed someone behind them, 'does he seriously have the gall to show his face here?!'

Percy and Clifford never looked back, for they instantly recognised the voice of Sir Philip Mowbray. Sir Philip was the uncle of the recently murdered Red Comyn, who had been slain in a chapel by the Bruce and his men. It was an act which had sparked the ire of half of Scotland, which supported the Comyns' claim to the Scottish throne.

Yet their anger was nothing when compared to the rage which had erupted in London, for the English king, Edward Longshanks was incensed upon receiving news of the Bruce's coronation. Longshanks had swiftly appointed the Earl of Pembroke as special Lieutenant in Scotland and ordered him to ride north at the head of an army. Pembroke's own sister Joan had recently been widowed by the Bruce, since she was the wife of the Red Comyn killed at Dumfries. All of which meant that Longshanks' special Lieutenant did not need much encouragement to ride to Scotland and hunt down the Scottish king.

'Hail, my lords' said Mowbray as he stepped alongside them, then fell silent as Clifford jerked his head sideways.

All present knelt and bowed as they noticed the Earl of Pembroke walking towards them with a severe expression. Longshanks' special Lieutenant in Scotland cast a knightly figure in his chain mail, worn beneath the blue and white rings on his surcoat. The red martlets across his breast completed the colours of his house. Pembroke's eyes were like a pair of robin eggs, with their pale blue hue unnerving most

people they fell upon. The Earl briefly looked askance at Clifford who nodded back to him, so as to confirm the reported numbers led by the Bruce. Then Pembroke swiftly withdrew his stare and stepped towards the battlements.

Alongside him a dozen Welsh archers fitted arrows to their bows, producing the sound of creaking strings as the Bruce's army ground to a halt. The Scottish knights in the front were a fair few feet away from the ditches and the tanners' pits, yet already complaining of the stench of animal entrails. Clifford could hardly blame them, for although he had stood on many battlefields filled with the stench of gore, the stink at the Red Brig Port was unbearable.

Eventually the Bruce's standard bearer, Sir Alexander Scrymgeour, kicked his steed towards the walls. Scrymgeour had not hidden his house's colours, for he had once been standard bearer of the Scottish patriot William Wallace, as well as being the first knight to declare for the Bruce. A golden lion holding a scimitar adorned his scarlet surcoat, as his knave issued a loud bugle blast.

'All hail His Royal Highness, King Robert Bruce of Scotland!' yelled Scrymgeour, warily eyeing the bowmen atop the walls, 'he who holds dominion over all these fair lands, whose city you unlawfully occupy! Surrender to His Majesty, who may forgive your unlawful invasion! Surrender, and you may yet leave these lands to return to your homes and your wives and children!'

Pembroke never once acknowledged Scrymgeour or his words. He looked on impassively as the standard bearer withdrew and the Bruce himself rode forward. The Scottish king cast a formidable figure with a rampant red lion adorning the breast of his yellow surcoat, and a golden circlet upon his head. A great murmuring was heard upon the walls of Perth, for the Bruce was one of the most formidable warriors of his age. He was also possessed of an awesome, kingly aura, despite being an excommunicated outlaw. As he drew rein

within a few feet of the pits, the Bruce rose in his stirrups and called out to Pembroke.

‘Hail, my lord Pembroke! Will you cede the castle?’

For a few instants the two famous knights beheld each other in silence.

‘No,’ replied Pembroke.

The Bruce appeared to be taken aback by the curt answer, as his horse pawed the ground and whinnied. Then a low murmuring was heard along the battlements again, as the king proceeded to raise the visor on his helmet. Clifford noted that the Bruce’s face was somewhat haggard, despite his recent ascendancy to the Scottish throne.

As is to be expected, thought Clifford, for who would wish to trade places with him right now? More than half the Scots want him dead for slaying the Red, and the English king wants his head on a spike. We thought he’d never show his face, and yet here he is.

‘Mad King Robin!’ yelled Mowbray alongside Clifford, stunning the Warden of the Marches with his sudden outburst.

‘Usurper!’ screamed the Earl of Percy, who stood alongside Sir Philip.

Pembroke was irritated by the men’s yelling and he whirled upon them with a glare of foreboding. The earl’s standing ensured that his dark stare served as sufficient reprimand. For both noblemen instantly fell silent as Pembroke returned his attentions to the Scottish king below him. On his part the Bruce appeared to be cursing beneath his breath and struggling to bridle his anger at the men’s insults, while his soldiers yelled threats at the walls. As he breathed the rank air Clifford prayed that the leaders of both armies would resume their dialogue. He was relieved when the Bruce finally spoke again.

‘If you will not cede the castle, Pembroke, will you bring your men out to fight? I shall withdraw my army until you

take up your positions on the field.’

‘Very chivalrous,’ replied the special Lieutenant sharply. ‘But alas, Bruce, the day is far too advanced for combat. Yet I will readily meet your challenge tomorrow morning.’

The Scottish king fell silent for a few moments, then called out again.

‘Very well, my lord. Yet do I have your word that you will ride out?’

‘Of a certainty,’ replied Pembroke, ‘I swear that my army shall ride out. You have my word.’

The Bruce appeared to mull over the special Lieutenant’s reply, then nodded slowly.

‘Very well my lord, until our next meeting.’

The Scottish king kicked his horse away from the walls, back towards his men. Clifford was in awe as he watched the Bruce ride off. He could never imagine disobeying a single order by the English king, let alone lead a hopeless revolt against him.

The man is indeed mad, thought Clifford, and now we have snared him.

Meanwhile Pembroke quickly turned on his heel and walked over to the Warden of the Marches, who instantly fell to one knee.

‘No dragon banner,’ remarked Pembroke, as he looked at the St George’s flag flapping atop Perth castle.

Clifford said nothing as he met the earl’s stare.

‘Very good,’ said the special Lieutenant, ‘have it raised at dawn.’

He looked away and walked past Clifford, who felt like he was about to burst with pride.

The Bruce rode his palfrey in the direction of the two rivers, keen to flee the awful stench of the pits. His subalterns quickly spurred their horses after him, beckoning to their men to follow them. The summer sun was at noontime height as the

Bruce veered to the right of his large body of soldiers, then galloped towards the banks of the Tay. He drew rein when he finally reached the womenfolk, who were guarded by his brother-in-law, Sir Christopher de Seton.

De Seton cast a forbidding figure as he glowered at the Scottish king. The Bruce sometimes thought that Sir Christopher had not forgiven him for the outrage at the chapel in Dumfries, when the Bruce and his men slew the Red Comyn. Sir Christopher had been involved in the resulting brawl, even killing a Scottish lord who was about to end the Bruce's life. The Bruce shivered at the memory of the terrible affair, then realised that de Seton's eyes still bore into him.

'So will Pembroke engage?' asked his brother-in-law.

'He has sworn to ride out tomorrow,' said the Bruce, 'we will engage with his army then.'

De Seton tilted his head sideways.

'Curious,' he said, 'very curious.'

'He has not our numbers,' replied the Bruce.

Sir Christopher was silent for a few moments as he mulled over his king's reply.

'Perhaps...our spies said he crossed the Forth with three thousand...'

The Bruce nodded, for both he and de Seton knew that their army was made up of four thousand five hundred men.

De Seton said nothing more while the Bruce's sister Mary spoke up behind him, addressing her brother.

'So where to now, Your Highness?'

'The Earl of Atholl, John de Strathbogie, knows these parts,' replied the Bruce, 'he mentioned a clearing near a village called Methven. We should repair there.'

So saying, the king spurred his horse westwards along the River Almond. His queen, Elizabeth de Burgh, was soon riding alongside him. His subalterns next caught up with him, with the Bruce's brother Eideard breaking the silence.

'The men are in high spirits about tomorrow's battle.'

‘That is good tidings,’ replied the Bruce.

‘Your first battle as king,’ declared the Black Douglas, who rode behind Eideard.

Sir James Douglas, also known as the Black Douglas, had received his education in Paris following the death of his father William the Hardy. He subsequently returned to Scotland and served as the squire of Bishop Lamberton, then swore loyalty to the Bruce shortly after the Red was slain at Dumfries. In the brief time he had spent with the Scottish king, Douglas had already shown himself to be a wily and resourceful sort.

‘So will he show?’ asked Eideard Bruce, the Earl of Carrick, with a note of concern in his voice.

‘Of course he will show,’ said Thomas Randolph, the king’s squire and nephew, ‘there is no knight more honourable than the earl of Pembroke. He is a man of his word, and the cream of chivalry.’

‘Why, you hold him in high esteem, nephew,’ remarked the Bruce’s brother with a chuckle.

‘The very highest esteem,’ said Randolph, ‘for all who know him, know I speak true.’

‘Shut your face, Tam,’ sneered Douglas, and most of the men burst out laughing.

Randolph turned crimson, while resisting the urge to draw his sword and turn on the Black Douglas. For Douglas’ cocksure bearing and confidence greatly irked the more deferential Randolph, particularly since they were both the same age. Of particular annoyance to Randolph was how the Bruce had taken to the young Douglas, trusting him with various responsibilities, despite his younger years.

And for him to speak to me thus, thought Randolph, as his hands quivered on his horse’s reins, in the presence of such distinguished company like the Earls of Atholl and Lennox! As well as the de la Hayes! I swear that one of these days I will strangle him with my own hands.

‘You speak truth, young squire,’ said the king, when the cackling had subsided, ‘for I knew Pembroke in London, before Comyn’s treachery forced me to flee. He is a man versed in statecraft and diplomacy, who is a faithful servant of the Crown. His example is always to be followed when it comes to chivalry. He displays the gallantry and honour expected of all knights.’

Eideard nodded at his brother, half hoping that he would not next regale them with a story or verse. Yet the Scottish king could not help himself, as he raised his voice and recited a Latin poem by the Roman poet Horace.

*To suffer hardness with good cheer,
In sternest school of warfare bred,
Our youth should learn; let steed and spear
Make him one day the Parthian’s dread;
Cold skies, keen perils, brace his life.
Methinks I see from rampired town
Some battling tyrant’s matron wife,
Some maiden, look in terror down,—
“Ah, my dear lord, untrain’d in war!
O tempt not the infuriate mood
Of that fell lion I see! from far
He plunges through a tide of blood!”
What joy, for fatherland to die!
Death’s darts e’en flying feet o’ertake,
Nor spare a recreant chivalry,
A back that cowers, or loins that quake.*

‘Hear, hear,’ said Eideard with a sigh, with a low cheer also issued by the other lords gathered about them.

‘Accomplished verse, Your Highness,’ agreed the Scottish queen.

The king smiled at his wife. He thought she looked beau-

tiful with her plaited brown hair enclosed beneath golden bosses.

‘And what do *you* think, my love?’ asked the Bruce, ‘will the earl show tomorrow?’

Elizabeth sighed softly.

‘The earl is an honourable man,’ she said. ‘Yet war is war, and he will do what best suits his cause.’

The Bruce nodded his agreement, then grinned at her.

‘To the knoll?’ he asked.

No sooner did he say this, than the queen dug her spurs in her palfrey’s flanks, which charged on up the hill. With a laugh the Bruce kicked his mount forward, making after her as she closed in on their agreed target.

As Randolph watched them galloping away, he marvelled at the excellent horsemanship of the Scottish queen. She was renowned for her love of horse riding, a passion she had developed in the lands of her father Richard de Burgh, the most powerful man in Ireland. Randolph wondered what Lord de Burgh recently made of his daughter’s union with the Bruce. For the Scottish king was once a leading light in Longshanks’ court in London, yet more recently a usurper outlawed by the English king and excommunicated by the Pope in Rome.

Just one victory tomorrow, thought Randolph to himself, all we need is one victory tomorrow, then more will flock to our banner.

After racing her husband to the knoll, Elizabeth rode back towards the mounted nobles. She wore a broad grin after beating the Bruce, her face roseate following her hard gallop. The Bruce rode after her at a canter, grinning foolishly at having been bested by his new wife.

‘Soundly beaten, father!’ cried the Scottish king’s daughter Marjorie, as the Bruce laughed aloud and wagged his finger at the young princess.

As the Scots travelled over the knoll and made down a slight decline, they met with a beautiful scene of undulating

countryside, with the river Almond hissing softly alongside it.

‘Good Lord,’ remarked Eideard, upon taking in the sight of the country ahead of them, ‘if this country is not worth fighting for...’

None spoke as they proceeded with their journey, for many were tired from the long ride to Perth and looked forward to a good night’s sleep on the eve of battle. After riding past the Methven Loch, they journeyed through forest and plain, with the sky turning greyer as they made their way up higher ground towards a small wood.

‘Yonder,’ said John de Strathbogie, ‘is a clearing where we can spend the night.’

The Earl of Atholl was allowed to ride ahead of the king, as the men struck a path through the alders and birch trees. They also sighted the odd oak tree until they came to where the trees grew sparser, then entered a huge glade. Its ground was level and filled with soft grass, with its periphery skirted by trees.

‘Very good, my lord,’ said the Bruce to Strathbogie, as he drew rein and proceeded to dismount from his palfrey, ‘we shall set up camp here.’

The Bruce’s subalterns instantly did their king’s bidding. Within the hour the nobility’s large tents and the small folk’s bivouacs were pitched, with men sitting in circles around low fires. After Randolph had helped him remove his plate armour, the Bruce summoned his closest circle to the edge of the clearing. This group included older veterans like the Earl of Atholl John de Strathbogie, his brother-in-law de Seton, Malcolm II the Earl of Lennox, Sir Neil Campbell and the de la Hayes. Younger nobles like the Bruce’s brother Eideard, the Black Douglas and his squire Randolph were also present.

‘The men are of good cheer, Your Highness,’ said John de Strathbogie, ‘they believe in your strength and cause.’

‘We should depart at dawn,’ said Douglas, earning him-

self a frown from Randolph, who was still smarting from the earlier slur, 'perhaps even lure the English into a trap. As when William Wallace and my father tricked Ormesby at -'

'William Wallace is no longer with us,' cut in the Bruce, as Randolph smirked with satisfaction, 'nor is your father. There will be no traps or ruses. The earl of Pembroke has demonstrated the highest chivalry, and we shall ride out to meet him before Perth as tradition would demand.'

The Black Douglas nodded without making any objection, to Randolph's dismay.

Arsè licking, fawning hound, he thought, *always doing my uncle's bidding without a word of complaint.*

'It is advisable,' agreed de Strathbogie, 'to observe tradition. We would not want to further incur his wrath unnecessarily. I trust in your strength, Your Majesty, although one can exclude little in battle.'

The Bruce grudgingly nodded at the Earl of Atholl. He did not want to think about losing the following day.

'The numbers favour us,' he said, 'and the men know our strength in battle. There is little to fear.'

'So there is nothing else then?' asked Gilbert de la Haye.

'Nothing,' agreed the Bruce, 'except to have the men prepare their weapons and get themselves a good night's sleep.'

'And to send out the pickets,' said Sir Neil Campbell, a lifelong Bruce loyalist, 'I can find some men to -'

'There is little need for it,' said the Scottish king, 'for Pembroke has given us his word. We have more to fear from the wolves in these parts. Let us all get some rest, for it will be a day of hard fighting tomorrow.'

As the highborn nobles dispersed, de Seton called out to his brother-in-law.

'We need more food, the earl told me that the game is good in these parts.'

'You will forage?' asked the Bruce in surprise.

'We shall return towards dusk,' said de Seton, 'find our-

selves a few red deer. I will take Sir Neil and Sir Gilbert with me.'

So saying, de Seton wandered off to gather a hunting band, while the Bruce decided to seek out his queen. He wanted to tell her about the decisions he had taken for her safety, as well as the other womenfolk in her company who included his sisters and daughter.

Randolph was halfway towards his own tent, wondering what he was going to do for the rest of the day, when a hand landed heftily upon his shoulder. In his surprise the Bruce's nephew whirled around and drew his dagger, only to find the Black Douglas scowling at him.

'What are you looking at, Tam?'

'What are you doing, Douglas?' snarled Randolph, 'creeping up on me like that and giving me a hell of a fright!'

'It pleased me to do that,' said the Black Douglas drily, reaching into his cloak, 'it's a few hours until dusk, and I want to have some fun.'

'Well, if that's your idea of fun -' said Randolph, then stopped when he saw the tarot cards which Douglas held out before him.

'Oh no...' said the Bruce's squire.

'Come on Tam,' laughed Douglas, 'what were you going to do? Read a book? Do you even have any with you?'

'No...'

'Come on Tam,' said Douglas, punching him in the shoulder, 'I borrowed these from a friend in Paris, before I joined the king's service. I know of a few games, I'll teach you.'

'Borrowed, huh?' asked the king's squire, raising a cynical eyebrow, 'he lent you expensive cards from far off Italy...'

Douglas laughed.

'Just one game Tam, it will be fun.'

Randolph made to protest, then slid his dagger back in its sheath while Douglas grabbed him in a stout headlock and dragged him towards a nearby oak.

The king was long in conversation with his sisters and daughter. Young Marjorie was but ten years of age, all he had left of his first wife, Isabella of Clan Mar. He had never told his daughter that her birth had been the cause of her mother's death. He fell to one knee before the girl, gently pinching her chin and looking into her ochre eyes which were so like Isabella's.

'Are you fighting tomorrow, father?' she asked him.

The Bruce could not resist a chuckle.

'Yes, my angel. But do not give it any thought. You will be safe with your aunts.'

'Will you be hurt?' she insisted, her eyes trembling and fearful.

'All these questions!' exclaimed her father, then rose to his feet and wrapped her in a great embrace. 'Do not trouble yourself, my dear. I would worry more for our enemies. I have many great knights who shall help me crush them.'

'You mean Uncle Christopher?' asked Marjorie, 'and Eideard?'

'And more,' said the Bruce, 'but I must now speak with your mother.'

'She is not my mother,' said Marjorie sullenly.

'Now, now,' said Christina, resting her hand on the girl's shoulder, 'the queen is kind to you.'

'She is,' admitted Marjorie.

'And smile,' said the Bruce's other sister, Mary, as she held out a pair of dice in her right hand, 'we can play a bit before supper.'

Marjorie's face lit up while the Bruce smiled at his sisters. He was so grateful that they had always cared for Marjorie as though she was their own daughter. After he had visited them, he also made time to visit the Countess of Buchan, Lady MacDuff. Weeks earlier, the brave countess had abandoned her husband, a staunch Comyn loyalist, to crown the Bruce at Scone. For it had always been Scottish tradition for

a member of Clan MacDuff to crown the king. The proud woman was one of the Bruce's most loyal supporters, who burned with a patriotic desire to support a Scottish king backed by the church.

'Our hopes lie with you,' she told the Bruce, serving him with a severe stare, 'you must not fail us.'

'I will not, my lady,' said the Bruce, yet the countess was not appeased.

'One victory tomorrow,' she said slowly, 'will change all.'

'Indeed, my lady,' he said with a slight nod, then bowed respectfully and left her tent to find his wife.

Elizabeth lay upon their straw mattress in silence, dressed in a white gown with her hands clasped together in prayer. The Bruce noticed the wooden beads curled between her slender fingers; the rosary given to her by Bishop Wishart of Glasgow. The Scottish king sighed at the memory of his old friend, to whom he owed so much. Wishart, who had given him absolution following the killing of the Red Comyn at Dumfries. Wishart, who had always backed the Bruce's claim to the Scottish throne, and who had already been captured by Pembroke.

May God protect him from the ire of Longshanks, thought the king.

'Hail, Your Majesty,' said Elizabeth, interrupting his thoughts.

'How do you fare, my queen?' he asked.

'I am hopeful,' she replied, 'for we have many men now. More than first expected.'

'It will be a long road,' he replied, 'one step at a time.'

'Indeed,' she said, 'you should get some rest.'

After he lay alongside her, they spoke of years gone by. Of the time she had been a young woman sent from Ireland to Longshanks' court. Longshanks had been swift to realise that the widowed Bruce had eyes for her. The shrewd old English king soon pressed for their union, which had seemed a fine

match between two powerful Norman houses.

‘So much has changed in so little time,’ she muttered.

‘It has,’ he sighed, ‘I never thought the Red would betray me.’

‘Why not?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘He gave me his word,’ replied Robert.

‘And you took him at his word,’ sighed Elizabeth.

‘Is it does not behove a knight to break his word,’ said the king with a frown.

‘It did not behove the Red,’ said the queen, ‘and yet -’

‘And yet?’ asked the Bruce.

Elizabeth sighed again.

‘No, no,’ said the Bruce, ‘out with it.’

‘You place such trust in others,’ she said suddenly, ‘such faith in chivalry.’

‘Chivalry is all!’ exclaimed the king, ‘what would we be if we do not keep our word?’

Elizabeth sighed as she rose from the mattress and scowled at him.

‘You are still plagued by what befell the Red. Yet he left you with no choice.’

The Bruce was too surprised to say anything, as she fell back alongside him and sighed yet again.

‘I am sorry,’ she said after a while, ‘I spoke out of turn. You are right to be honourable, to seek to do what is right.’

They sat alongside each other in silence for what seemed like an age. The king mulled over the words of his young wife, then spoke to her again.

‘Perhaps you are right. I should not place such trust in the honour of men. An army is no place for you and my daughter, nor any other woman.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

‘You must all leave tomorrow,’ he said, ‘Sir John will escort you to Nigel at Kildrummy. The army is no place for a child, and I will not have you in the vicinity of Pembroke’s

army, or any other enemies. The MacDougalls want my head too...'

The queen sighed again.

'So many enemies...'

'For a while yet to come...' he replied.

They said nothing for some time thereafter, as it dawned on the queen that it would be their last day together. There was still daylight outside, but he had to sleep early to face whatever lay ahead of him the next day. On her part she was tired from the long ride to Perth, yet still felt a stirring for him. She turned around and kissed him gently upon the neck, then reached down and found him ready. His hands slid behind her back and hers slid behind his, then she felt a squeeze on one buttock and hairy legs rubbing against hers as their lips met again and then again. She drew a quick gasp of breath when he was suddenly atop her, still kissing her passionately while she felt him sliding within her.

'Oh dear Lord,' said the queen.

Her eyes were already shut, for his was always a generous serve. She felt whole, complete, with his face on her shoulder as she felt the full thrust of the Bruce's passion, again and again. She was already breathless, yet doing her best to keep with him, while her head jolted backwards again and again.

Not even the best charger, she thought, then flinched slightly when his mouth was around her breast and then the other, his rippling forearms suddenly wrapped behind her back once more in an iron grip.

'My queen...' he whispered, yet she could barely breathe, less talk, as another thrust sent a flood of ecstasy running right through her.

His thrusts were like lunges of the wildest horse, her legs quivering as he sent another flash of ecstasy through her. It was almost instantly replaced by another, with her whole body trembling as she again gasped for breath. Again and again, he crashed against her like a tidal wave, until a low

moan was produced from her as she squeezed his forearms and shoulders, dug her nails into his skin.

‘Don’t...’ she whispered, trying to not cry out loud and embarrass herself with the guards outside, ‘do not...stop...’

She was so close to reaching a climax that she dared not stir, feeling both excited and wary of the eventual gush of pleasure when a low rumbling sound was heard. Yet the Bruce did not tarry, his lunges still powerful, when the drumming suddenly grew louder and a long candlestick fell over. The rumbling grew louder again until it sounded more like pounding.

‘Don’t...’ she gasped, unable to think clearly.

The king suddenly withdrew, her disappointment like a pail of cold water dousing a fast-growing flame.

‘What?’ she gasped, yet the Bruce had already pushed his head through the tent flaps.

‘What is it?’ she asked again, her tone turning fearful when the thudding grew louder, with the rattling of other objects heard in the tent.

‘Is that thunder?’ she asked.

In an instant Elizabeth heard the mad screech of horses, the pop and crack of bones, the clash of steel and a cry of horror which seemed to rise from the depths of hell itself. Then her husband turned towards her, his face reddened with rage and shock, racing towards his blankets and snatching his sword.

‘To arms!’ he cried in desperation, then raced out of the tent, leaving her behind him as his next cry rose above the screech of horses and howls of agony.

‘To arms! To arms! We’re under attack!’

But a half hour earlier, Douglas and Randolph were finishing their last game of French tarot. The two men had played for hours, sharing a skin of wine which Douglas had also borrowed from someone. Randolph was slowly improving his

play, although Douglas was inexplicably often a step or two ahead of him. The Bruce's squire observed the cards in his hands with a studious glance, while Douglas beheld him with the bemused air of a cat watching a mouse. In the distance they could still hear a soldier from Mar singing to his comrades, although the voices were dying down as men retired to bed while the evening dusk grew.

'The sun it sets,' remarked the Black Douglas to the Bruce's nephew, 'and I am afraid, young Tam, that you have lost again.'

He grinned broadly as he spread his full hand of cards across the grass.

'Who are you calling young?' asked Randolph, 'you're my age, James.'

'Not here,' said Douglas, tapping his temple.

'Whatever!' said Randolph indignantly, hurling his cards on the grass, 'these cards have more dog ears than there are in a king's kennels! You know what I hold the moment they're served!'

Douglas laughed and took another swig from the wine-skin.

'Ever the sore loser.'

Randolph snorted and returned to his feet.

'Not at all, I find that your triumphs have given me a sudden stirring.'

With that he stormed off and made for the trees.

'Do not wander too far,' chuckled the Black Douglas.

'Of a surety, lord Douglas,' said Randolph, 'for I cannot hold it much longer.'

The king's squire was careful not to stray too far from camp. For there would soon be wolves about, not to mention bandits. Randolph wondered how many bandits roamed the country they were in, as he unfastened the front of his hose. He cursed all the wine which he had drunk because of Douglas, although it had helped to calm him down.

One good night of sleep, he thought, after the wretched last few weeks. And who knows what horrors await us tomorrow.

He released a deep breath amid the sloshing sound from the grass in front of him, then sighed relievedly and pulled his hose up again. He was about to turn around and return to the clearing, when in the corner of his eye he glimpsed a movement low in the trees. As the Bruce's nephew slowly turned his head towards the slinky motion, he noticed a large cat with black and brown stripes, making its way over the branches and leaves towards where the trees grew thicker.

'A wildcat!' exclaimed Randolph to himself, with the scholarly side of him suddenly filled with curiosity.

Besides being a lover of learning, Randolph had always loved observing creatures in the wild, to study their habits and sleeping patterns. He was fascinated by how some creatures emerged at night, while others retired for the day. Few could agree whether wildcats emerged at night or during the day. Indeed, it was rare enough to hear of them, let alone see them. So he abandoned all caution as he silently made after the distant creature, gently loosening his sword in its scabbard when he heard the first howl of a wolf.

I wonder if it is retiring for the night, he thought to himself, I might just be able to make out where it retreats to.

As the dusk set in, Randolph followed the scurrying feline cautiously, always crouching low and careful not to make a sound. The squire froze in his steps but once, when the crack of a branch under his foot had the cat instantly turn around. Randolph cursed beneath his breath as he leant behind a tree bark, yet there was no wind, and the cat was soon proceeding deeper into the wood. The Bruce's nephew slowly released his breath, then waited a few moments and quickly jumped over a fallen trunk and hurried deeper into the forest. As he made behind a large oak, he was surprised to find himself bumping into another man in the growing darkness.

'Forgive me,' said Randolph, then remembered how he

was often berated by others for being too polite.

He also realised that he had not yet checked whether the man was highborn or a commoner. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dark, he made out a fellow wearing bracers staring back at him in surprise. The stranger also held a bow and arrow, and Randolph could make out other archers behind him.

‘William!’ hissed one of the man’s comrades, ‘do not run too far ahead. The Bruce may have posted scouts...’

Randolph was first to react as he instantly drew his sword. The blade instantly hacked open the throat of the English archer, who collapsed onto the ground. With a curse the Bruce’s squire was already racing back towards the Scottish king’s camp, screaming at the top of his lungs while an arrow sliced the air above his head.

‘Stop him!’ yelled another English archer behind him, ‘he’s killed William!’

The Bruce’s nephew quickly ran behind a tree, as yet another shaft flew past. He kept trees to his back as he wended his way towards where he had left Douglas, as a slow, rhythmic beat suddenly grew louder to his right.

Please God let me live... he thought, as yet more arrows struck the trees ahead of him, *please God let me live...*

The cries behind him grew more faint as the thuds to his right grew louder and louder. There was heard the odd whinny as Randolph reached the edge of the clearing, then he fell to his knees as he saw the first knights through the trees.

My God, my God, my God my God my God...

There was the pop of hips and shoulders and the crack of limbs as the knights thundered into the clearing, trampling the slumbering Scots on the ground. As howls of agony and disbelief filled the air, Randolph fell on his hands and knees, retching in disgust until he remembered his master.

‘Robert,’ he said, rising to his feet and racing along the edge of the glade.

The bodies of roused Scots were crushed by the onrushing riders and skewered by lances and spears. In a fit of panic Randolph stopped skirting the edge of the glade and ran instead over the small folk between him and his uncle's tent, most of whom were not yet roused and still wrapped in their blankets. His feet trampled soft groins and hard heads, as roars of protest were issued as the men were roused to even greater horror. Between muffled apologies Randolph slipped and stumbled towards his master's tent, as he recognised Clifford leading the knights back towards the trees to engage in another charge.

Hundreds of them, thought Randolph, hundreds...

He did his best not to slash himself with his own sword, as it wobbled about in his hand. He tripped over a rising footman, as the loud blare of a bugle was issued from somewhere and a man ahead of him was felled by a flaming arrow. More arrows thudded into the ground in front of him, as Randolph realised to his horror that he had left his shield on the ground beside Douglas.

That cursed wildcat... where is James?

His fears turned to worse dread as he followed the light of the flaming arrows and saw the king in his bedclothes, tearing through the flaps of his tent.

'To arms!' roared the Bruce, 'to arms!'

Randolph also spotted his uncle Eideard Bruce running towards the king's tent, just as he reached the king's side.

'Your armour, Your Majesty -' stuttered Randolph.

He was shocked by his uncle's ferocity as the Bruce seized him by the shoulder and shoved him away.

'What armour? There is no time! Fetch me a horse!'

'Your Majesty!' cried the Earl of Atholl, also running towards him with Sir David Barclay and Lord Alexander Fraser hot on his heels. Others soon also appeared, including Sir Hugh de la Hay, Sir John Somerville and Sir David de Inchmartin.

All of the men were still in their bedclothes, with blood running down Fraser's face.

'Barclay!' roared the king, 'gather a guard to protect the queen! The rest of you, with me!'

As the Bruce raced off, Randolph fumbled about in the darkness, suddenly thankful for the light of the burning arrows as he made out the horses whinnying behind the tents. With a curse he held up his blade, ready to slash any hitches to fetch one for his master.

The Bruce flung his scabbard away and held up his sword. He could see that the impact of the second English charge had died off, as the knights hacked down Scottish peasants and footmen with a murderous urgency.

Less men than us, thought the king, *they must make every instant count.*

He knew they would soon be withdrawing for yet another charge, as a Scottish footman slid off the lance of Sir Adam Gordon. The Bruce also recognised the knights with Clifford, who included noblemen like the Earl of Percy and the huge Sir Philip Mowbray, as well as Abernethy, Berchin, Haliburton and Umfraville. They were all formidable champions who the Bruce had previously sparred with, yet his courage held when he made out Sir Alexander Scrymgeour to his right. The Bruce's standard bearer had borne the colours of the lion rampant and the saltire into the middle of the clearing. Scrymgeour stood barely a few feet away from the Bruce, as he and the Earl of Lennox roared at the top of their voices.

'To the king! To the king!'

The Scots drew their weapons and hurried towards the banner, with the red lion dancing upon the golden banner in the light of the blazing arrows.

'To me! To me!' cried the Bruce, with the cry taken up by his knights who clashed with those of Clifford's riders that still tarried in the clearing.

The lives of many Scots had already been claimed by

the charges of Pembroke's knights, with many skewered by lances or killed by axe and mace blows. With a snarl Eideard Bruce caught a spear blow on his shield, then drove his sword deep into the breast of his attacker, causing the enemy rider to tumble off his mount. The Scottish king raced past his younger brother and snatched up the fallen knight's shield, raising it over his head as Percy brought his mace down upon it.

The blow was a hard one, yet the Bruce was fighting for his family as well as his country. No sooner was the blow deflected than he dropped his weapons and grabbed the earl's ankle, twisting the heavily armoured knight's foot out of its stirrup and flinging it up in the air. There was heard a loud crash as Percy fell off his stallion, with the Bruce snatching up his sword again and hurling himself upon the startled horse.

'To the king!' roared Eideard, with Somerville and other Scottish knights also charging their stunned English foes with their retainers.

The Bruce ignored them all as he charged at Abernethy, then rose in his stirrups and struck the knight's helmet with his blade. The blow sounded like a hammer upon an anvil, as the dazed Abernethy attempted to raise his own sword, then flew out of his saddle as the Bruce swung his blade again into the side of the knight's helmet. Eideard gratefully snatched up the reins of Abernethy's riderless horse, hauling himself atop it and charging towards Clifford.

The Warden of the Marches was stunned by the Bruce's attack, having first feared that they had already fled the field. Then he was suddenly excited by the prospect of seizing them, as he cried out to his other knights and raised his lance. Yet Eideard was already upon him, slamming his sword against Clifford's shield as the Warden struggled for balance. Beneath him his mount kicked the ground as it whinnied hysterically alongside the horse of the Bruce's brother.

'Bastard!' roared Eideard in anger, bringing his sword

down again upon the top of Clifford's helmet.

The blow produced a shower of sparks, while another shower of flaming cloth yard arrows fell amongst the roused Scots across the clearing. As Clifford grappled with Eideard's furious lunges, the Scottish king rode up and hacked the hand off Clifford's young squire with his sword. Meanwhile Lennox, Somerville and the other Bruce loyalists kept up their fierce attack on the mounted English knights who were trying to regroup.

The Bruce fought like a cornered lion, leading by example in his bedclothes and demonstrating daring horsemanship. In his desperation he tried to single-handedly turn the tide in the Scots' favour. With another blow of his sword, he knocked Adam Gordon out of his saddle into the mud, then turned towards Philip Mowbray. Like Gordon, Mowbray was a Scottish knight who also fought for the English. Except that Mowbray hated the Bruce more, for killing the Red Comyn at Dumfries.

'Cur!' roared the huge knight, wheeling his mount about towards the king.

The Bruce thundered towards him without fear, dodging a swing of Mowbray's mace. For a moment he hesitated to attack the knight's horse, thinking that it was not befitting of honourable knights like Pembroke.

Honourable knights like Pembroke? Just do it!

He viciously hacked at the enemy charger's hindquarters, with the horse issuing a piercing shriek as Mowbray was sent flying off its back into the mud underfoot. As he thundered back towards the clearing, it suddenly occurred to the Bruce that his brave resistance had paid off beyond his expectations. In following his lead, the Scots had mounted a tigerish attack on the English knights on horseback, who were slowly being overcome and unhorsed as more of the roused Scots set upon them with snarls and steel.

The Bruce next spurred his mount towards Clifford, who

was still locked in a fierce fight with Eideard. Then a low rumble of thunder was heard in the distance, followed by a flash of lightning which briefly lit up the clearing. The Scottish king nearly gagged when he saw the hundreds of English footmen approaching through the trees from the northern side. His spies had told him that Pembroke's force numbered three thousand men, yet in that instant the Bruce guessed at there being at least twice as many.

Comyn supporters, he thought, as his courage momentarily wavered.

The next flash of lightning was like a hammer blow to his spirits, when he saw the English standard bearer carrying the dragon banner. As he stared on in horror at the red dragon on the black flag, everything suddenly made dreadful sense to the Bruce.

So they have raised the dragon, he thought, *yet the wily Pembroke kept it out of sight. He is not bound to honour any oaths to the enemy. No mercy shall be shown to us, our women can be raped and murdered...*

He suddenly remembered his wife and daughter, his sisters and Countess MacDuff. A flood of panic ran through him, as he gritted his teeth and rammed his heels into his horse's flanks. His wet hair fluttered about his face as the mud underfoot became soggy from the growing rain. His men slipped about as they tried to keep their footing, horses stumbled and fell sideways with their riders crashing to the ground. Yet the Bruce had no mind for knights anymore, horrified as he was by Pembroke's design.

'To me!' he cried out to his men, 'to me! For Scotland! For Scotland!'

Yet too many of his subalterns were already locked in a desperate tussle with Clifford's knights, although Scrymgeour spotted him. The Scottish standard bearer withdrew from the raging conflict at the east side and quickly rode after the king, holding aloft the banner of the rampant lion.

‘To the king!’

Bands of small folk hurried after the Bruce, as the rain grew heavier amid the cries of the many bands of enemy footmen. They quickly set upon the Bruce’s men, kicking over both cooking fires and bivouacs. With a growl the Scottish king made out the red martlets and the white and blue hoops on Pembroke’s surcoat, with the mounted special Lieutenant leading the hundreds of footmen who already poured into the clearing.

‘Liar!’ yelled the Bruce, standing in his stirrups again as he galloped at the earl.

Pembroke raised his shield at the king’s charge, with the first blow of the Bruce’s sword almost toppling the earl as he reined his horse sideways. Pembroke tried to raise his lance while the Bruce cut down the earl’s squire, then made straight for the Pembroke again. Another blow resounded on the earl’s shield, followed by yet another, as Pembroke silently weathered the onslaught while trying not to fall off his horse.

The earl dropped his lance as he struggled to keep his balance, for it was of no use to him at close quarters. He next drew his sword and dug in his spurs, yet the king was already at him again. The Bruce leant sideways and hacked open the throat of Pembroke’s steed, with the earl issuing a loud groan as his horse collapsed and sent him rolling over the mud. The king was incensed with rage as he jerked his mount’s reins leftwards, then charged at Pembroke again. Yet the earl rolled away with surprising agility, having been instants away from being trampled.

‘Bastard!’ roared the Bruce, as his mount wheeled around again.

He was determined to end Pembroke’s life as hundreds of enemy footmen streamed about him. One of them ran up to him in that instant, holding a pike out before him. The Bruce was still leaning sideways on his mount, with the spear point inches away from his face and leaving him with a single

option. He loosened his feet from their stirrups and fell over into the blood-streaked mud below, then rolled under his horse and shoved his sword point into the footman's groin.

His English assailant shrieked aloud and fell backwards, with blood spurting everywhere while he wailed again and again in agony. The Bruce hacked down another three footmen who assailed him, then ran back to his horse and flung himself atop it. The once peaceful clearing was an insane din of screams and battle cries, with the rainfall heavier as flaming arrows in the ground revealed the savage clash between knights on the northern side, while Pembroke's footmen hacked down everyone in their path.

'Elizabeth,' gasped the Bruce, 'Marjorie...'

He jerked his head towards the tents, where he could make out the dim outline of fighting men, where Barclay was putting up a stout defence of the womenfolk. In his alarm the Bruce made to snatch up his reins, only to find them in the grasp of another. To his horror he saw the figure of Sir Philip Mowbray in front of him, with mud still dripping off his broad, bearded face. The huge knight held the reins of the Bruce's mount in one hand, while also grabbing the king's sword arm by the wrist. The Bruce tried to punch him with his other hand, only to find it snatched up by Mowbray's squire as yet more footmen surrounded him.

'Help!' cried Mowbray, 'help! I have the new-made king!'

The Bruce's heart sank as he struggled against the hold of his captors. Yet Mowbray held him in an iron grip, as he proceeded to pull the king off his horse. Meanwhile the cries from the tents grew louder, as a lady's shriek pierced through the night.

'No!' cried the Bruce as he looked over his shoulder, where he could see Barclay fighting with two Scots against over a dozen men.

Then there was heard a loud crash, as Sir Christopher de Seton suddenly appeared with a set jaw and a heavy mace.

He was closely followed by Sir Neil Campbell and Sir Gilbert de la Haye, whose blades dripped with blood as they took on the Bruce's captors with insane fury. The men had heard the sounds of fighting while coursing a red deer. They had instantly abandoned the hunt and hurried back to the clearing upon realising what was astir.

Mowbray turned towards the Scots with a snarl, only for de Seton to lift his mace and deal the knight such an almighty blow to the head that it also made the Bruce shiver. Mowbray was powerfully built yet staggered sideways, tottering from one leg to another until his hand slid off the Bruce and he landed in a dazed heap. The Bruce and de Seton exchanged their last stunned stare, then the king's brother-in-law tore off towards the tents where Barclay fought alone and wounded.

'Christina!' roared de Seton, calling the name of the Bruce's sister, 'Christina!'

'Mary!' cried Sir Neil Campbell behind him.

This cry from Campbell hardly surprised Gilbert de la Haye, who also hurried after them with their retainers. For it was no secret that the brave Bruce loyalist was besotted by the Bruce's other sister. Dozens of English footmen fell before de Seton's men as they reached the tents, just as the heavily wounded Barclay was finally struck down in the dirt. One footman was already tearing open the flaps of the shrieking Christina's tent, only for de Seton to reach him and crack the man's skull open with a single mace blow. The Bruce's brother-in-law next flung the stricken footman aside like a rag, then seized up his wife in a hard embrace.

'Christopher,' gasped Christina in disbelief, her eyes full of tears, 'Christopher...'

Their lips were locked for a few instants, then de Seton looked behind her and saw Mary, Elizabeth, Marjorie and Countess MacDuff, all pale yet defiant in the weak candlelight.

'Are they harmed?' gasped Campbell, reaching de Seton's

side.

‘Stay here,’ said de Seton to his wife, gently pushing her back inside, then turned to Campbell and said, ‘do not delay.’

Behind them Sir Gilbert and their other men formed a defensive ring around the tents, as scores of footmen charged towards them. De Seton ignored the sight of Mary’s hand being kissed by Campbell and walked towards the younger de la Haye, his mace held at the ready. On his part Sir Gilbert regarded the tall figure of the Bruce’s brother-in-law with a degree of reverence and fear, then wiped his wet hair out of his face as de Seton growled at him.

‘To the death.’

De la Haye nodded back at him, while Campbell quickly rejoined their side with his sword drawn.

There were simply too many footmen, so that in less than an hour the clearing had turned into a killing field. The Bruce was furious when he saw many of his own footmen fleeing into the woods.

‘Bastards,’ he said, furiously seeking out Pembroke.

If he would lose everything that night, he would do all he could to take the English special Lieutenant down with him. As the rainfall grew there was yet another flash of lightning, which revealed the figure of Pembroke attacking the Scottish knights on horseback. With another loud war cry the Bruce charged at the English earl again, with his sword blade missing Pembroke’s head by a handspan as his horse slid on the mud. The special Lieutenant first galloped away from Bruce, then veered sideways and charged the Scottish king, raising his lance.

As the king’s palfrey regained its footing and turned towards Pembroke, the special Lieutenant’s lance ran through its breast, spitting the horse like a chicken as the Bruce was sent rolling over the muck underfoot. Pembroke’s sword was already drawn and falling upon the Bruce’s head, when there

was heard a loud clash of steel. The Scottish king looked up in disbelief, where he could make out Douglas, teeth gritted, shoving a shield against Pembroke's blade.

The Black Douglas next aimed an axe blow at the earl's head, which caused Pembroke's helmet to ring like a gong while the king gratefully rolled away from the quivering figure of his shrieking horse. No sooner did he return to his feet, than the sodden Randolph appeared, dragging another horse behind him. The king seized up the mount's reins and shoved his squire in the direction of the tents.

'Help Christopher!' he gasped, 'help Christopher..'

He climbed atop his steed and sought out Pembroke, yet both the special Lieutenant and the Black Douglas were gone, having no doubt taken up the fight in another part of the clearing. Amid the cry of men and the endless screaming, the Bruce made out Eideard running towards him from where the English knights were rallying again. Blood ran down the face of the Bruce's brother as he cried out to the king with other unhorsed Scottish knights close behind him.

'Too many brother!' cried Eideard, 'fall back, there are too many!'

'Never!' cried the Bruce, then saw his standard lying abandoned in the mud.

He beckoned to Eideard to fetch it for him, then held it aloft as he thundered towards the gold and blue checked surcoat of Clifford. Pembroke was already at the Warden's side, as together they led their hundreds of English knights on yet another charge towards the clearing. Every last loyal Scot rode or ran after the Bruce, intent on defending him as he rose in his stirrups and slashed his horse's withers with its reins. He was barely five yards from Pembroke when an arrow was buried in his charger's throat, sending both horse and rider flying to the ground.

The onrushing English knights had not had the time or the distance to build up enough speed for a charge. Pem-

broke's mount rose on its hind legs and kicked the air while the Bruce lay in a daze, having fallen for the third time. Then his brother Eideard was at his side and Sir John Somerville too, with Sir Hugh de la Hay and Sir David de Inchmartin appearing to defend their king.

'Get him away!' snapped Somerville, as he shoved Eideard away, 'get him away!'

Eideard beheld the knight in disbelief, then received a slap across the face for his hesitation.

'I said,' snarled Somerville, 'get him away!'

The Bruce's brother nodded once in disbelief, then grabbed the king under one arm and found that Douglas was grabbing the other. Eideard was grateful for the help, as the two men dragged their stunned sovereign back towards where de Seton was still fighting like a fiend. The Earl of Lennox and his clansmen followed closely behind them, hacking at anything that threatened their progress until they cut their way through the footmen who had fearfully withdrawn from the furious de Seton and his band. Randolph had already joined the defence of the tents, with dead enemies also lying at his feet when he saw his uncle being dragged towards him.

'Leave me,' gasped the Bruce at last, 'leave me, leave me.'

Eideard and Douglas instantly dropped him in the dirt and stepped among de Seton's band, with Neil Campbell helping the king back onto his feet.

'Too many, Sire,' said Campbell, 'we must away, or the ladyfolk shall also perish.'

'Fetch them,' gasped the Bruce, suddenly fearing for their lives, 'before it is too late.'

Hundreds of footmen were charging the tents again, as the Bruce shoved his wife, daughter, sisters and the countess between him and Campbell. Eideard, Strathbogie, Douglas, Randolph and Gilbert de la Haye also helped form a ring about the womenfolk and young Marjorie.

'Join us, Christopher!' cried Christina, yet her husband

ignored her and roared at his own retainers.

'Stand firm!' he cried, as the Scottish king reluctantly led his group of knights towards the trees.

To the Bruce's disbelief, Randolph ran off and took his place at de Seton's shoulder with his sword held out before him.

'What are you doing Randolph, you fool?' howled Douglas.

'Begone!' cried Randolph, as Pembroke's footmen closed in.

The Scottish king needed no encouragement, as he led his hastily assembled band towards the other side of the clearing. Any foe who approached them was instantly struck down, until at last the trees on the southern side were reached and the ring disbanded, with men and women alike running as fast as they could downhill and away from the madness.

Meanwhile Randolph caught the first sword blow on his shield, then shoved his assailant away as he sought to control his fear. De Seton was roaring as he felled one attacker after another, with the mad flailing of his mace producing sickening cracking sounds with each swing. Randolph felt himself fading as he struggled for breath, then ran another attacker through the leg and caught yet another blow on his blade as the sheer number of assailants shoved him backwards. The Bruce's squire slashed at another angry face, then saw the cudgel too late, as all turned into a hundred brilliant stars.

II

Loch Monzievaird, 19 June 1306

They had journeyed away from the cursed clearing for hours, and at last the small band came to a halt within sight of Loch Monzievaird. They were a sodden, miserable gathering, not more than fifty people. It was all that was left of the Bruce's army of over four thousand men, and they staggered towards the growing sun in muted disbelief. Christina had not stopped weeping since they had fled the clearing, with everyone else also stricken by grief and overcome by a great weariness.

When the Bruce called a halt, those on foot fell to their knees amid ragged gasps, while those on horseback dismounted. The Scottish king's brow darkened as he turned and stared at the distant forest near Methven, which was encircled by large flocks of crows. He sighed heavily and proceeded to address the earl of Atholl.

'What becomes of our cause, I cannot yet say. Yet they have raised the dragon and they shall not spare the women or my child either.'

Strathbogie issued a low sigh, then shook his head in disbelief.

'You do not have to -' began the Bruce, only for the earl to serve him with a look of outrage.

'Your Majesty! I said I would do it...'

The Bruce fell silent for a few moments, feeling wholly unworthy yet also grateful for the earl's devotion.

‘Thank you,’ was all he could say, since he could not promise anyone anything anymore.

Strathbogie said nothing and made to mount his horse, with a half dozen of his riders following his lead. The Bruce turned towards the womenfolk, who all looked on the point of tears, with his young daughter appearing particularly confused. He stepped towards her, ashamed of his blood-splattered garments as he held out a grimy hand and gently held her chin between bruised thumb and forefinger.

‘I will see you again soon, my angel,’ he whispered, falling to one knee, ‘you will be safe with Uncle Nigel.’

‘How long...’ she instantly asked, as he tried to hold her stare.

‘I will come for you as soon as I can,’ was all he could say, as the agonising magnitude of his loss sank in like a length of cold steel through his gut.

It was all he could do to kiss his daughter gently on the forehead, then somehow rise back to his feet and embrace the women in turn. Christina was still sobbing, and Mary and Countess MacDuff were forlorn figures. Yet they knew that he had fought bravely and risked his life with reckless abandon.

‘You could not have done more,’ said Mary, embracing him tightly.

‘Our hope rests in you,’ hissed Countess MacDuff defiantly, yet he could not even find the words to reply.

At last, he turned to his wife, Elizabeth. She beheld him with great concern yet allowed him to kiss her.

‘What will you do?’ she replied in a faltering voice.

‘I don’t know,’ he managed, feeling sick to the stomach, then regained his composure, ‘I will do what I can.’

‘Will it be enough?’ she asked fearfully, for she was scared that she might be about to lose him forever.

‘I do not know,’ he sighed, then added, ‘perhaps your father...’

‘Oh Robert,’ she sighed, ‘you always knew that he would never raise his sword against Longshanks.’

The Bruce nodded and kissed her on the forehead, then stood away as the womenfolk and his daughter mounted their horses. He stared after them long after they were gone, until they were but distant specks on a hillside. At last, he turned to face his two score men, as the growing wind rippled the grass about their feet.

‘Where to now?’ asked Campbell.

‘St Fillan’s Priory,’ declared Douglas in a brash voice, ‘then on to the mountains of Atholl.’

The Bruce looked at the young man in surprise, awed by his resolve. It was too soon after the rout to feel heartened, yet he felt a slight flicker of belief far sooner than he had expected.

‘And what then, young Douglas?’ asked Campbell, as he climbed atop his horse.

‘Then,’ growled Douglas, glaring at the Bruce, ‘then we fight like Wallace.’

‘Never mind Wallace,’ said Eideard drily, ‘we’ll be lucky to see out the year.’

III

Methven to Perth, 19 June 1306

Many miles away, it was all Randolph could do not to trip over as his guard shoved him forward by the shoulder again. As he stumbled through the trees, the Bruce's nephew could make out the city of Perth in the distance. As the English footmen kicked him in the buttocks, the Bruce's nephew almost fell onto his face, with his chained wrists grasping at the thin air before him. Randolph dared not cry out, for some of the other prisoners were in worse shape than him.

His head still spun from the blow which had knocked him out cold for most of the night. Yet Randolph could still recognise the scowling Sir John Somerville, as well as other knights loyal to the Bruce like Sir Alexander Fraser, Sir David Inchmartin, as well as the standard bearer Sir Alexander Scrymgeour. All of them were battered and bruised, with their surcoats in tatters. Sir David Barclay's face was caked with dried blood, and Sir Hugh de la Haye's jaw was badly swollen, while his broken arm hung limply at his side.

It was a sorry gathering of highborn prisoners, with the snarls of wolves and the cry of crows still audible behind them as the creatures feasted on the hundreds of Scottish corpses in the wood. As they drew closer to the city, Randolph was filled with dread when he saw the raised dragon banner atop its walls, fluttering alongside the St George's flag.

Damn bastard tricked us.

The sight of the dragon was all too much for Randolph,

whose vision suddenly blurred before he tripped over a tussock and fell on his face. The other English footmen shouted at him in protest, as his guard kicked him back onto his feet. Randolph's captors suddenly bowed their heads when a whinny was heard, with Pembroke riding up to the prisoners with Percy and Clifford.

'What shall become of us, you honourless bastard!' cried Somerville, earning himself a punch in the face from a guard.

Pembroke drew rein and raised his visor, as Percy and Clifford followed suit. Then the special Lieutenant cast a dark glare at his prisoners.

'You should all be ashamed of yourselves,' he said, 'for serving the usurper. It is you that are honourless.'

Randolph beheld the distinguished nobleman in disbelief, as the earl's eyes fell upon him.

'And you too, Moray,' said the earl dismissively, 'what were you thinking?'

'I thought,' replied Randolph hesitantly, 'I thought that you were the cream of chivalry.'

'Which one shall we kill first?' asked Clifford.

'You mean you'll not ransom us?' cried Somerville in disbelief.

Pembroke said nothing as his cold blue eyes remained fixed on Randolph, for the words of the Bruce's nephew had cut him deeply.

'I am not judge or executioner,' he said to Clifford.

'But King Edward,' said the Warden of the Marches, 'King Edward said they were to -'

Clifford was cut short as Pembroke raised his hand for silence.

'I said I am neither judge nor executioner,' he repeated tersely, 'they will be sent to Berwick where they will meet with the king's justice.'

So saying, the earl served Randolph with a dark scowl, then kicked his horse on towards Perth.

I hope you've enjoyed 'The Cream Of Chivalry', a short story which is the perfect companion piece to my next story on Robert The Bruce, 'Mad King Robin.' Here's the prologue which I hope you'll enjoy:

SACRILEGE

*10th of February 1306 AD
Greyfriars, Dumfries, Scotland*

The small window glowed in the light of the dying sun. It was a small dome-shaped aperture, situated high above a large crucifix. A weak radiance streamed through it, revealing an intricate marble floor which spread before an oaken door that creaked open. A faint gust of wind blew across the nave, which disturbed the flames of the nine candles behind the altar. The overbearing silence in the chapel was broken by a man dressed in a fur-lined cloak. As he stepped inside his face was twisted by a frown, and his long red hair was parted in the middle. The entrant's breathing was terse as he closed the door before he proceeded to enter the circle of faint light before him.

'Times are troubled indeed, Lord of Badenoch, if you must also bear arms in a place of worship.'

The redheaded lord jerked his head to the right. Across the nave he could make out a tall figure kneeling before a

statue of the Holy Virgin, with both palms tightly clasped together in prayer.

‘Hail, Robert the Bruce,’ said the redheaded lord with a sneer.

It was a dismissive salutation, for the Bruce should have been greeted as the Earl of Carrick. Yet there was no love lost between the two men, so that the slight was repaid in kind.

‘Hail, John the Red,’ replied the still kneeling figure, ‘and well met. I am here, just as we agreed.’

The Bruce rose to his feet and bowed once to the statue of the Madonna, before walking towards the newcomer. John the Red quietly observed his approach, then decided to further assess the Bruce’s mood by engaging in further conversation.

‘Word reached us from London that Longshanks wants you dead,’ said the Red, while beads of perspiration prickled his brow despite the winter cold.

In truth the tidings from England had filled the Red with a deep joy. Yet he was still nervous, for he knew that one did not lightly cross Robert the Bruce. Which was not to say that Red had lightly crossed the Bruce, because he had recently done far worse than that. For years, great rivalry had existed between John the Red Comyn and Robert the Bruce. For after the king of Scotland had died childless, both men held a claim to the Scottish throne.

Robert the Bruce and John Comyn were both thirty-one years of age, yet had the wisdom of men twice their age. From their earliest years, they were both forced to take part in battles and eventually also lead their own armies. Both men were also Guardians of Scotland, yet many arguments had often broken out between them during the gatherings of Scottish lords.

So John the Red was surprised when the Bruce had agreed to enter into a secret pact with him. This agreement bound the Red to support any Bruce-led revolt against Longshanks,

the fearsome English king, who constantly behaved as if he were Lord Paramount of Scotland. Yet in truth the pact had been a cunning ploy by the Red to destroy his lifelong rival. Indeed, Comyn was surprised that the Bruce was still alive at all.

The Bruce stepped into the glowing circle on the marble floor, standing around five paces from his visitor. On his part the Red was also quietly delighted to see that recent days had not been kind to his young rival. For the Bruce was swathed in a fraying cloak which hid all of his appearance save for his height, which exceeded that of most men. The Bruce pulled back the hood about his head with blistered fingers, revealing gaunt and unkempt features beneath an unruly tangle of black locks.

As the Red observed the Bruce's weary countenance, he became more confident. As he became more confident, he was also overcome by hatred so that his initial wariness turned into a growing rage. Meanwhile the Bruce maintained a stern, unmoving expression as he reached for something in his cloak. At this gesture, a low intake of breath was heard from the Red, who took a step backwards.

'Why Lord Comyn,' whispered the Bruce, 'do you not trust me?'

The Red flinched when the Bruce threw something towards his feet, which produced a sharp clink of steel against stone. The Lord of Badenoch scowled at the coins and the steel spurs which had landed upon the ground before him.

'What is that?' he snapped.

'Twelve pence and a pair of spurs,' replied the Bruce. 'A trusted friend sent them to me in London, the day after Longshanks interrogated me about our pact.'

'I see,' replied the Red between gritted teeth.

He felt crushed by disappointment, while secretly cursing the man who had warned the Bruce about Longshanks' intentions.

‘I rode my unhappy steed half to death to flee England,’ said the Bruce.

The Red said nothing while the Bruce whipped out a scroll and held it out before him.

‘Here is our pact. You agreed to support my claim for kingship in return for the Scottish king’s lands. Now Longshanks has learned of it, he will invade. The hour is at hand. The time has come for us to rise up again. Together we can be free again.’

At the Bruce’s declaration, the Red stared back at him defiantly while his lips formed into a smirk.

‘I will do no such thing,’ he said, never batting an eyelid as he enjoyed the changing expressions on his rival’s face.

The Bruce’s expression had already changed from one of shock to one of disbelief. As he stared back at the Red, he eventually sighed and looked wholly crestfallen. As the scroll fell from his hand onto the floor.

‘Why did you do it, John?’ he asked at last, as the scroll fell from his hand onto the floor. ‘The pact was your idea.’

The Red appeared thrilled by the Bruce’s dismay, with his rage welling up further as he stepped towards his old rival.

‘Do not look at me like that, Bruce. You who have only ever served your own interests, who have only raised your sword for or against Scotland as best suited you.’

‘You are not Scotland,’ whispered the Bruce. ‘And yet I would have given you whatever you wanted. We had a pact.’

‘And more fool you for believing in it!’ roared the Red, his eyes blazing from his years of hatred for the Bruce. ‘Who are you, for me to be second to you? After all, my claim to the throne is the rightful one. You thought that I would surrender it to you so readily?’

In his anger the Red stopped short of seizing the Bruce by the throat, as he had infamously done years earlier. On his part Robert did not stir as John Comyn yelled at him again.

“Wallace, Moray, my uncle, me – we all bled for this land!

All of us more loved by the people than you, who would as readily fight for Longshanks and swan about his court! Men say he all but considers you his own son!

Spittle dribbled down the Red's chin as his livid stare bore into the Bruce who beheld him almost sorrowfully.

'Readily do you talk of fighting for freedom!' yelled Co-myn, 'yet did you end up in the tower of London, like I did? Did you beg at the king of France's feet for this land's freedom?' Tell me, lord Robert, what did you ever do to earn the right to become king? When did *you* bleed? How did *you* suffer?

The Red was appalled when the Bruce spoke again, seemingly deaf to all of his rival's accusations.

'I thought you were a man of honour.'

'Honour be damned!' shouted the Red, then laughed aloud, 'I have freed Scotland from a profiteer and a would-be usurper. And now Scotland will no longer be divided, for Longshanks wants you torn apart. You are finished Robert, yet there was only ever one true heir to the throne.'

He turned on his heel and readied to make for the door.

'And you think Longshanks will respect your claim?' asked the Bruce.

'Well,' said the Red, 'you spent years being his lapdog, yet the revelation of our pact has left you without standing. Once you are out of the picture, the Scots will only look to me.'

He was already feeling quite smug and could not help gloating further. So he turned on his heel and faced the Bruce with a hateful grin.

'Farewell Robert. We led each other a merry dance, but it is now all over. Get yourself on the first ship to France or Norway, or to hell for all I care. Longshanks will show no mercy, he will have you torn limb from limb when his men find you.'

The redhead issued another mocking chuckle. He could not resist twisting the knife of betrayal, since he was filled

with loathing for the Bruce. Yet as he readied to turn back towards the door, he found that his rival had already crept past him and stood before the door.

‘Let’s settle this,’ said the Bruce, ‘once and for all.’

The Red took a step back as his rival drew his dagger.

‘In a church? Have you not dug a deep enough hole for yourself man?’

‘As you say John, I am left with no choice. I may only survive Longshanks’ fury if I am the sole claimant. I may as well be dead if I do not leave this church alone.’

The Red suddenly realised that the Bruce was serious, so that he whipped out his own dagger and lunged forward, aiming it at his rivals’ breast. Yet the redhead’s blade met with thin air, and dots appeared before his eyes as the Bruce’s knee was buried into his stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of the Red, who fell onto the marble ground. He still held his dagger as he gasped for air, then groaned aloud when the tall figure of his enemy stepped towards him.

‘Have you not backstabbed me enough for one lifetime Comyn?’ cried the Bruce, the echo of his words as loud as a crashing rafter, ‘confront me face to face for once!’

Although he was as versed in treachery as most men of his rank, the Red was no coward.

‘Readily!’ he cried, then rose onto his feet.

If he was to dance with death, he would first learn whether the Bruce fought with the dagger as well as he did with most weapons. Scotland’s two guardians moved warily along the edge of the faint ring of light, circling each other like rabid dogs ready to spring at the first sign of hesitation.

Outside the friary of Greyfriars, a band of men waited anxiously in the street.

‘What can be keeping him so long?’ mumbled de Kirkpatrick.

‘Hope they’re at least past the greetings,’ groaned Lindsay,

barely restraining a shiver of cold.

‘Stay your tongues!’ hissed a lord in their company.

Roger de Kirkpatrick and James Lindsay heeded the man’s command, since he was Sir Christopher de Seton, the brother-in-law of their leader Robert the Bruce. Seton nodded towards another group of men who had appeared further along the road, and who served them with dark stares.

‘They be the Red’s folk,’ whispered de Seton, ‘I’ve met the fat one on the right. He’s Sir Raibeart, Comyn’s uncle.’

Both de Kirkpatrick and Lindsay said nothing, worried as they were about what was happening inside the chapel. They knew that the two lords’ exchanges had been fiery at the best of times, with Comyn once grabbing the Bruce by the throat seven years earlier, at a Scottish baronial council held in Peebles.

‘Hope they’ve not come to blows again,’ muttered another man named Cuthbert.

‘What? In a church?’ said Christopher Seton, ‘only a madman would do such a thing. It is why they met on holy ground.’

De Kirkpatrick sighed. Scotland had seen endless strife for years since its king Alexander had died childless. This in turn led to years of succession disputes between the Bruces and the Comyns, who both had the best claims to succeed to the throne. Matters had deteriorated further because of the king of England, who had done all he could to weaken and take control of Scotland.

‘Utter madness, this,’ grunted Christopher de Seton nervously, as he loosened his sword in his scabbard and glared back at the Red Comyn’s followers across the street. ‘Utter madness.’

Although the Bruce was the taller of the two rivals, the Red by far preferred close combat. He waited until Robert tried to stab him, then spun sideways as his foe’s knife edge missed

his gullet by a handspan. The Red's swiftness filled him with a rush of daring, and he aimed a savage kick at his rival's crotch. A stunned grunt echoed against the walls as the Bruce collapsed to the ground, then rolled over sideways and tripped the onrushing John Comyn. The Red slashed at thin air with his blade, then crashed into the wooden benches along the wall.

Many months spent in the court of the English king had not softened the Bruce. He sprang back to his feet and dealt the rising Red a punch to the jaw which sent a tooth bouncing across the cold tiles. No sooner did the Lord of Badenoch's bloodied face hit the floor, than the Bruce hauled him back onto his feet and flung him towards the high altar.

As the Red crashed into the exalted table, the heavy statue of the crucifix behind it wobbled once before toppling onto the marble steps. The sound of its collapse was deafening, yet it still took a few moments for the Red to recover from his savage collision. When at last he stirred again, he turned onto his back and looked up at the Bruce who approached him like some growing nightmare.

'You would not dare,' gasped John Comyn, warily eyeing Robert's drawn dagger while he wiped fresh blood from his eyes, 'this is consecrated ground! Besides, I am the Guardian of Scotland, appointed by the king himself!'

The Bruce remained silent while his gait never faltered. Despite his dizziness, the Red somehow staggered back onto his feet, then seized a tall candlestick from the ground and flung it at his rival. The Bruce dodged the iron missile with a slight dip of his shoulders, then raced at the redhead with a loud roar and smashed his forehead into his rival's face. The Red tumbled back to the ground with an agonised howl, then attempted a last stab at his enemy.

As the dagger tore through the air, the Bruce snatched up John's wrist and wrenched the blade out of his hand. Without a second thought, he next slammed it into the Red's chest.

Blood appeared on the Lord of Badenoch's lip, while the Bruce's furious stare slowly turned into one of disbelief. He staggered away in shock, as the realisation of what he had just done cooled his rage like a pail of ice-cold water.

The Bruce almost missed his footing as he stumbled away towards the door. Meanwhile the mortally wounded Red seized the dagger in his breast, while his scream tore through the fleeing Bruce's ears like a malediction.

'Doomed!' he screeched, 'your lands forfeit! Longshanks will never stop searching for you!'

Robert turned to flee, and he had hardly reached the chapel door when a last cry reached his ears from the ravaged altar.

'The English will find you like they did Wallace!'

The fray was over, yet the Bruce felt suddenly overwhelmed by thoughts of Longshanks' terrible rage when word of the stabbing reached London. The door of Greyfriars chapel burst open as the Earl of Carrick ran into the street and fell onto his knees, staring at his bloodstained dagger hand. At the sight of their master, Christopher de Seton and the other followers of the Bruce pushed aside the townsfolk who had gathered about Robert and made out the glint of tears upon his cheeks. Robert shivered wildly as they helped him to his feet, when he cried aloud.

'I drew blood in a church!'

De Seton stared at him in horror.

'Did what?'

The Bruce looked back at him, scarcely able to talk. De Seton looked over his shoulder and saw the Red's men drawing their arms. Then he met the Bruce's stare again and drew the mace at his belt, stepping back towards the gathering on-lookers.

'Christopher...' said the Bruce in disbelief, yet his brother-in-law was already pushing his way through the crowd.

‘Coward!’ snarled Lindsay after the vanishing de Seton, as he grabbed the Bruce by the shoulder and hissed in his face.

‘Did you stab the Red?’

‘Yes.’

His portly follower swallowed hard in disbelief, before he finally managed a reply.

‘Is he dead?’

‘I don’t know!’ wailed the Bruce.

Lindsay swallowed hard and traded a look of dread with de Kirkpatrick.

‘I’ll make sure,’ gasped de Kirkpatrick, then ran into the chapel with Lindsay close on his heels.

They had hardly run off when Comyn’s men were seen running towards the Bruce, while the Red’s uncle Sir Raibeart yelled at the top of his voice.

‘John! John! What did you do to him, cur!’

Cuthbert and two of the Bruce’s remaining followers met the assault of the Red’s men, yet not enough of the Bruce’s men were left to fend off Sir Raibeart. The Red’s uncle glared murderously at the bewildered Bruce, as he raised his sword over the Guardian’s head. He readied to split the Bruce’s head open, while a man pushed the stunned bystanders aside. A crash of steel was heard when de Seton’s first blow sent Sir Raibeart’s helmet flying into the air. His second blow producing a sickening snap as the mace head cracked open the back of Raibeart’s skull.

Comyn’s uncle was dead before he collapsed to the ground, while Cuthbert’s axe tore through the shoulder of one of the Red’s men. Meanwhile de Seton drew his sword, using it to run through another enemy and then chase the remaining pair down the street. As they vanished around a street corner, de Seton made his way back towards Cuthbert and the Bruce. He panted heavily as he recovered his breath, while whispering beneath it all the while.

“Utter madness...utter madness...”

After they entered the chapel, de Kirkpatrick and Lindsay ran up to the high altar, where they turned the Red onto his back. They were left aghast by the gaping wound in his breast, and the Lord of Badenoch drew his last breaths as a trembling de Kirkpatrick lay the edge of his blade upon his throat.

‘May the Almighty forgive me.’

The dagger was jerked sideways, shearing the Red’s throat wide open. Hot blood was spattered everywhere, as Lindsay kicked John’s hissing form back over. It was left abandoned before the ravaged high altar, which stood above a man whose treachery had all but made him the king of Scotland. When the blood spattered de Kirkpatrick ran back out into the street, he could see Cuthbert and Seton dragging a forlorn Bruce away with two other followers. The Red’s uncle lay dead on the ground with one of his men, while Lindsay ran into the street with his blade drawn. De Seton was wholly winded from all the killing and spat on the ground.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he growled, as he noticed an English patrol at the end of the street.

The Bruce’s followers needed no encouragement as they dragged their stunned leader towards a side alley. They entered it as the first light of the moon fell over Dumfries, casting the town in a deathly pallor.

