

Being a chronicle of the Kingdom in the Years of Trouble, written at Greyfriars Priory on the octave of Septuagesima, in the year of Our Lord one thousand three hundred and twenty-nine, 23rd year of the reign of King Robert I, God save and keep him.

In the year of Our Lord one thousand three hundred and fourteen, the King had reigned for eight hard years, driving his enemies with fire and sword so that the Balliol and Comyn were crushed out of the realm and those still alive fled to the south. The aged Earl of Buchan, wasted by the harrying of his people and lands, died there, pleading with the English King Edward for help while ensuring that his former wife, Isabel, languished in a cage on the walls of Berwick for daring to support the Bruce cause. Buchan's henchman, the cruel Malise Bellejambe, was left as her keeper, a task he pursued assiduously.

But this second King Edward was not his father. He had abandoned all attempts to exert his power in Scotland, preferring to squabble with his own barons, who sought to remove his favourite, Piers Gaveston, and impose restrictions – Ordinances – on his rule.

Thusly, with a free hand, good King Robert chased the

occupying English and their Scots allies from the realm. At the start of this year of Our Lord, in all the Kingdom there remained but three great fortresses of major note still held by the English: Roxburgh, Stirling and Edinburgh.

It was now that our king chose to bring the Kingdom to freedom and determined to remove these last bastions from the enemy, so he came and closed off all of these great castles all around. But, without proper weapons of sieging war, it did not look as if the Scots would prevail and the English took heart from this.

Then Sir James Douglas came to Roxburgh . . .

ISABEL

Heaven is dark and God is ugly. Yet may He do ye hurt. Liar. Fornicator. Torturer. Murderer. May He send ye toads beneath your serk, ants in your beard and up your nethers and flies into your eyes, auld wickedness. Please God in Your mercy let me become the wildfire abune the marsh and let me lead him into the sucking pit. Praise God for ever and ever, let me be the white hart that leads huntsmen to the wolves of the forest that I may lure him to their fangs. Blessings of Heaven, make me the wasp that might fly about his head and never give him peace. God in Your Mercy let me bury him so deep he will never find his way up to Judgement Day, so deep even worms cannot find him. Or give me leave to die, Lord, rather than suffer longer in this Berwick cage from the vile of Malise Bellejambe.

CHAPTER ONE

*Roxburgh,
Shrove Tuesday, 1314*

Frixco de Fiennes scurried across the cobbles into the shelter of the gatehouse in a drizzling dusk as miserable as wet ash. It matched his mood, especially when he saw the dark shape lurking under the cullis, bouncing slightly and swaying left to right: Aggie, nursing her bairn.

He sighed and went to them, peeling off his hat and beating the drops from it.

‘Aggie,’ he said wearily. ‘You should not have met me here.’

‘None can hear. The guards are in their wee cubbyhole,’ she retorted tartly. ‘Asleep.’

Frixco cursed silently and made a note to rout them out when this business was done; somewhere behind him came a burst of laughter from the main hall, where they were already deep into celebrating the Shrove feast, stuffing their faces on the eve of Lent.

‘Aye, you need not worry,’ Aggie added bitterly. ‘You will not be long with me – the same time it took to make this wee mite.’

Frixco managed a weak smile and wished the woman a hundred miles away and the child with her.

‘I can spare a few silvers only,’ he wheedled and saw that she knew it for the lie it was. Desperation made her lips a thin line and she merely nodded, holding out one free hand for the bag of coin.

Even this was passed over reluctantly and, not for the first time, Frixco cursed the castle cook’s daughter even as he prayed she would keep her mouth closed on who the father of the child was. The image of Sander and his meat cleaver made him close his eyes briefly and then offer a last weak smile.

He had back scorn for it, started for the main hall, remembered the sleeping guards, turned and shuffled past her; Aggie heard him vent his wrath on the luckless pair as she drew up her shawl to cover herself and the babe before stepping out of the shelter of the gatehouse into the mirr.

She did not go back to her cookhouse bed, all the same, to the scowls and the demands her father made to name the man who had filled her belly with bastard. Even now she found it hard to believe that she had let Frixco have his way – but she knew the why of it, in the end. He was brother to the seneschal, with power of a sort, had coin when he could be parted from it and seemed, for one bright summer, her escape from Roxburgh.

Climbing up to the rain-smearred night of the gatehouse battlement she recalled the Prisoner, the one she had brought food to every day for as long as she could safely carry the bowl, spoon and cup without spilling any – seven years at least. He and I are the same, she thought, held in this stone gaol, stitched in on three sides by water. She was fifteen and her life was over.

She went up, above the gate and close to the brazier, sizzling coals spitting as the drizzle landed on them. The wind swept in, blowing the loop of wool off the baby and she covered him up quickly.

‘Away, lass,’ said a voice and she turned into the helmeted

smile of Leckie. ‘Ye should tak’ the mite down to the warm and away from this wind. Ye’ll catch yer death of chill and so will the bairn.’

Aggie liked Leckie, if only because he never looked at her askance, or asked what everyone asked about her baby. He was kind, too, and frequently shared his bread and cheese when she came up here, to feel the wind and smell the promise in it, the taste of somewhere else.

Now she nodded and smiled and moved away, anxious now to be in warmth and shelter, pausing for one last look out beyond the raised bridge and the rutted track that led to it – and led away from it, to that fabled Somewhere Else.

‘Nae rebels on a night like this,’ Leckie declared firmly, thinking she was fretting about the dark beyond the fortress, and she smiled again. Rebels preoccupied everyone’s thoughts now. Roxburgh was one of the last big fortresses held against them in this realm; everywhere else had fallen to the usurper king, Robert Bruce, and now panic was rife.

But nothing moved in the deep pewter dim save for a grazing scatter of black cattle, shadows in the mirk. She moved off, crooning to the babe.

‘Hush ye, hush ye, the Black Douglas will no’ get ye the night.’

At the foot of the gatehouse rock, half a dozen black kine milled slowly, as if searching out the lush grass that grew around the jakes fall. When one put an elbow in something wet and noxious, his curses were immediately hissed to silence by the others.

Sim Craw, fumbling furiously, threw off his black cloak in a fury of frustration and fought the coiled ladder off his back.

‘Aye,’ said James Douglas, merciless and bitter. ‘Ring a bell, Sim. Let them hear where we are.’

‘The hooks were stabbin’ me,’ Sim muttered back. ‘And I have crawled in shite besides.’

‘Whisht, the pair of you, or we are undone.’

The other two turned at the sight of the wet, scowling face thrust at them. A wee wet mirror of the Black Jamie Douglas, Sim noted. The only folk who have not noted that Jamie and Dog Boy are kin are the pair themselves. James the Black because he is lord of Douglas and will not admit that the Dog Boy, a mere cottar of no account, is a byblow of his father. Dog Boy because, even if he suspects it, will not want to shame his boyhood friend and now liege lord with it.

Sim, as ever, never voiced any of it, but simply scowled back at the pair of them.

‘I hope you have the spear, Dog Boy,’ he whispered harshly and had back an exasperated grunt.

‘I have, shoved through the grass as I crawled. And it is Aleysandir, not Dog Boy. I have said this afore.’

‘Aye, aye,’ muttered Sim, untangling the confection of rope and wood and iron. Dog Boy had never been the same after finding out that he had a real name. Sim recalled how and when that had been uncovered: from the houndsman rolls at Douglas Castle when Jamie and Dog Boy had raided it. Christ betimes, a fistful of years ago now.

That was when Sir James had found his own new name – the Black Douglas – for what he had done to the English garrison in his own dispossessed keep. He had taken it from the occupying English by as clever a ruse as the one they now planned, but knew he could never hold the place – so he had wrecked it.

He and his men had soiled everything spoilable, from fodder to well, stacked the cellar with loot, pissed on it, and then lopped the heads off the surrendered English – and their Scots lackeys – before roasting the lot in a fire. The Douglas Larder, they called it with grisly humour and the memory of it was as black as the stones they left. Blacker still was the scowl of Jamie, but only because he had had to do this to his boyhood home and his rightful inheritance.

There was no scowl on him now, all the same, only the mad gleeful grin that always made Sim's flesh rucked as goose-skin.

'Ah, you are a cunning man, Sim Craw,' James Douglas enthused in a hissed whisper, clapping the man on his sodden shoulder. 'This will take the shine off Randolph.'

Sim eyed the dark, wild-haired lord sourly. As if this is for the glory of Douglas over Randolph, the latter sitting at Edinburgh and wondering how to take its castle, us sitting at Roxburgh and pondering the same. Now the lord of Douglas is out to scoop Roxburgh in a single blow and it is mainly to put Randolph's nose askew . . . not for the first time, Sim marvelled at how the diffident, lispng lord of Douglas could turn, in an eyeblink, into a red-handed killer with a heart the same shade as the Earl of Hell's own cloak.

Using my cunning to further himself, he added moodily to himself as the ladder finally unveiled its grapple-hooked top, with the slot for a spearshaft. Twenty feet of it was coiled up, the rope steps bolstered with wool-padded wood to keep them just far enough from the wall for a foot to fit – his da and other well-diggers had taken the idea from the miners at Leadhouse and Sim had recalled it from his boyhood, and then adapted it for this one purpose.

Now he moved to the crag of rock on which the blocky gatehouse was built and looked up, shaking mirr from his eyelashes. He nodded to Dog Boy, who put his back to the rock and cupped his hands, while Sim took the long pike-spear and shafted it into the slot on the ladder, handing it to James Douglas.

Then he stepped into Dog Boy's hands, heard him grunt and curse.

'You are getting fat, Sim.'

Fat and auld, Sim agreed, stepping on to the Dog Boy's shoulders, then up to a toehold on the rock, then higher still on the treacherous wet until he could climb no more. He reached out one hand and felt the slap of the spearshaft in

it, and raised it, waving it as high as he could, balanced precariously with the sibilant mirr making tears on his face. Teetering, he lifted it higher still with two hands, straining until he felt the ladder on top of it slide over the crenellation; he heard the grate of it catching.

He tugged the cord and the ladder unravelled with a soft pattering, as if a cat ran down the stones. Sim felt a touch on his boot, looked down and saw the Black himself staring anxiously up.

‘Are you certes you want to be first?’

Sim did not answer. He knew the reason for the Black’s concern: too old for this sort of work. But it is my ladder, Sim thought to himself. Mine. So he said nothing at all, tugged hard to make sure it had settled, and then started to climb.

Frixco, mollified by shouting at the gate guards, hurried back through the wet to the main hall, aware of the glares at his back – more so than ever before, he knew. It was the way of things, as arranged by custom and so by God, that those he had power over would resent it and scowl when they were sure they would not be seen.

But Frixco, for all the time he had been here – Christ’s Bones, eighteen years at least – had always been seen by the English as a Gascon and by the Scots as an interloper, no matter his stripe. Gascons had been preferred under the old Edward and under the new – especially under the new, for Gaveston, the King’s favourite, had been a Gascon.

But Gaveston was dead and the lords who had murdered him circled and scowled and barked at the King and his loyal barons, two dog packs with bristling hackles. Now every Gascon serving King Edward was under suspicion from all those not of the King’s mind: a warden had been appointed to Roxburgh town, forced on the King by his Ordinancer barons to ensure the loyalty of the castle’s Gascon garrison commander, Sir William de Fiennes, Frixco’s brother.

Inside the hall, the blast of heat and noise drowned Frixco in delight for a moment, so that he took his time shaking out his wet cloak and chaffering with those feasters nearest him, but he had one task left before he could join in and hurried after it, out of the hall and up the steps to the private chapel.

The Prisoner knelt, a humble supplicant, before the carved wooden panels brought out specially for this day: the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The Prisoner, permitted this worship for the Holy Day, knelt at the ninth, the third Falling of Christ, and Frixco hoped the man was not about to argue for lengthy prayers at all fourteen; he had come to return him to his prison and then get to the food and the drink.

‘It is time,’ he said and had no response, so he repeated it, more loudly.

Hal did not hear him, lost in the carving, which was very beautifully rendered, every agony transcribed lovingly. Christ prone, held up by one hand, the other gripping the crushing weight of his Cross. He remembered all the other times he had attended Confession at the wee stone chapel in Herdmanston, waiting in the queue, Lord Hal or no, while others shuffled in. There had hardly been time to babble out a sin because there was only Father Thomas issuing pardons.

Father, I have stolen. Father, I have sworn. I ate meat at Lent. I beat my wife. I drink. Most folk knew already what others would murmur in supposed secret and those who took longer went on the end of knowing nudges and looks from those waiting impatiently. Must have done red murder, or robbed a bishop at least, they would offer with irritated scowls.

Were any prayers ever answered? Were God and His saints asleep? Was the Lord still a refuge? *Non accedet ad te malum* – there shall no evil befall thee.

Seven years. For her, too . . . He wondered if Isabel’s prayers had been answered and hoped, at least, that she was no longer in a cage. Yet he thought that unlikely. The treacherous Isabel MacDuff had been hung on the walls of Berwick by old King

Edward, with the tacit agreement of her husband, the Earl of Buchan. Longshanks had done it because she had dared to place the crown on the head of Robert Bruce and Buchan had agreed to it as a warning to cuckolding wives everywhere. He would have killed the cuckold, Hal, if he had been able.

Hal's attempt at seeking her out in a dashing rescue had ended with his own capture and, for a time, it looked as if Buchan would have his final triumph – but then the old King Edward had died. A miracle, Hal thought, which left him held at the new king's pleasure, inviolate until he was remembered and dealt with.

The new Edward had had more to occupy his mind and now Hal had been here in Roxburgh, forgotten, for seven years. The stumbled Christ looked back at him with blank wooden eyes and Hal admitted that the Lord might well still be a refuge – for certes, Hal no longer feared anything, though he was relieved, every day, to discover that this was not because he no longer desired anything.

Freedom. Isabel. The words rang him like a bell and the carved Christ seemed to shift, though it was the light from wind-wafted candles. He remembered, as he did every day, the promise he and Isabel had made to each other never to be parted. You should be wary of swearing oaths to God, for the Devil is always listening.

Yet God was always watching, Hal thought, staring at the blank wooden eyes of Christ. You Yourself refused to be carried by the angels and wounded Your feet on the stones of the way. For this You came into the world in a stable on a winter's night. You love my lost Isabel, too, and I hope You keep her safer than I did . . .

The blow on the back of his head blasted him back to the moment and he half fell, recovered and turned into the scowl of Frixco, who had cuffed him.

'Hear me now?' the man demanded and Hal nodded dumbly.

‘Time to go,’ Frixco growled, weary of it all. Seven years they had tended this one, waiting for some word from someone – anyone – as to his fate. None had come and even Frixco had almost forgotten what the lord of Herdmanston – wherever that was – had done.

Murder, Frixco recalled vaguely. And a Scots rebel. He would hang one day or the next and it could not come soon enough for Frixco de Fiennes, set the task of caring for him. Down below he heard shouts and bellows and scowled even more deeply – he was missing the best of the night’s feast.

Leckie heard the peculiar pink-pink sound, could not place it, cocked his head and strained. Silly wee sound, he thought. Like a wee moose dancin’ in clackety shoes. Or a faerie redcap, whetting his steel claws. He crept, following the noise past the brazier, away to the dark corner of the gatehouse battlements, where he caught the gleam of metal where none should be.

His heart skipped and he moved to it, saw the hooks and blinked, stunned, barely comprehending. A wee powrie’s steel-clawed fingers, right enough, he thought, hanging off my wall. He looked at the far side, to where Aggie crooned to her bairn, wanted to call out to her to get away, and then looked back at the steel talons, heard the pink-pink as they grated, shifting slightly from side to side.

Because something – someone – was climbing up the ladder they were attached to. The realization was a dash of ice down Leckie’s back. He should have made for the alarm iron. He should have bawled his lungs raw. Instead, he went forward and peered over the edge – and came face to face with a grey-haired man with an ugly grin.

‘Boo,’ said Sim, shot out a hand, grabbed Leckie by the front of his tunic and hauled him over and away before as much as a squeak had passed the man’s lips.

A little way below and climbing steadily, Jamie and the Dog

Boy saw the blurring rush, heard the dull crunch. There was a muffled curse as the men waiting to climb dealt with the shock of a man cracking his brains and bones at their feet.

‘Christ betimes,’ Jamie hissed. ‘What was that?’

‘Sim at work,’ Dog Boy answered grimly and they climbed on.

Up on the battlements, Aggie had had enough of crooning and hoping. She turned to go, paused to wave farewell to Leckie, but saw only the vague shape in the far shadows, so she shrugged and turned away heading for the stairhead; the babe wailed a little as the rain hit his wee face.

‘Hush you, hush you,’ she sang, folding him into the safe warmth of a cloak corner. ‘The Black Douglas will no’ get ye the night, wee lamb.’

‘In truth, wee lamb,’ said a voice in her ear, even as a horned, calloused hand closed off her screams, ‘your ma is almost completely mistook in that regard.’

Frixco, following Hal to the top of the wind of stair that led to the hall, paused uncertainly. Screams had never been part of a Shrove feast before. Nor the clash of steel and shouts – perhaps a fight had broken out? Frixco was anxious not to miss it and turned to scowl and urge Hal on, saw the Prisoner’s face and whirled to look behind him.

Horror shrieked up the steps at him, one eye dangling from a bloody cord, his face a mass of gore and his mouth wide, every tooth outlined in red.

‘Back,’ his brother screamed. ‘Back. Up the stairs and bar the door. The Black is here . . .’

Frixco, stunned as a slaughter-ox, stood open-mouthed at the bloodied vision of his brother and the men spilling after him, turning fearfully to guard his back with drawn knives. William de Fiennes, his face a raw agony, half-blind and wholly afraid, slapped his brother’s gawp from him in a fury of panic.

Behind him, Hal saw Jamie Douglas, a flash as if scrawled against the dark by a bolt of lightning and as sure to him as if seven years had not passed at all: wild black hair flying, a sword in one hand, a dirk in the other. And at his back, as strange as a two-headed calf, was another Jamie Douglas, standing fierce guard on a shivering girl with a swaddled wean in her arms.

It was only after, shoved and kicked into the chapel, with men piling up what little furniture there was against the door – all fourteen carved Stations included – that Hal realized that it had been Dog Boy he had seen.

Sim saw the men on the stairs, falling back with shields up to protect their lord; he was hurt bad was Sir William de Fiennes, for Sim had done it with a backlashed blow from a dirk and panted that out to Jamie Douglas as they crashed into the hall.

‘Poked oot his eye,’ he declared and Jamie nodded thoughtfully; both men agreed that such a wound might colour a man’s decision to resist.

They did not debate it long, for a sudden rush of new foes spilled on them and Sim crashed through a scatter of benches towards them, his breath harsh in his ears. There were men running away from him, to the back of the hall where there was no way out. On the table to his left, Red Rowan kicked through a slurry of sauce and meat and gruel, kicking trenchers like a boy jumping in puddles; he turned to grin at Sim and then seemed to be hauled backwards, though Sim knew fine well it was the force of the quarrel hitting him with a deep shunk of sound.

Sim leaped towards the man with the latchbow, who gave up feverishly attempting to span it, tried to swing it like a club, shrieking out his fear and anger. Sim’s sword blurred in the hazed candle-reek and cut into the man’s neck, so that his shouting was choked off in a gurgle; Sim kicked the body away with his boot, scooping up half a round of cheese on the way, so that it flew into the air.

‘Aaahh!’

Sim spun, blocking the snake-like blow with a frantic movement, though the stun of it almost lifted the sword out of his hand. The man who had rushed at him, yelling, was elderly, with a white beard and rheumy eyes; he jumped back and waved his weapon threateningly.

A fire iron, Sim saw. He is attacking me with a fire iron. A retired soldier, said the thought flickering through his mind as he chopped hard at the man’s knee. The man dodged; Sim felt his foot skid on a soggy trencher and then was on his arse, legs and arms flailing.

The old man screamed, wet-mouthed, and raised the fire iron high – but the point of a sword erupted out and upwards from his chest so hard and fierce that it went on into the underside of his jaw. He wailed, high and thin, falling away to reveal the grinning face of Jamie Douglas, staggering as the man’s weight dragged the sword down; he struggled to work his blade free.

‘Christ betimes, that was almost too good to waste: a brace of auld yins at it like Rolands. You will have little better entertainment at this feast.’

Sim’s mask of disgust was ignored and, grinning broadly, Jamie hauled him to his feet, put his boot against the old man’s dead neck, using the leverage to drag his sword free; the blood crept sluggishly out in a viscous tarn, lapping at the apples and plums, the buttered capons, the Shrove griddle cakes and bread spilled from the tables.

Another bloody larder for the Black, Sim thought bitterly as he heard more shouting and turned to it, aware of his weariness. He saw Dog Boy and raised his bloody blade in salute.

Dog Boy had been charged with the woman and her bairn, though he did not know why the Black set such store by it. For all that, he kept her close and grinned as friendly as he could every time he caught her eye; it did not seem to help the tremble in her.

He lost the grin in the hall, with everyone running and shouting and clashing steel. He saw a party break away and head for the stairs and a measure of safety. He saw Sim and Jamie cut down a brace of fighters and thought it was all over until a last knot of men ran at him, wailing desperately. They were led by a big man with a bald head like a flesh fencepost, so that the knob of his original chin alone showed where there had once been a neck. He had a meat cleaver and a deal of trapped-rat courage.

Dog Boy thrust the woman behind him and leaped at this fat giant, hacking overhand with his sword to make the man block with his cleaver, the dirk curving round in his other hand and sinking into the fat man's belly. He thought he heard a scream from behind him and fought the urge to look and see if the woman and her bairn were under attack.

The fat man reeled away, clutching his belly and looking alternately at Dog Boy and the blood on his palm, a bemused disbelief in his whipped-dog eyes. Another man surged in, Dog Boy struck out and had the blow parried with a small shield – it was only later that Dog Boy saw it was a pot lid – the man grunting as it took the blow. Then he stabbed out with a vicious carving knife.

They are servants, Dog Boy realized suddenly, getting his sword in the way and managing to turn the blow. At his side, Patrick slapped down the knife, smashed his studded leather shoulder into the man's pot-lid shield and sent him staggering back; a bench caught him just behind the knee and he went over with a despairing cry.

Patrick, snarling like a mad hound, lunged after him, his elbow flailing like a fiddler at a dance, the longsword rising and falling, spraying gleet and blood.

Dog Boy turned and saw the woman, clutching her wailing brat to her and staring, open-mouthed with horror. Aye weel, he thought, hearing the wet, ugly sounds of Patrick making sure his opponent was truly dead, such sights would give you pause.

'Dinna fash,' he panted, leaning on his sword, knowing the

worst of the matter was done with. ‘The Black ordered you safe and safe you shall be.’

Patrick appeared, his bluff face speckled with blood, and offered her a grin of his own as he cleaned gore and bits of brain from his blade with the hat of the man he had killed.

‘Hot work,’ he offered, but the woman merely buried her face in her swaddled bairn and wept, so he shrugged.

‘Ach – weemin,’ he said. ‘Have you told the quine she is safe?’

‘I have,’ Dog Boy answered firmly, but frowned and added loudly: ‘So it is a puzzle why she is weepin’ so.’

The woman surfaced, tear-tracks streaking through the grime of her face and pointed a shaking hand at the quivering giant, who had dropped his meat cleaver, sunk like a stricken ox and bled to death through the fingers clutching desperately at the hole Dog Boy had put in his belly.

‘That was my da.’

Hal marvelled on that vision of the two Jamies all the rest of that night, strangely detached from the fetid sweat of fear in the chapel, where men crouched like panting beasts listening to the thud and crash on their battened door.

Sir William roared curses back at them and wheedled courage into his own before he collapsed, breathing like a mating bull; one of his men-at-arms mercifully severed the last shreds of his eyestalk and then tried to hand it to Frixco, who shied away in horror.

By morning, it was clear to everyone that Sir William was dying and that Frixco was no leader, so Hal was unsurprised when a man – the same who had physicked the eye off Sir William’s cheek – came and knelt beside him in the stale dim, where the tallow candles gasped. He announced himself as Tam Shaws, a good Scot, and said as much with an air of challenge. Hal said nothing, though he had his own ideas on what made a good Scot.

‘Is he set on red murder, or will the Black spare us?’ Shaws demanded, which was flat-out as a sword on a bench.

Hal shrugged. Truth was, he did not know. He had heard, as had everyone, of Jamie Douglas and his savagery and could only vaguely equate it with the youth he had known. But Dog Boy was with him and, for the life of him, Hal could not see Dog Boy indulging in such tales as were told, with wide-eyed, breathless horror, under every roof in the Kingdom. He said as much and saw the man-at-arm’s eyebrow lift laconically.

‘It is not your life,’ he answered dryly, which was only the truth. Hal rose up, stiff after sitting so long.

‘Is it your wish to surrender provided no harm comes?’ he asked and, after a pause and some exchanged glances – one of them with the whimpering Frixco – Shaws nodded.

‘Unbar the door,’ Hal ordered.

It came as a shock to Jamie Douglas when the clatter of moving furniture heralded something imminent, for he had not thought the defenders had that much courage in them. Still, he thought savagely, better this way – I need this place taken and swiftly.

‘Ready, lads,’ he called out, and the black-cloaked men on the stair behind and trailing into the bloody ruin of the hall, still picking wolfishly at the wreck of the feast, flexed chapped knuckles on their weapons.

Dog Boy, standing guard over the crouched woman – Christ betimes, hardly more than a girl in the pewter dawn light of the hall – saw her tremble and touched her shoulder reassuringly; she had wept most of the night and hugged her bairn to her, so that the episode of killing her da had fretted Dog Boy more than a little and he felt she should know other folk cared yet for her.

‘The Black has placed you under his cloak, yourself and bairn both,’ he reminded her and saw the wan smile.

The door above creaked open and everyone tensed, waiting for the last mad leap of the desperate. Instead, a man stepped

through, nondescript in hodden, with a matted tangle of iron hair and beard. Folk squinted, not knowing who he was.

‘Young Jamie,’ the man said quietly. ‘They will surrender if you spare them. It would be sensible to consider it.’

Only Sim knew, as soon as he heard the voice, and looked up.

‘Sir Hal,’ he yelled and Jamie Douglas jerked like a stung beast. Recovering, he grinned and shook his head in awe at this, a hero sprung like a tooth sown by Cadmus – a man, he was forced to admit, whose presence in Roxburgh he had shamefully overlooked.

‘Sir Hal of Herdmanston. Here you were, a prisoner we came to free,’ he called out for the others to hear, for it did no harm to stamp your mark on the moment, ‘and here you are, having taken this wee fortalice of your ain accord.’

ISABEL

The nuns are here, the one called Sister Constance and the other, Alise. What kind of name is Alise for a nun? One for a nun who thinks herself boldinit and more mighty than the Almighty, that's what kind. Wee Constance is kind enough in her way, though she believes what she is told, of this hoor of Babylon kept in a cage on the walls of Berwick until Hell calls her for a seat at her personal bad fire. The convent they come from is the same one where I was held for ransom by Malenfaunt long years since, but all his charges have been scourged from it – I wonder what became of the little oblate, Clothilde? She and all the rest have been replaced, Constance told me primly, by decent, Christian women. Well – all but Alise, who is a goad in the hands of one of Satan's lesser imps. From woman sprang original sin, she tells me often, and all evil and all suffering and all impurity – with a sly little smile that tells me she does not include herself as any kin of Eve in it. Who is without sin? Even an Order Knight would need to live in a desert to obey God's Law in this kingdom. I said as much to her at frst and saw the little cat's-arse purse she made of her lips at having been so spoken to, though she could do nothing then. Afterwards, the number of folk allowed into the bailey to gawp seemed to increase for a time, and had been encouraged to jeer until they were stopped by, of all folk, Malise, who does not like his authority

over me challenged, never mind by a mere nun. Sister Alise hates being one of those given the task of sleeping across my door each night on a straw pallet, to make sure nothing ungodly happens and no visitor takes advantage. Not unless it is Malise Bellejambe, of course. What does she know of me, this Alise? What do any of them know, slobbering and laughing below me like I am some babery beast? I am Isabel MacDuff and I am loved. My Hal lives yet – I would know if he did not – and he will come. Miserere nostri. Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla. Pity us. Dreaded day when the universe will be reduced to ashes.

Amen.