

PROLOGUE



NORFOLK, ENGLAND

FEBRUARY, 1358

Lashed by a morning sleet storm, William Douglas paced behind the frozen earthworks that guarded Castle Rising, an old royal mint so grim and neglected that it made London Tower seem hospitable. As the Earl of Mar and patriarch of his clan of Lanarkshire warriors, he had survived English assaults on the bloody fields of Neville's Cross and Poitiers, but never had his fortitude so lagged as it did now. Drafted by King David to serve as a ransom surety for the onerous Treaty of Berwick, he was homesick for Scotland, having been away for over half a year. He stole a glance over his shoulder at the East Anglian peat beds that lay north across the low broads. If he and his squire could break free of their warden, they might reach the Borders and hide in the tangled briars of Ettrick Forest, just as King Robert's mossers had done half a century ago.

He asked himself again: Why would the She-Wolf demand to meet *him*?

Did the brooding harridan seek to be entertained by his humiliation in defeat? No fellow Scot would shame him for wishing to shun the task at hand, for inside that ice-corniced mausoleum prowled the most dangerous and reviled woman in all the Isles. Isabella of France, the hoary old queen mother of England, had been at various turns in her infamous existence an insatiable adulteress, a regicide and usurper of the throne, a changeling who wore armor into battle and perverted nature by making love like a man, a sorceress who had beguiled her own son by slithering into his bed at night, a necromancer who held séances with her beheaded—

The gate portcullis cranked up and a detail of English pikemen in hobnailed boots marched from the tower and across the ice-glazed boards.

The Scot earl sighed heavily, his last chance to avoid the ordeal now dashed. Led with his squire through an occulted archway, he searched the scratchings

on the rampart stones for signs of Isabella's witchery. In her youth, the queen mother had gained a reputation for being a meddlesome princess in her father Philip's royal court in Paris, where she was said to have become privy to the heretical depravities of the Knights Templar. Bartered off to England as a marital bargaining chip in the conflict over Aquitaine, she had made good use of the cunning assassination methods perfected by those crusader monks. Her feckless husband, Edward Caernervon, had duly earned his toll paid to Hell, but only a woman who consorted with demons could have arranged so heinous a death for a deposed king. When Isabella's first-born, Edward the Third, became old enough to climb atop the throne, he banished her from London, and she raged at the filial ingratitude by conjuring down the Black Death upon the Isles. Most believed that she had managed to survive these past twenty-seven years in this outpost only because she had long ago sold her soul to the Devil.

A forearm came roughly to the earl's chest, halting him. The sergeant of the guard opened a door and prodded the earl and his squire into an austere room lit dimly by a solitary candle. The earl heard the lock latch behind him. As his eyes adjusted to the dusty gloom, he spied a silver cross with *fleur-de-lis* flanges crowning a small altar at the far wall. That corner of the room shimmered with movement. A bent hag, shrouded in the brown habit of a religious, arose with difficulty from a kneeler in the slant shadows and shuffled toward him.

The earl reached into his coin pouch and offered her a farthing, as was one's obligation when encountering a Poor Clare devoted to poverty. "Forgive us, *cailleach*, for interrupting your prayers. Would you inform the Queen Mother that William of Douglas awaits her summons?"

The nun kept staring over his shoulder at his squire.

He feared she was senile. "Good woman, did you not hear me?"

She snatched the coin from his fingers and, holding it under the candle's penumbra, traced a long nail over its raised face in profile.

He cursed under his breath, suspecting that he had been led to the wrong chamber in a prank to entertain the garrison. "I am Douglas of—"

"I know who you are." The nun turned her evil eye again on his squire, who remained a step behind him. "Who is *this* man?"

"My second."

She returned the farthing. "I have scandals enough attached to my name. If Parliament were to learn that I accepted charity from a Scotsman, I would be led to the block on the next morn."

The earl retreated a step, abashed at having mistaken the She-Wolf for a doted anchorite. He surrendered a grudging bow to the shriveled womb that had given birth to his country's sworn enemy. "I beg your forgiveness."

Isabella smiled wanly as she took their wet cloaks and hung them on pegs. "You will have to wait your turn. There is a long line of men who seek God's intercession for my absolution." She extended a tremulous hand to invite them toward the cold hearth. "I would offer you wine worthy of your palate, but circumstances have denied me such provisions."

Easing his guard, the earl considered the possibility that this frail woman might not be a bewitching harpy after all, but a victim of England's cruel imagination. He inspected her sparse quarters and wondered if she had accepted this living martyrdom to draw off the ire of the fickle English and deflect their challenges to her son's legitimacy. Yet she was still a Plantagenet by marriage, attached to the rapacious brood that was bent on crushing his country's independence, and he could not mask his hatred fueled by half a century of war. "We Scots are accustomed to being denied provisions. We have England to thank for that."

She nodded wistfully. "And yet, I can remember a time when your forefathers dined uninvited at many a table in Northumbria and Yorkshire." She studied his features. "You are kinsman to James Douglas."

He braced for the opprobrium that the admission always elicited here in England. "My father, many years younger, was his half-brother."

"Your uncle was the most troublesome of the many trespassers who harried our northern shires." She squinted to peer over his shoulder again. "His skin was dark for a Scotsman, like that of your squire."

Born in the year of his famous uncle's death, the earl had often heard the Good Sir James's unusual coloring compared to that of a Castilian. "Aye, hence they called him the Black Douglas."

She waved off that explanation. "His dark countenance was not why he earned that wicked sobriquet. There is much you do not know about him."

He bristled at the suggestion that she was better informed about his clan's heritage. "May I inquire, madam, as to the purpose of this audience?"

Lifting the clotted candle from the altar, Isabella drifted unsteadily toward the fireplace and stooped wincing to a knee. She held the precarious flame under a pile of green wood until it took the spark. "I am told that the Canterbury scribes are filling their chronicles with calumny about your uncle."

Perplexed by her concern, the earl, long inured to the Plantagenet industry of lies, shrugged with bitter resignation. "If paid handsomely enough, those monks would defame St. Peter himself."

Isabella stirred the fire, stalling for time as if debating his trustworthiness. "I am the last mortal still drawing breath who knew James Douglas. I wish to have my say on his deeds before I die."

The earl was incensed to discover that he had journeyed three days to this outback in the midst of winter merely to suffer a lecture on Westminster's version

of Scot history. “I suppose you would have us believe that he ran from a match of arms against one of your tourney hotheads.”

Her wrinkled mouth pursed with faint amusement. “Lord Douglas feared no man. ... But there was one woman who daunted him severely.”

A snort of disbelief puffed the air near the door. The earl turned and glared at his squire, chastising him for the indiscretion.

Smiling at their skepticism, Isabella arose from her knees with the earl’s assistance. She wrangled a chair nearer the fire and, gathering a shawl around her ankles as she sat down, taunted the two men with a challenge. “If you Scots are as stout of heart as you always boast, surely you will not shrink from an old widow’s tale.”

The earl was intrigued by her claim of distant acquaintance with the Good Sir James. He agreed to hear her out, for in truth he had no choice, given the exigencies of his diplomatic commission. When Isabella motioned for him to bring up stools aside her, he complied, but his squire insisted on standing in the shadows behind him, as his duty required.

The queen mother stared for nearly a minute at the crackling hearth, as if scrying a vision in the flames. Then, rousing from this trance, she smeared the tip of the poker with charcoal and sketched a crude map of the Isles on the flagstone near her feet. “Long before you were born, your King Alexander died without siring an heir.”

Alarmed, the earl glanced behind him, wondering if his squire also detected that her voice now sounded altered and otherworldly. Was the woman using her conjury to bring forth a spirit from beyond the veil?

Isabella tapped the floor with the poker to reclaim their attention. Gaining it, she scratched a mark on the southeastern region of her map to indicate the location of a port city at the eastern crease where Scotland and England met. “Four years before this century turned, your throne fell empty, and the clans commenced scrapping for it like charnel dogs over a carcass. All the while, the Leopard of England stalked the Borders, sniffing blood and champing to pounce when the Lion of Caledonia fell lame from self-inflicted wounds.”

Beguiled by the strangeness of her bardic inflections, the earl and his squire edged closer to better hear her.

“But one runt of a lad, inspired by a headstrong maiden from Fife, would not sit prey for an easy clawing.” Isabella stabbed the crackling log as if gutting a combatant, forcing the two Scots to their eyes from the flying embers. Her shuddering voice, taut with the emotion of memory, fell to a near whisper. “Nay, the stars had destined Jamie Douglas to stalk the stalker.”