

RENEGADE

Also by Robyn Young

Insurrection

The *Brethren* Trilogy

Brethren

Crusade

Requiem

ROBYN YOUNG

RENEGADE


HODDER &
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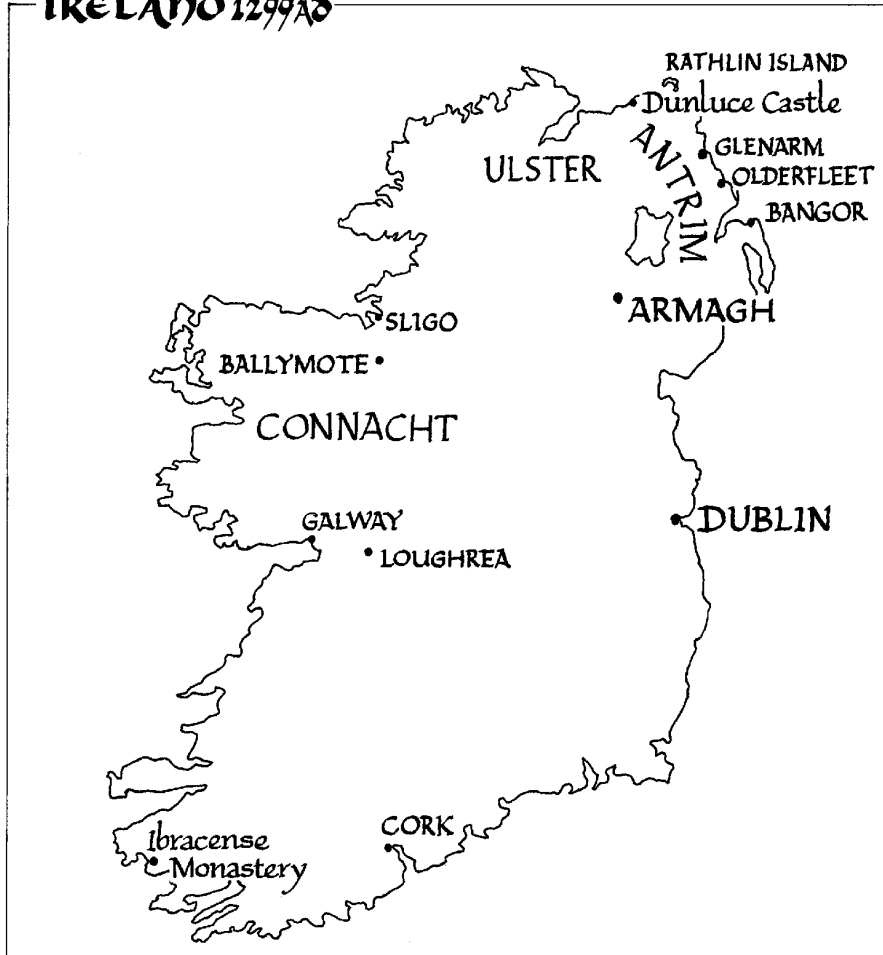
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ENGLAND, SCOTLAND & WALES 1299 AD



IRELAND 1299AD



*Brutus! there lies beyond the Gallic bounds
An island which the western sea surrounds,
By giants once possess'd; now few remain
To bar thy entrance, or obstruct thy reign.
To reach that happy shore thy sails employ;
There fate decrees to raise a second Troy,
And found an empire in thy royal line,
Which time shall ne'er destroy, nor bounds confine.*

The History of the Kings of Britain, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*

PROLOGUE

1135 AD



. . . the reliques of the other saints should be found, which had been hidden on account of the invasion of pagans; and then at last would they recover their lost kingdom.

The History of the Kings of Britain, Geoffrey of Monmouth

Armagh, Ireland

1135 AD

On the brow of Ard Macha, whose ancient slopes bore the name of a goddess of war, a band of men were waiting. They stood close together outside the cathedral's doors, eyes searching the mist that shrouded the hilltop. A golden light was starting to suffuse the haze, the memorials of the saints in the cemetery just visible, but, beyond, the city of Armagh remained veiled in white.

A crow cast from one of the yew trees that guarded the approach to the cathedral, the beat of wings disturbing the hush. The eyes of the company darted in the direction of the bird to see a figure emerging from the mist. It was a man dressed in a hooded black robe that ill-fitted his gaunt frame. As he walked towards them, their hands tightened around their weapons. Some of the younger men shifted uneasily. One at their centre, as broad as an ox with a hard, craggy face, pushed through their ranks to the front. Niall mac Edan stared past the approaching figure, scanning the amber gloom. After a moment something large appeared, trundling in the man's wake. It was a cart, drawn by a mule. Two men in black habits were leading the beast. Niall's eyes narrowed in expectation, but there was no other movement. As ordered, Malachy had come alone.

The men with the cart halted on the edge of the cemetery, leaving Malachy to continue up the slope, the hems of his black habit flapping around bare feet. His head was shaven in a severe tonsure, his bald crown burned livid by the July sun. His face was pinched, the skin stretched over the bones of his cheeks and sinking into the hollows of his eyes. Niall sensed the tension in his men; saw some of them edge back. Last month, when Malachy came to this hillside, attempting to enter the cathedral, he brought an army with him and blood had been spilled. But Niall knew it wasn't the memory of violence that unnerved his men. They would be calmer facing spears and axes than this solitary, whip-thin man whose feet were callused from years walking the land, preaching the word of God. They had all heard the stories.

It was said that Malachy once cursed a man who defamed him, causing the unfortunate's tongue to swell and turn putrid, worms gushing from it. After seven days

vomiting out the maggots that filled his mouth the wretch had died. A woman who harangued Malachy during a sermon was known to have fallen to the ground after the oration, convulsing so hard she swallowed her tongue. He was said to be able to cure pestilence and create it, cause rivers to rise and burst their banks, and it was believed that the vengeance of the Lord would fall upon any who stood against him.

Despite this, Niall mac Edan held his ground, not bothering to draw his sword. He had denied Malachy entry to Armagh and its cathedral for ten months now and he was still standing. His eyes moved to the cart, which, even at this distance, he could see was piled with chests. The sight of it strengthened his confidence. Only a man, as fallible as any born of Adam's line, would need to resort to a bribe to get what he wanted. He gestured his men to move aside as Malachy, Archbishop of Armagh, approached.

Malachy watched the men before him part. Beyond, the doors of the cathedral were open into shadow. Ard Macha, encircled by mist, was as familiar as a friend. Born in this city almost forty years ago, he had grown to manhood with her green slopes in his view — upon which the blessed St Patrick had founded his church. The stone cathedral had changed in the years since he was a boy. It was only a decade since its ruined roof, struck by lightning in a time no one living could recall, had been replaced by Archbishop Cellach. The shingle still looked new. Malachy was pleased to see that although his friend and mentor had died his labours lived on. The thought of Cellach made him turn his attention to Niall mac Edan, at the head of the waiting company.

For almost two centuries, men of Niall's clan had held sway over the cathedral, claiming to control the diocese by hereditary right, along with its wealth and the tributes of horses and cows from the people of the province. Few of these men who had stood as bishops had taken holy orders, or been consecrated in Rome. Most were married laymen, whose hands were more accustomed to weapons than scripture; men of avarice, lust and violence, whose control of Ireland's Holy See was anathema in the eyes of the Church.

This evil had been uprooted by Cellach. A son of the clan, but a true man of God and a staunch reformer, he had elected Malachy to be his successor, but after Cellach's death, Niall and other members of the family had defied this decree and kept Malachy out of the city. And so he had come to defend his right; first with an army, which resulted in bloodshed, now alone, with ten chests of coin. The payment was large, but the prize invaluable.

Malachy halted before Niall, wondering how such a brute could have sprung from the same womb as a devout man like Cellach. Cain and Abel, came the thought. 'It is inside?'

'As soon as I've seen my fee you can have it.' Niall's Gaelic was abrasive.

'It is with my brethren.'

Niall motioned sharply to two of his men. *'Go. Look.'*

Moving warily past the archbishop, they headed down to the cart.

Malachy stood waiting while Niall's men inspected the chests. It was not so many moons ago that the people of Ireland bartered with animals and goods. The plundering Norsemen had changed all that, bringing the tainted silver with them. How often these days it seemed a man's worth was measured in such things, rather than in the fortune of his faith.

Once they were done, the two men hastened back up the slope. Both were grinning.

'It's all there,' said one to Niall. *'Ten chests.'*

Niall's eyes flicked back to Malachy. He gestured to the cathedral with a mocking sweep of his hand. 'Enter then, your grace,' he said, *his voice biting down hard on the title as if it were a piece of gristle in his mouth.*

The fires of hell cleanse your soul, Malachy thought as he moved past Niall and walked between the rows of armed men towards the doors of the cathedral. None of them lowered their weapons, but Malachy paid the barbed points and keen blades no heed. He paused at the entrance, his bare feet suddenly reluctant to take him from the dewy grass on to the flagstones beyond. He had not wanted this. Any of it. Now, more than ever, he missed the wild solitude of his beloved monastery, Ibracense. But Cellach had entrusted him with this position. It had been his mentor's dying wish that he become Archbishop of Armagh. Moreover, the pope had commanded that he take control of his see and oust the men who continued to defy the laws of the Church.

Malachy stepped over the threshold and entered the shadows of the interior. The place had a smell of sweat and men about it. He didn't look back as footsteps and triumphant voices faded behind him, Niall and his band swarming over their prize. Ahead, at the end of the nave, was the high altar. On the altar, where the flames of candles flickered, was a long object wrapped in white cloth.

Malachy dropped to his knees in front of it, resisting an overwhelming urge to seize the object; to hold in his hands what had once been held by Lord Jesus Christ. When the proper prayers had been said, he rose and carefully unwrapped the cloth. From out of the folds he drew a staff; a crosier, covered in an exquisite sheath of gold, encrusted with gems. All the candlelight and hazy morning sun filtering through the windows seemed caught in its precious length so that it blazed like a flame in his hands.

The staff had belonged to St Patrick who brought the word of God to Ireland seven hundred years ago. It was said that the saint had been given it by a hermit who received it from Jesus, although some heathens proclaimed Patrick stole it from the

Druids. It was the holiest relic in Ireland. People would swear their most solemn oaths upon it; oaths that if broken would cause great plagues to sweep the land. It was the staff of the King of Kings, a symbol of righteousness and supreme authority.

It did not matter that Malachy had been chosen as Cellach's successor, or that he had been consecrated in Rome. Until he was in possession of this relic his appointment would not be accepted by the people of Ireland. This was why he had agreed to Niall mac Edan's demand for payment; for whosoever had control of the Staff of Jesus could claim to be not only rightful Archbishop of Armagh, but successor to St Patrick and spiritual ruler of all Ireland.

PART 1
1299–1301 AD



He was in suspense for some time, whether he had better continue the war or not, but at last he determined to return to his ships while the greater part of his followers was yet safe, and hitherto victorious, and to go in quest of the island which the goddess had told him of.

The History of the Kings of Britain, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*

I

*Armagh, Ireland, 1299 AD
(164 years later)*

The frail glow from a single candle danced over the walls of the crypt, throwing monstrous shadows up the sides of the octagonal pillars and across the ribs of the vaulted ceiling. The light's bearer slowed his footsteps, cupping a hand around the flame as it threatened to flutter out. Around him the voices of the others were breaths in the darkness.

'Hurry.'

'There, Brother Murtough. The chest.'

'I see it. Bring the light, Donnell.'

As Donnell moved closer to the whispers, his flame illuminated a collection of chests and boxes stacked on the floor. There were many such items stored in rows down the length of the sixty-foot crypt: baskets of cloth, sacks of grain and barrels of salted meat. The cathedral and the city it dominated had suffered much violence over the centuries, from destructive raids by neighbouring Irish chieftains and pillaging Norsemen, to the determined, tide-like expansion of the English. Thirty years ago, when Archbishop O'Scanlon ordered a great edifice built in place of the original scarred structure, the underground chamber had formed the base of his new choir, granting the cathedral and the people of Armagh a safe for their treasures.

Donnell halted beside his four companions, the candlelight staining their faces. The chests here were decoratively carved and painted with biblical imagery. It was clear they belonged to the cathedral and no doubt contained its collected wealth: chalices and plates, vestments, jewels and coin. The chest Murtough and the others had spotted was larger than the rest. Inlaid with inscriptions in Latin, barely legible under a layer of dust, it was the only one that could store what they had come for.

Murtough negotiated his way to it. The shadows highlighted the scar that furrowed the left side of his face, cleaving right through his upper lip, in sharp relief to the pale, unblemished skin that surrounded it. He reached out to lift the lid. When the chest failed to open, his brow knotted.

On the stillness came an eerie moaning, drifting towards them as if flowing down a tunnel, rising and falling in pitch.

One of the men crossed himself. 'Lord, spare us!' His exclamation resonated in the vaulted space.

Murtough's scar creased with his scowl. '*Matins, brother. The canons are singing the matins!*'

The younger man let out a breath, but the fear didn't leave his gaze.

Murtough rose and scanned the gloom until his eyes fell upon a pair of large silver candlesticks. He crossed to them and hefted one in his hands, testing its weight.

'They will hear,' said one of his companions, catching Murtough's arm as he moved back, the candlestick brandished in his grip. The man's eyes flicked to the ceiling, where the distant chanting continued.

'*There,*' murmured Donnell, the flame guttering in the rush of air from his lips. He pointed at a basket covered with cloth.

Seeing what he meant, Murtough went to it. Dust swarmed as he wrapped the cloth around the candlestick's base. Returning to the chest, he rammed it at the lock. The muffled thud echoed like a drum. The chest shuddered, but although the wood was dented by the impact the lock didn't break. Steeling himself, Murtough tried again, ears attuned for any change in the chanting descending from the cathedral choir. After three blows, the lock buckled. Murtough lifted the lid, sending shards of wood scattering. He stared inside at a neat collection of breviaries and Bibles.

As the others saw what it contained they began speaking in rapid whispers.

'*We cannot search every chest here.*'

'*We have lingered too long already.*'

'I will not leave without it,' replied Murtough grimly. 'We were told beyond doubt that they are coming for it. I will not let it fall into their hands.'

'But if we are caught . . .?'

Donnell moved down the chamber, his eyes on something that shimmered up ahead. He had glimpsed it earlier, but had thought it the reflection of his candlelight on one of the many barrels or coffers. Now he was accustomed to the gloom he realised that the glow in his cupped hand was

too feeble to penetrate that far. Whatever it was, it was standing in its own source of light.

Drawing closer he saw a stone plinth, like an altar, the top of which was covered with brocaded cloth. He could smell the smoky perfume of incense. The chanting of the canons was louder here, the psalms of the dawn office rippling down to him. Upon the plinth lay a slender, gem-encrusted crosier.

'Praise be.'

Looking up, Donnell saw an aperture cut into the roof of the crypt, tunnelled through the rock right up to the floor of the choir. Beyond the bars of an iron grate he made out the pillars of the choir aisle stretching to the far ceiling, bathed in candlelight. The Staff of Jesus lay hidden at the cathedral's heart, displayed only to the canons who worshipped above.

According to their abbey's records, one hundred and sixty-four years had passed since St Malachy had wrested the staff from Niall mac Edan. In all the time since it had rested on this hallowed hill, the cathedral, the city and Ireland itself changing around it. If sentient the staff would have perceived the distant convulsions of war as the English had come, first as adventurers, then under the command of their kings. It would have smelled the fires of destruction and heard the marching footsteps of the conquerors as they took the east coast from Wexford to Dublin and Antrim; felt the hammer blows as the earth was quarried for stone to construct new towns and castles that were heaved up to dominate the country they now controlled. Would Malachy, their blessed founder, even recognise what had become of the land outside these walls? Donnell turned, his eyes shining in the candlelight, as his brothers emerged from the darkness he had left behind.

Murtough moved past him, slowing as he approached the plinth, his gaze going from the staff to the iron grate above. Cautious, but eager, he stepped forward and took hold of the crosier. One of the others opened a cloth bag for him to lower the relic into. With the staff secured and Donnell lighting the way, the men hastened through the crypt, leaving the psalms of the cathedral's canons to fade behind them.

By a door in the east wall, a figure was waiting. His pale face came into view with the approaching candlelight. 'Do you have it?'

Murtough nodded, his eyes on the prone form of the doorkeeper his companion was crouched beside. There was a smear of blood on the man's forehead. His sword was still in the scabbard at his side. He had not been expecting the attack. Why would he, from men in the garb of a holy order? 'Has he stirred?'

'No, brother. I fear we wounded him gravely.'

‘We will pray for him and suffer penance for the sins we have committed tonight.’ Murtough’s voice was gruff. ‘When the staff is safe.’ He nodded to Donnell, who pinched out the candle flame as the door was opened into the crisp dark of a spring dawn.

Leaving the body in the crypt, the six men stole across the grass, threading silently between the wooden crosses and memorials of the saints, their black habits making them one with the great shadow cast by St Patrick’s cathedral.

Antrim, Ireland, 1300 AD

The horse plunged through the forest, snorting steam and kicking up clods of earth. All around the trees surged, scattering rainwater through the canopy. Snatches of white sky flickered between webs of brown and brittle leaves. November’s fury had flayed the branches and the valley floor was covered in a rustling shroud.

Robert leaned into the furious pace, the wooden pommel jarring his stomach as he compelled the animal on through the trees. Fleet, a dappled grey courser, was so responsive to the bit that the merest tug of the reins would compel him up and over fallen boughs or across the narrow cuts of streams. The horse was smaller, but far swifter than Hunter, the destrier he had left back in Scotland in the care of his friend and ally, James Stewart.

The hood of Robert’s green cloak had slipped back miles ago and rain drenched his cheeks. His ears were full of the rushing wind and his own fierce breaths. Exertion raised a metal taste in his mouth. A small branch whipped his face, but he barely felt it, all his attention on the backs of the twelve running-hounds as they veered up a steep bank, barking furiously. Robert pricked his spurs into Fleet’s sides, urging him to follow.

Cresting the rise, he put his horn to his lips and blew several rapid bursts, indicating the change of direction to the others, whom he’d left some distance behind. Through a break in the trees he glimpsed a bald sweep of headland rearing over the mouth of the wooded valley. Beyond, the sea filled the horizon, slate grey beneath a sky ragged with clouds. Across the expanse of water, visible as a faint, broken line, was the coast of Scotland. Robert felt his chest tighten at the sight of his homeland. Then, he was goading Fleet on.

Ahead, through the tangle of oak and rowan, he got his first glimpse of the quarry – a flash of light-coloured rump with a darker stripe down the

tail. Determination shifted to anticipation as the blind pursuit delivered the prospect of reward. The hounds had picked up the trail of a good-sized fallow buck. It switched this way and that, trying to elude the dogs, but they were fixed on its scent now, blood-lust impelling them through their exhaustion. The deer was following the natural line of the valley, through which a river ran down to the sea. Robert blew the horn again. Answering calls echoed from different parts of the forest, some behind, some ahead. Without warning the buck turned and reared, hooves striking the air. It wasn't as big as the great red harts they had hunted until the season ended, but its antlers would still maim, even kill any hound that got too close.

Robert pulled on the reins, bringing Fleet to a wheeling halt as he shouted commands to the circling dogs. Uathach, his faithful bitch, was at the front of the pack. Despite having recently given birth to a litter of six she was fearless in her ferocity, her sinewy body hunched forward as she snarled at the buck, which lowered its head and tossed its antlers this way and that, raking the soil. Robert glanced over his shoulder, hearing the mad ringing of horns as the rest of the hunting party converged on his position. He caught sight of his brothers, Edward and Thomas, at the front of the company. The buck veered away through the undergrowth, but it was too late. The huntsmen, lying in wait further along the valley, had let slip the mastiffs.

Robert spurred the courser on, pursuing the deer in its final, desperate flight as from the left hurtled two massive dogs, the spikes on their collars flashing like metal teeth. The buck raced on despite the danger. Robert admired its tenacity, even as the mastiffs emerged from the trees and threw themselves upon it, one leaping up and under to tear at its throat, the other raking its hind. The buck's bellow became a roar of pain as it crashed into the mud, limbs thrashing. Bringing Fleet to a stop, Robert swung down from the saddle, shouting for the huntsmen. They came sprinting through the bushes, sticks at the ready to whip away the mastiffs who had pinned the buck, their jaws embedded in its flesh. The animal snorted deeply and shuddered. As Robert went forward through the line of hounds he slid the silver-ringed horn back into its silk baldric – both gifts from his foster-father. The buck's legs were twitching. Robert nodded to the huntsmen, who beat the ground menacingly with their sticks, until the dogs released their hold, licking bloody slaver from their jaws.

As Robert crouched by the deer he saw himself reflected in its eyes: wet hair falling in dark hanks around a strong-boned face, green cloak hanging heavy from broad shoulders, sodden with rain. The buck snorted again,

blood trickling from its nostrils and pumping from the mortal wound in its neck. Robert eased off his glove and placed a hand on one of the antlers. He ran his palm along the curves of velvet bone and remembered his grandfather telling him that some believed an animal caught in the hunt would imbue its captor with its properties. Words, long forgotten, sang in his mind.

*From the hart power and nobility; from the buck swiftness and grace.
From the wolf cunning and agility; from the hare the thrill of the race.*

Drawing his broadsword, balanced by its ball-shaped pommel, he rose and placed the tip of the forty-two-inch blade over the buck's fluttering heart. He pushed down hard.

The rest of the hunting party gathered, squires taking the reins of horses as the noblemen dismounted, calling their congratulations to him. Seeing Nes had arrived and was taking care of Fleet, Robert pulled a rag from the pouch at his belt and wiped the blood from his sword. The wood filled with the sound of frenzied barking as the running-hounds were allowed to take it in turns to tear at the buck's neck – an incentive for the next hunt – before they were coupled by the varlets. Uathach was among them, panting steam into the frigid air. As the huntsmen surrounded the buck to prepare it for the unmaking, Robert's foster-father came over.

Lord Donough's eyes crinkled at the corners as he clamped a hand on Robert's shoulder. 'Well run, my son.' He looked at the buck, nodding appreciatively. 'He'll make a fine feast for our table.'

Robert smiled, pleased by the old man's admiration. As he stuffed the soiled cloth through his belt, Cormac, one of his foster-brothers, handed him a jewelled wine skin. Two years younger than Robert, at twenty-four, he was a mirror of Donough, without the crow's feet or the white in his red hair, which he wore in the *cúlán*, the front thick and hanging in his eyes, the back shorn short.

Cormac grinned as Robert drank deep. 'I thought you might leap off Fleet and sink your own teeth into the beast's rump the haste you were in to catch it.'

Donough's voice cut across him. 'Mind your tongue, son. You speak to your elder and better.'

'Elder anyway,' Cormac murmured, as his father moved to oversee the huntsmen's preparations.

'Old enough at least to grow a man's beard.' Robert snatched out before his foster-brother could move and tugged hard at the whiskers Cormac was

cultivating, causing him to pull away, protesting. Robert chuckled as the younger man sauntered off, rubbing his chin. Cormac reminded him so much of Edward. As Robert looked over at his brother, who was talking to Christopher Seton, his smile faded.

Fostered to Donough as children, as was the Gaelic custom, Robert and Edward had spent a year with the Irish lord and his sons, learning to ride and to fight, in training for knighthood. But while Cormac had retained his carefree insouciance, Edward's spirit had been dampened in the time since. Robert had found the return to the Antrim estates after fifteen years had only served to accentuate the changes the war had wrought in his brother, and in him.

'For the unmaking, sir.'

Robert turned as one of the huntsmen offered him a leather pouch in which were inserted five knives, each with a different blade, one for cutting through bone and sinew, another for flaying the hide, others for more delicate butchery. He gestured to his foster-father. 'I'll pass the honour to the master.'

Donough laughed contentedly and pushed up the sleeves of his shirt. Choosing a knife, he crouched with a wince and went to work on the buck, which had been turned on its back, antlers pushed into the mud to hold it steady. The hounds had quietened. Knowing their reward would be coming soon they watched the blood flow as the lord made the first cut.

As the men gathered to witness the unmaking, Robert's gaze drifted over them. Edward was lounging against a tree, arms folded. Christopher Seton was following Donough's brisk movements intently. Close by, Niall, at nineteen the youngest of Robert's four brothers, rested an elbow on Thomas's shoulders, the two so unlike one another it was impossible to guess they shared the same blood. While Niall had been blessed with the dark good looks and merry temperament of their mother, Thomas took after their father: bull-shouldered and beetle-browed. The varlets and the local men who had joined in the hunt stood apart from the nobles, watching their lord work. All their faces were flushed with exhilaration, every one of them satisfied by a hunt that had concluded with a clean kill and no injury to horse or hound. Every one, that was, but him.

The pursuit might have ended, but none of Robert's impatience had diminished. It remained in his belly, hot and unsated. That broken coastline he had glimpsed during the chase filled his mind. Scotland taunted him with its proximity. It was a year since he resigned as guardian of the kingdom and

seven months since he had come to Antrim. Seven months absent from the war that ravaged his country. Seven months away from his home and his daughter, chasing a ghost.

Robert glanced round at a snap of twigs to see Alexander Seton move up beside him. His muscular form was swathed in a hunting cloak and rainwater trickled steadily down his hard face. He appraised Robert with a knowing look, as if he'd read his thoughts.

'Another good hunt.'

Robert nodded curtly, wary of the tone in his companion's voice, which augured contention. He wasn't wrong.

'But I'll say again, however good the sport, I'd rather my sword was bloodied for a greater purpose. How long do you plan to stay here?'

Robert didn't respond, but the lord from East Lothian who had been in his company for over three years, fighting at his side, wasn't to be dismissed so easily.

'We should go home where we're needed, Robert. This was a fool's errand.'

Anger flared in Robert, the words pricking him with a truth he didn't want to hear. 'Not until I've exhausted every possibility. We haven't heard from the monks at Bangor yet. It's little over a week since Donough sent word to the abbey. I want to give them more time.'

'More time?' Alexander kept his voice low beneath the conversations going on around them. 'The monks didn't respond to the first message we sent three months ago and even if they do know where the staff is, why would they tell us? It's clear from what we know – the theft in the night, the murder of the doorkeeper – that whoever took it from the cathedral intended for it to vanish without trace. The Earl of Ulster hasn't found it despite the fact his knights have been scouring the length and breadth of Ireland. By God, if a man such as Richard de Burgh, with all his power and resources, cannot find this relic, how can we?'

Robert stared at the carcass of the buck as Donough pulled the hide back from its stomach, ripping skin from muscles. His pride fought against the sense in Alexander's words. He had to believe he had been right to come here, no matter the doubt that had wormed its way in. 'You can return to Scotland. I won't stop you. But I'm staying.'

'I have nothing to return to. I gave up everything to join you and your cause. We both did.' Alexander stared across the gathering at his cousin. 'Longshanks would have Christopher and me clapped in irons the moment either of us set foot in our lands.'

Robert looked over at Christopher Seton. The Yorkshireman, whom he'd knighted two years earlier, was talking animatedly to Edward and Niall. 'Your lands may yet be won. We took back a great deal of territory before we left and James Stewart and the others will have continued the fight in our absence.'

'Territory will mean nothing if King Edward returns in strength. His last campaign almost annihilated us. We lost ten thousand men on the field at Falkirk. With William Wallace in France and you here, who will stand against the English? Tell me, are you content to leave the fate of our kingdom in the hands of a man like John Comyn?'

Robert's jaw tightened. The months absent from Scotland had not dulled his hostility towards his enemy. If anything, time had heightened it, his mind darkened by the knowledge that the longer he stayed away the more Comyn would consolidate his own position.

Two years ago, almost to the day, after William Wallace resigned as guardian of Scotland, Robert and John Comyn, the same age and heirs to the fortunes of their families, had been elected in his place. Together they had governed the king-less, war-torn realm, presiding over the fractured community of earls, lords, knights and peasants who sought an end to Edward Longshanks' English dominion. It had not been an easy alliance. There was enmity enough between the two men, but worse still was the bitterness between their families. Poisoned by an act of betrayal decades earlier that bad blood had seeped through the years since, flowing from father to son.

In invoking Comyn, Alexander Seton played a clever move. But he missed the fundamental point. When Robert left, his place as guardian had been taken by William Lamberton, but even the appointment of the formidable Bishop of St Andrews wouldn't have stopped Comyn bolstering his support among the men of the realm. In order to restore his own authority in Scotland, Robert knew he had to return with something that could prove his greater worth, something that could win them their freedom. John Comyn was just another reason he could not return without the prize he sought: St Malachy's staff.

'You told us our country needed a new king,' Alexander continued gruffly, mistaking Robert's silence for indifference. 'One who would defend our liberties, where John Balliol failed. You told us you would be that king.'

Now, Robert turned to him. The memory of the words he had spoken in the courtyard of Turnberry Castle three years ago – the year he broke his

oath of fealty to King Edward to fight alongside William Wallace – was still vivid. He had addressed his men back then with fire in his heart, promising to defend their freedom and pledging to be their king. Not only did his veins flow with the royal blood of the house of Canmore, but his grandfather had been named heir presumptive by Alexander II. Before his death, the old man had passed that claim to him and Robert had sworn to uphold it, no matter the pretenders who sat upon the throne in defiance of the Bruce family's right.

His voice strengthened. 'And I will be.'