Crown and Covenant

Book 1, *Duncan's War*

Duncan's War

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Contents

Life is myself, I keep the life of all;
Without my help all living things they die;
Small, great, poor, rich, obey my call . . .
I hurt, I help, I slay, and cure the same;
Sleep, and advise, and pense well what I am.
King James I (1566–1625)

1
Give Way, Ye Coward English!

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . .

Shakespeare

Duncan M'Kethe lay prone in the heather, his hand opening and closing on his weapon. With intense green eyes he sized up the crumbling battlements of Dunfarg Castle. Only a narrow ridge separated him from his objective. With a defiant toss of his head—his red locks flipping onto his shoulder—he scanned his followers. They moved as one on his signal. He smiled, a grim determined smile, and slithered silently forward, the heather parting around his lithe body like the cold North Sea parting for a haddock.

Cresting the ridge with caution, he halted and peered around a tuft of moor grass. Where secure gates should have stood, the entrance to the castle gaped wide and deserted. Just as he hoped: their attack was wholly unexpected. He stole another glance at his clansman waiting at the ready. For an instant Duncan lay pressed flat on the ground. He hesitated, his heart beating wildly against his ribs. Could he do it? Then the words of his father came to mind: "If you've no cause worth dying for, m'lad, you've no cause to be breathing God's air."

Leaping to his feet, his stout weapon held aloft in defiance, he roared, "For the Crown and for the Covenant!"

Then, like a berserk of old—save that being fourteen he kept his kilt firmly girt round his middle—Duncan flung himself toward the unguarded castle. His bare feet seemed not to touch the heather as he ran.

"Give way, ye coward English!" he screamed, his weapon circling madly over his head.

Weaving and ducking, he dodged crossbow bolts hastily launched by the startled soldiers on the battlements. Boldly into the breach like a valiant clan chief, Duncan dispatched the first English with a single stroke. And then another, and still another lay stretched at his feet.

But what was this? Sneering English soldiers came at him from every side. Stroke for stroke, he diminished their number by two.

More took their place and closed in around him. Then, a blow to the head! Searing pain! The castle spun round and round. He had to fight on. The haze cleared for an instant—an instant of terrifying clarity—he parried a fatal stroke, and with a desperate thrust, his would-be executioner lay at his feet. No time for gloating, and weakened from his wound, Duncan spun on his bare heels. A giant of a man, his sword hissing menacingly, stalked toward him, leering as he advanced.

Suddenly, Duncan caught sight of a black-and-white streak: his clansman bolting to the rescue, teeth barred in rage. Fighting shoulder to shoulder, they stoutly threw themselves on the giant and the remaining defenders. As suddenly as it began, the conflict ended. Not a single enemy soldier breathed. All about them the ground lay strewn with the grim remains of battle.

"The day is ours!" Duncan gasped, gingerly holding the side of his head as he collapsed onto a moss-covered pile of stones.

One eye blackened, his comrade-in-arms sat attentively before him, awaiting his next command.

"Ye rendered good service today," Duncan said, patting the black-and-white head. "And for that I dub ye"—he held aloft his weapon—"with this my herder's staff. I dub ye Sir Brodie. I owe ye my life, Sir Knight. And make no mistake, I pay what I owe."

As he said these words, he solemnly lowered his stick on either side of his comrade's head.

Brodie grinned, a tongue-lolling dog grin, and sat dutifully looking up at his master.

"Come here, boy," Duncan said when he finished the ceremony.

With a happy yelp, Brodie placed his front paws on Duncan's chest and licked the red welt on the side of his young master's head.

"And now you'll be my doctor, is it, a tending of my wounds," laughed Duncan, wincing as he touched the tender redness. "A knock I gave myself flailing about with my own stick." He laughed sheepishly. "Aye but, wounds is wounds in a battle."

Eyeing the sun as it peeked reluctantly out from behind a steel-gray barrier of clouds, Duncan opened the goat-hair sporran hanging low from his waist and took out his meal of oatcakes. Breaking one in half, he shared it with his dog.

"You've earned yer bannock," he said, scratching Brodie's ears. "And if I'd have fought here alongside Robert the Bruce three hundred fifty years ago when this castle last fell"—he looked around

at the crumbled ruin, little evidence of its former glory but the lower part of the central tower—“I’d have wanted none more noble than ye by my side.”

With intelligent eyes, Brodie gazed fixedly at his master. As Duncan finished his lunch, the dutiful sheep dog trotted to the broken-down entrance of the castle and peered critically at the small cluster of sheep grazing on the hillside where they had left them only moments ago.

“All’s well?” Duncan asked when the dog returned. “ ’Course it is,” he answered his own question. “Or you’d be off after ’em like a bullet blown from the musket of a pro-English dragoon hunting down a son of the Covenant—like me,” he added, frowning pensively.

Duncan and his dog had explored these ruins many times, and most of the crofters from the surrounding hills and glens had for generations borrowed stones to repair fences and to patch up chinks in the walls of their cottages. Picked-over as it was, with each visit Duncan felt, with a quickening of his pulse, that this might be the day he’d uncover some long-forgotten treasure. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the mounds of rubble and the jagged remains of ruined walls. It had been a long winter of heavy snow, and spring rains had come in torrents and had lasted for weeks. He poked curiously at a mossy stone with his stick.

Circling the old wall, Brodie at his heels, Duncan picked up a rock and hurled it at the battlements of the remaining tower. On his second try, with a clattering echo, he found his mark: a jagged hole gaping in the tower that must have been made by some heavy missile launched from a catapult during the final days of a siege. It gaped down at him, and he imagined it to be the skeletal grin of an ancient laird who tyrannically ruled the peasants who once eked out a meager living in the surrounding glens.

Brodie waited patiently while Duncan, leaping along the broken-down wall, scrambled to the highest point. Steadying himself, Duncan looked to the south and east. His eyes narrowed and his chin jutted defiantly—England lay that way.

Then for an instant the grayness overhead broke, and the sun shone brilliantly on the green and purple of the hills, some speckled white with sheep, while on the grassy slopes of others grazed the unique Belted Galloway, black cows with distinctive white belts around their middles. The spotlight of sunshine shifted, as the

clouds rearranged themselves overhead, and reflected off the slate roofs of the hillside village of Dalry—the valley of the king—far below in Glenken, the broad waters of River Ken meandering through the valley. The steeple of the parish church rose above the cluster of cottages, their crow-stepped gables and chimneys outlined in sharp relief. Four years had passed since Duncan had been inside the stone walls of the church, now under the control of popish bishops and the local curate, a drunkard named George Henry. Covenanters and their families were forbidden to worship inside the little sanctuary unless they swore allegiance to King Charles II as the head of the Church and submitted to the blasphemous, slurring homilies of George Henry.

Hunted like beasts by the ruthless James Turner, chief enforcer of the king's will, Covenanter families like Duncan's fled to the hills, worshiping instead at secret field meetings, hearing faithful preaching from the lips of wanted men. Fugitive field preachers, out of loyalty to Christ, the only King in his Kirk, risked their lives for the sake of their scattered flocks. And Turner was determined to see every one of them hang.

The clouds shifted again, leaving the village in shadow. Duncan looked to the south, toward the northern reaches of Loch Ken, just visible at the foot of the glen. He drew in a deep breath. Sunlight sparkled in mottled patches across the blue waters. Duncan watched the brown sails of a fishing boat scudding slowly across the lake in search of salmon.

Several times a year his father traveled to the bustling village of Wigtown on the Solway Firth to sell wool, and Duncan remembered how immense the salty waters of the Solway looked when he first saw them, stretching away westward to the open sea, and to the south—and England. He loved the screeching of gulls, the salty smells, and the sights and sounds of men and boats in the harbor. His father's brother, his Uncle Hamish, worked as a fisherman somewhere near Edinburgh. Though Duncan had never been to faraway Edinburgh, nor had he ever met his uncle, his father told him about fishing on the sea. He told him all about the rising and falling of the fishing sloop on the waves, the fresh salt breeze on your face, and the thrill as the sails filled and the boat surged forward into the frothy seas.

Springtime or not, this was Scotland, and the teasing sun soon disappeared altogether behind the clouds, and Loch Ken faded into

the landscape. But Duncan continued gazing approvingly over the muted countryside falling away on every side of his castle—he often referred to Dunfarg as *his* castle. You could see an enemy coming for miles, a perfect place for a fortress, he concluded, leaning on his staff. Duncan often tried to imagine what it would have been like long ago when men fought within these walls for their lives—and for Scotland.

Nosing his way along the rubble, Brodie suddenly halted in his tracks, his ears erect, head cocked to one side. His nostrils flared, and his eyes stared unblinking as he worked this new scent through the mysterious intuitions of his dog brain.

"What is it, Sir Brodie?" Duncan asked. Long ago he had come to respect his dog's instincts. "I wouldn't mind if you've gone and sniffed out some fresh meat for us. Mother'd be loving ye if ye've gone and done it. What is it?" he urged.

Duncan's mouth watered as he thought about how his mother had roasted the last rabbit Brodie caught—it seemed like months ago. Though filled with oatcakes, his stomach gnawed and growled for meat.

"Rabbit, is it, Brodie?" Duncan hissed, crouching low beside his dog. "A fat one—oh, let it be a fat one."

His face now close to his dog's, he sniffed. A boy's power of scent, though well trained to sniff out mealtime smells, was no match for a dog's keen sense of smell. Though Duncan smelled nothing, he did feel something. A sudden breeze moved his thick red hair, and he felt it on his cheek. He moved to the right and all was still again. Slowly moving left, he felt the narrow breeze again.

"You've done it, Brodie," Duncan said. "Though I can't say as I know what it is you've done."

Following the breeze on his cheek, Duncan leaned closer. Searching the mud, his eyes fell on a dark depression along the inside of the wall.

"You've found a bonny hole," Duncan said, a lilting sort of wonder in his voice. "And if air's coming out at such a rate, it must be something more than a rabbit's wee burrow!"

For the next quarter of an hour, boy and dog worked side by side enlarging the hole. Brodie dug away the mud with canine efficiency, and Duncan lifted the stones out of the way.

"We've been over this ground hundreds of times," Duncan said, grunting as he reached farther into the hole, mud smeared on his

cheek. “Spring rains must of washed away the soil that covered this passage for—what d’ye think it’s been, Brodie?—hoondreds o’ years?” When excited, Duncan’s r’s rolled more than usual, and his vowels tended to rise and fall and stretch themselves in all directions in the process.

Duncan felt his heart beating faster as they dug.

Moments later, his eyes wide with excitement, Duncan said, “Ye really have done it!” He ran a muddy hand through his hair. “You’ve gone and found an old passage!”

2
Fight or Die!

The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er wi' patriarchial grace,
The big ha' Bible, ance his father's pride.

Robert Burns

With a distracted nod of his head, Duncan signaled Brodie to gather the sheep for home. So occupied was Duncan with the discovery of the passage he barely heard the bleating of his black-faced charges as he followed Brodie and the little mob down the terraced steepness into the glen. Just ahead, a stream chattered its way down the narrow valley and then leveled off for several yards into a quiet pool.

With no apparent signal from Duncan, Brodie shot forward and halted the sheep along the banks of the pool. Duncan smiled. Habit had almost taught his dog how to care for the sheep without him.

He watched the new spring lambs, their clubby legs looking too tall for their fresh white bodies, as they frisked about the older sheep. Most black-faced ewes bore only one lamb each springtime, but this year three ewes had delivered twins. Duncan never tired of the heel-kicking playfulness of the new pairs of brothers and sisters.

Kneeling at the edge of the stream, he scooped up a handful of water, and scrubbing at his muddy face, he gasped at the numbing coldness of it. With a handful of wet heather, he worked away at his dirt-covered hands and arms. It wouldn't do to show up at home for dinner all muddied up. His mother would only turn him out and send him off for a good scrub.

Wiping his face dry on his plaid, Duncan smiled as two lambs butted and frolicked in the tall grass. As he watched, his mind wandered to the stories filtering up the glens from Dalry that told of Sir James Turner's dragoons prowling about stealing sheep in payment—*they* called it payment—for fines. Worse than that, whole farms had been burned to the ground, and ministers imprisoned for unlicensed preaching. Drunken soldiers burst in on worshipers and demanded anything of value from the poor. One man described the soldiers with arms so loaded with spoil—coats and plaids, even

shoes—that it looked as if they'd been stripping the slain after a battle. With his stick he made a savage cut at a clump of gorse. He couldn't help hating the English.

"Now, that's an unkind cut, indeed, Master Duncan," came a voice from the slope opposite the pool.

Duncan looked up at the speaker, an old man, his grinning face topped with a tattered wool bonnet sloping jauntily to one side. Long yellow-white hair fell onto his shoulders and joined a full beard of the same hue. Ancient Grier, their nearest neighbor, had lived in these hills forever. *Should I tell Grier about my discovery?* Duncan wondered.

"But if it were meant fer the enemies of the Laird and the Kirk, I'll be forgiving of ye fer it, that I will."

"A good evening to ye, Ancient Grier," Duncan called up to the old man.

"Aye, 'tis a good evening," mused the old man, stepping nimbly down the hillside.

Duncan smiled as the old farmer joined him at the pool. The old man wore loose-fitting wool trousers, patched and stitched so completely that Duncan had long ago given up trying to tell what the original wool might have looked like. Over a grayish-brown coat, similarly repaired, a plaid draped across his wide shoulders, shoulders once broad and strong but now bent with age. Completing his tattered outfit, the old man wore a pair of knee-high leather boots that widened and folded over at the tops and that looked, battered as they were, like the footgear worn by a pikeman from some twenty-five years earlier during the wars. Ancient Grier had fought in those wars, and Duncan often found in him a ready supply of riveting stories from those heady days.

The old man continued. "Each night after prayers I lay my head on my pillow, and I wonder if I'll wake oop on t'other side. And each morn I wakes on this side—so fer it hae been so, as ye see." Here the old man lifted his white head, and with a broad smile, he continued. "I bless King Jesus and I thanks him fer anoother day 'to glorify and enjoy him,' as it says in the catechism."

"But how, when the times are so bad," Duncan blurted, wondering at the old man's faith, "how can ye possibly enjoy anything with that hell-hound Turner and his dragoons plundering crops and flocks and leaving families to starve to death? Some, they

say, not worth rounding up for swinging, he shoots dead on the spot."

"Aye," the old man said. "Go on, give it mouth, lad. Ye'll feel better fer it."

Duncan continued. "My father got word of another fine for not attending the popish services in Dalry, and he said they read yer name out for non-compearance last Sabbath Day, as well. How will ye pay? They'll take everything we have. Like as not, Turner'll kill ye. And how is it ye'll go about glorifying God and enjoying of him when they've done with ye?"

Flushed, Duncan fell silent. He'd said more than he should have.

Grier nodded sagaciously and worked his mouth from side to side in thought, his curly mustache and beard sticking out in a circular pattern as he worked Duncan's question over in his mind.

"Now here's a question that wants answering," Ancient Grier said.

But before he could continue, Brodie nudged his master with his long nose. Duncan glanced up at the flock ambling in all directions. With a slight jerk of his head, he sent Brodie streaking like a bullet in a half circle around the scattering sheep.

"Och, do yer duty, lad," the old farmer continued. "But we'll talk tonight. Yer good mother sent up yer bonnie sisters earlier to invite me to family prayers with ye. I'll bring m'pipes," he added with a wink. "But so's ye hae got an answer to work round in yer young pate till then: In spite of all, I enjoy the Lord, for his mercy, his goodness, his grace, his comfort—my cup fairly overflows with it all. Mind ye, I'd find it overflowing a wee bit more to m'liking if it went and flooded out all the English in the process."

With that, the old man turned and headed back up the hill. Duncan looked after him in wonder. Then he turned and followed Brodie and the flock already moving eagerly toward home. Familiar strains from the Psalter echoed after Duncan as the old farmer sang on his way up the hill to his croft.

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; he leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

The way widened, and just ahead lay his family's cottage, peat smoke drifting from the stone chimney that rose from one end above the heather-thatched roof. Duncan's stomach growled. His home seemed to nestle securely and inconspicuously into the green and purple of the surrounding hills. Though stories abounded of troubles and cruelties, living high up as they did and several miles from the village of Dalry, the troubles with the English king seemed far away. But Duncan couldn't help fearing—maybe even hoping—that those troubles might someday follow the rumors up the hills—and reach his family.

Pressed together against the dry stone wall surrounding the M'Kethe croft, the flock of sheep formed a solid mass of winter-thick wool backs broken only by flicking ears and curling horns. Duncan vaulted over the wall and opened the wooden gate from the inside. Brodie took a crouching step toward the flock, and sheep poured through the gate like fighting men through a breach. Clustered against the cottage and encircled by the protective wall, here the sheep would be safe from wolves—and their restlessness when danger threatened served as an early warning for the family within.

Duncan thought again of their discovery. Unless his father asked, he decided not to tell him about it just yet. He and Brodie would explore the passage further before saying anything to anyone.

After securing the gate, he grabbed up an armload of peat from the stack at the south end of the cottage. The M'Kethes always stacked their peat on the south side. Duncan had heard his father say, "Peat stacked at the south end dries better throughout what passes for summer, and dried peat gives ye more warmth throughout the numbing wet times—times when a warm fire is life itself."

Bursting out of the low entrance, braids bouncing and homespun dress flying as she ran, Duncan's seven-year-old sister Jenny flew toward him. Toddling behind came three-year-old Angus, a grin stretching across his round face.

"Dunckle!" Jennie called, grabbing his leg, then doing her best to scramble up onto his back. Angus wrapped chubby arms and legs around Duncan's leg and held on, squealing with delight as Duncan staggered forward. Eleven-year-old Fiona looked on, her face dimpled with a shy grin.

“Save me, Fiona. I’m done for!” he called in mock anguish, falling to one knee, his arms extended in supplication. Fiona planted a kiss on his cheek and laughed as he struggled under Jenny and Angus’s clambering. Jennie finally swung her legs onto his shoulders and sat proudly gripping his hair with her hands, Duncan wincing with each twist of his hair.

Brodie sat on his haunches, his head cocked to one side, and watched the familiar welcome Duncan’s little sister and brother inflicted on their big brother.

“I’ve not seen so wild a gaggle o’ bairns in the whole of Scotland,” Duncan’s mother called good-naturedly from just inside the low doorway. “Fiona, Jenny, ye fetch yerselves back in here and help me lay the table fer supper—be quick aboout it, now!”

Duncan disentangled himself from his sisters and reached for Angus’s pudgy fist, intending to hold his hand as they went inside. Prying open the fleshy fist Duncan discovered a moist, warty mound with what appeared to be arms and legs. Angus grinned at his prize.

“Puddock,” he informed Duncan proudly.

“Ye have been busy, then,” Duncan said, stroking the frog. “But ye ken what Mother’ll do if ye bring a creature like that inside? She’ll turn ye into a puddock, she will.”

Angus’s eyes grew wider.

“We’d best leave it just here,” Duncan continued, setting the frog in a niche in the stone next to the doorway.

Taking his little brother’s hand, Duncan stretched to his full height as he stepped over the threshold. He felt a thrill of satisfaction as his head brushed lightly against the stone lintel over the low opening. His mother had to duck slightly when she would pass in and out, and his father always bent over with his hand on the lintel, his shoulders turning sideways as he passed through. Though he still had to stretch and roll up onto his toes to do it, Duncan found a good deal of pleasure in that brushing of his head each time he passed in and out of the family croft. It seemed to hold a significance he could not quite explain, but for want of explanation his delight in the accomplishment was undiminished. Once inside he planted a kiss on his mother’s soft cheek.

“Yer safe returned, Duncan,” his mother said, lines of worry softening around her eyes.

Regular reports of fines, arrests, even executions made their way into the hills where Duncan’s family kept their few sheep, grew their

oats, and eked out their humble living. These were hard times, and though his mother seldom complained, Duncan thought the strain and worry showed more often in her eyes. She was used to loss and disappointments. His mother had delivered six live children into the world. Duncan's older brother had died as a baby and was buried near Inverary, north toward the highlands where his father had lived as a boy. Between Duncan and his sisters another boy had been born, then swept away by fever before he was old enough to walk. But for all that loss and grief, his mother's blue eyes usually sparkled with cheerfulness, and Duncan loved the enthusiastic glow that always seemed to animate her features.

"But yer returned dirty," his mother went on, pulling up the corner of her apron and making toward his face. "And all thwacked oop, too!" she added, spotting the bruise on Duncan's cheek. "However did ye coome by that?"

"It's just a scratch, Mother," Duncan said. "Never mind it." He smiled at her. "Ye are the prettiest mother a lad could ever ask for in all the world." He planted another kiss on her cheek. His sisters giggled from where they put out the wooden trenchers and cups on the table.

"Ye are, Moother," agreed Jenny, who, though the younger of the two girls, was always the first to speak for both of them.

"But it won't work," their mother said, looking all the prettier with the last light of day shining through a narrow window and the warm firelight playing on her auburn hair, subdued now from its more youthful flame color by the passage of time. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, and a flush of delight shone on her cheeks.

"Ye're still not pulling yerself oop to this table, Duncan," she went on, "wearing half the brae on yer face. Fall to scrubbing, then."

"But I di—" Duncan protested.

"Not enoough to suit me," his mother cut him off, "nor enoough to set mooch fear in the heart of the dirt, I shouldn't think by the look of ye."

While Duncan scrubbed in the basin, his father came in from plowing.

"Blessings aboound!" he said, patting Brodie's head, then planting a kiss on each of his daughters' foreheads, and giving Duncan a manly squeeze and a hearty pat on the back with honest hands made large and coarse from years of hard work. With

merriment in his eyes, he then spun their mother around and embraced her. Holding her at arm's length he said, "Tut, tut, poor Solomon. There's none prettier or wiser in all the world."

"That's just what I've been trying to tell her," Duncan said.

"Flatterers all!" she said, a flush of pleasure on her cheeks.

"Not so, m'love," Duncan's father said, planting another kiss on her forehead. "Flatterers mean to hurt ye, and Duncan and I mean to love and protect ye." His face clouded as he added quietly, "Come what may."

When all was ready, they sat around the trestle table, the peat fire hissing in the crude stone fireplace. Duncan's father prayed the Lord's blessing on the food and offered their thanks for it, and the family ate their simple fare, lovingly prepared: broth and oatcakes spread with soft Crowdie cheese.

"Dunckie gave hi'self a woound," little Jenny offered when she finished her broth.

Duncan scowled at his little sister.

"How'd ye coome by that, lad?" his father asked in a tone of genuine concern.

Duncan never lied to his parents, but how could he admit to hitting himself with his own stick while having an imaginary battle?

"Fiona and I ken how he done it," Jenny offered persistently.

Duncan stopped chewing. Ancient Grier said the girls had come up for a visit that day. Could they have been watching him storm the castle? He studied Jenny's wide eyes and features bulging with merriment. Fiona studied the food on her trencher and wouldn't meet his eye. That settled him.

"Playacting, Father," Duncan said, coloring and taking a vicious bite of oat cake.

"Playacting?" his father said. He studied his son silently before continuing. "And the wee lambs while's ye was playacting? Were they only playacting at nourishing themselves and generally trying to get a decent start on life, answer me that, lad?" Before Duncan could reply, his father continued. "What was it ye were playacting at?"

"It were more rehearsing, Father," Duncan said, and liking the sound of that, he nodded and said it again, "rehearsing it was, Father."

"Did ye keell 'em all?" Jenny asked.

“Now, Jenny, I’ll not go and hae ye talking about killing,” their father said, his voice firm but his sandy eyebrows raised in a pleading expression.

Broth dribbling from his chin, Angus looked with wide eyes from his father to Duncan as they spoke.

“I might be so bold as to call it *training*, Father,” Duncan said, hoping to divert his father’s attention from Jenny’s question. “Training for resisting Covenant breakers and all oppressors of the Kirk.” This sounded even better. Duncan continued. “It were no mere playacting. I was *training*, that I was.”

“Training, was it?” his father said, his face growing sober.

“We’ll soon have to fight them,” Duncan said, his eyes pleading with his father, “fight them or die.”

“Fight, fight, fight!” Angus sang, slashing his spoon in the air as if it were a claymore. It slipped from his pudgy hand and hit the wall with a thud and then clanked onto the floor.

“Or die fighting ’em,” Duncan’s mother added, a bitter lilt in her voice. “For shame, Angus,” she scolded, retrieving his spoon.

Jenny took another bite of oatcake and smirked at Duncan. Fighting and war were so far removed from anything Jenny had yet experienced in her short life that she decided all this talk must be just part of a game. Fiona grew pale and stared at her trencher, her hands folded on her lap.

“I’ll not have ye casting gloom over this fine supper yer mother’s gone and prepared for us,” Duncan’s father said, his voice rising.

“But they’re cooming, Sandy,” Duncan’s mother said, nervously putting a wisp of auburn hair back in place, her eyes casting about as if soldiers might even that moment be lurking in the shadows of the croft.

“Mary, Mary,” Duncan’s father said soothingly. His eyes fell on each of them in turn as he continued. “The devil wants us a-running about tearing our hair with fear of what might happen to us.” He paused and an expression of determination and wonder spread across his face. Duncan had often seen his father look that way. “But our sweet Lord Jesus, he wants us to obey. And, Duncan, I’ll not have ye raising the alarm. You’ll be stirring the pot and scaring the wee ones. Now, there’s an end of it.”

Duncan had learned long ago that when his father spoke like that the topic was closed. But why didn’t his father want to fight?

There were wrongs enough. He looked at his father's broad shoulders and muscular arms. And though his father's face was often alive with merriment, when he was angry, his determined forehead and fierce eyes could set fear in the stoutest heart. So why wouldn't he fight? If Duncan hadn't known his father better, he might even have been tempted to think that he was afraid to fight.

Try as they might, the gloom lingered throughout the rest of the meal. Then Duncan heard it—the faint skirling of Ancient Grier's pipes drifting down the brae and into the cottage.

"There now, Grier approaches fit to wake the dead from here to Dumfries," Duncan's mother said, clearing the table.

"He'll tell us stories," Jenny said hopefully.

Duncan's father's eyes clouded slightly.

"Won't he, Father?" Jenny persisted.

"After prayers," her father said shortly.

Ancient Grier halted outside their croft, the piping now sounding loud and alarming. Duncan's heart beat faster. The wailing of pipes always made him wish he had a two-fisted broadsword in hand and a pack of English or Covenant breakers to throw himself at. He wasn't overly particular which.

He and his sisters, with Angus toddling behind, ran to the door and threw it open. A path of light fell on the old man, his face red and cheeks bulging as he blew air into the sheep stomach of his bagpipes. Lit up against the dusk, Ancient Grier marched in place as he played, until with a deflating screech, not unlike the sound of a goose at the chopping block, the tune came to an abrupt end.

"Peace be on this house!" the old man said as they welcomed him into the cottage.

After brief conversation about spring planting, goat kids, and lambs, they all sat down around the table. Duncan's father said solemnly, "Let us worship God." He then led the family in a prayer full of devotion and hope, his voice rising and falling with passion as he prayed. When he finished, he took the family Bible in his great hands and opened it slowly and carefully as if it were some rare and delicate treasure, easily broken if misused.

"Hear the Word of our Lord from the Proverbs of Solomon, the sixteenth chapter," he said, reverence and firmness in his voice. " 'Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.' " Duncan's father paused, eyeing his son over the sacred pages.

Duncan felt his cheeks burning as his father read the text through a second time before continuing. Why couldn't he have read about slaying enemies and trampling their faces in the streets? There was plenty of that in the Holy Book, too.

His father read on: " 'Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.' "

Duncan studied his father's face. As he read, the determination in his brow took on a resolve that Duncan thought looked as unshakable as faith itself. But Duncan feared that his father's determination was of a different kind than what was needed to drive out the English or wreak vengeance on Covenant breakers.

His father announced the psalm they were to sing, and when they finished singing, Ancient Grier spoke first.

"Ye no doubt read last evening in the same sixteenth of Proverbs," he said, rising and standing with his back to the peat fire. " 'The lips of a king speak as an oracle.' " He paused, eyeing all in the room fiercely. His voice rose, " '*and his mouth should not betray justice.*' " With each word, Grier's fist came down onto his open palm with a loud smack.

Little Angus squealed and slapped his pudgy fist into his palm like the old man.

"Aye, we read it," Duncan's father said, looking steadily at the old man.

"Which reminds me of our present monarch's grandsire, King James VI—James I, the English called him," Grier continued, folding his hands behind his back, rocking back on his heels and gazing up into the murkiness of the rafters.

Duncan's mother followed Grier's gaze, and she scowled at a rustling in the thatch. She hated the rats that lodged so freely above the family.

"Ye remember the treachery of King James," Grier continued, "betraying justice for saintly Andrew Melville, who was called to London on the pretense of hearing our Presbyterian grievances? 'Course ye don't remember, 'twas more than fifty years ago. But I remember, aye, I remember." Nodding knowingly, he stroked his long white beard, and Duncan and his sisters listened expectantly.

"Now, there was a scoundrel of a king," the old man went on, "who ruled by lies and deceit as he breathed. Breaking his word, he threw worthy Mr. Melville in amongst the rats and fleas of the

wretched Tower." He nearly spit out the last words. Then he paused, eyes defiant, as he gazed into the eyes of the children.

"What fer?" Jenny asked.

"I was hoping you'd be asking," Grier said, nodding in a satisfied manner and resuming his gazing up at the rafters. "All for telling the king the truth about hisself."

"What king would hate the truth so?" Duncan asked.

"An unjust one, that's who," Ancient Grier replied fiercely.

"What did he tell the king?" Fiona asked softly.

"He told him," Ancient Grier said, clearing his throat importantly, " 'There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: There is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is King Jesus, the Head of the Kirk, whose subject King James is, and of whose kingdom he is not the head, nor a lord, but a member.' Then he called a curse to light upon James's idea of trying to take the place of King Jesus in his Kirk. Sputtering and fuming, James forbade the General Assembly of the Kirk to meet, appointing his favorites to be bishops—bishops in Presbyterian Scotland, mind ye! And then he tried making us a kneeling Kirk and introduced other popish foppery."

"What's popish mean?" Jenny asked.

"Anything not conforming to how the Book tells us God wants to be worshiped, that's popish," Grier said. "James even went and installed a kist o' whistles at St. Giles in Edinburgh. Aye, he did, in the very shadow of John Knox's pulpit."

"What's a kist o' whistles?" Duncan asked.

"English call 'em pipe organs," Grier said, spitting out the name, the flames of the sheep tallow candles quivering precariously with his words. "Roman Catholic churches have pipe organs," he concluded, nodding knowingly.

"Aye, and popish churches have walls and roofs," Duncan's father said, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Would ye have us dispense with walls and roofs in the kirk?"

Grier blinked rapidly and frowned.

"No kist o' whistles in the Psalter," he said defiantly.

"Aye, but we're told to praise the Lord with all kinds of musical instruments," Duncan's father replied. "And I can't see as how an organ doesn't fit that description with all those lovely sounds wrapped up in one instrument." He leaned forward and set another

cut of peat on the fire. “It’s how ye use a thing that makes it good or bad, Ancient Grier, not the thing itself.”

Frowning, Ancient Grier cleared his throat and blinked up at the rafters. “Well, I might just agree with ye,” he said, looking levelly at Duncan’s father, “if ye said the same, Sandy M’Kethe, about yer sword.”

Duncan turned to look at his father. Before he could reply, Fiona, in her quiet voice, asked, “What became of King James?”

“James died,” Grier replied, eager to return to his tale. “And thanks be to God for it. But his son Charles—aye, he was even more deluded than his father at thinking he ruled the Kirk and the Parliament—Charles turned loose his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud.”

“His name’d be Archbishop Praise, wouldn’t it?” Duncan interjected.

“Aye, but there were nothing worth praising about that archfiend Laud,” Grier continued. “And before Scotland knew it, he’d forced their popish English prayer book on the Kirk. What followed was riots in the streets of Edinburgh and the Bishops’ Wars.”

“How’d it all happen?” Jenny begged eagerly.

“Oh, that I’ll tell, lassie,” Grier said. “And you’ll be liking the telling of it, to be sure.”