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Dacre's War

Written by Rosemary Goring

Published by Polygon

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DACRE'S WAR

ROSEMARY GORING

Polygon

For Marie

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Characters

The Scottish Court

John Stewart, Duke of Albany, cousin of James IV and Regent of Scotland

Margaret Tudor, the dowager queen, widow of James IV

James V, only surviving son of James IV and Margaret Tudor

Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, Margaret Tudor's second husband

James Hamilton, Earl of Arran, one of Margaret Tudor's strongest allies, enemy of her husband

Alexander Montgomerie, Earl of Eglinton, privy councillor and guardian of the infant king James

John Stewart, Earl of Lennox, a staunch defender of James

William Herries, Lord Herries of Terregles, son of Andrew who died at Flodden

David Forsyth, cousin of Archibald Douglas

The English Court

Henry VIII, King of England and brother of Margaret, Dowager Queen of Scotland

Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal, Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor, one of Henry's closest advisers

Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, soldier; son of Thomas Howard, veteran of the battle of Flodden, second earl of Surrey, and now Duke of Norfolk (Surrey takes his father's title on Norfolk's death in May 1524)

Sir William Eure, Vice Warden of the English marches

The Croziers

Adam Crozier, head of the clan
Louise Brenier, his wife
Tom Crozier, his younger brother
Old Crozier, Adam and Tom's grandfather
Hob, head stableboy and groom
Benoit Brenier, Louise's carpenter brother
Ella Aylewood, Benoit's wife
Wat the Wanderer, Adam's cousin and henchman
Murdo Montgomery, Adam's cousin and henchman
Samuel Jardine, clan chief, and ally of the Croziers
Mitchell Bell, head of local clan, and ally
Father Walsh, the village priest
Oliver Barton, sailor, and cousin of Louise
The wolf, the family dog, born of the late vixen

The Dacres and their household and associates

Thomas, Baron Dacre, Warden General of the English marches
Bess, his late wife Elizabeth Greystoke
Blackbird, Dacre's butler and personal attendant
Sir Christopher Dacre, his brother
Sir Philip Dacre, his brother
Joan Dacre, his youngest daughter
Mabel, his married eldest daughter
Anne, his married middle daughter
Mary, Joan's maid and companion
Sly Armstrong, outlaw leader of the Liddesdale Armstrongs
Black Ned, Sly's cousin, leader of the Tynedale Armstrongs

Epigraph

For me, the ransom of my bold attempt
Shall be this cold corpse on the earth's cold face

Richard III, Act V, Scene 3

PROLOGUE

10 September 1513, the day after the battle of Flodden



He picked his way over the hillside beneath a fog of heavy rain. The turf was strewn with sodden flags and toppled guns, abandoned swords and quivers. His boots slipped on mud made oily with blood, but the soldier who had brought him the news moved swiftly, as if untroubled by the scene. Dacre, after little sleep, and even less to eat, felt his stomach slop. He gripped his staff, and trudged on. Overnight the battlefield had been partially cleared, hundreds of corpses carried off on drays to await the lime pit and dead horses dragged to the valley top, where their stookie limbs prodded the sky, pyres of flesh awaiting the flame. Only at the foot of the slopes, where bodies were half buried in glaur, was the carnage untouched. The river washed on around them, turning a hand or shuddering a leg, as if the owner had been merely asleep and now was roused at last.

'He's over here,' said the soldier, calling the baron's attention to a hollow near the top of the hill, where they were heading. Some distance behind him, cloaked in rain, Dacre moved at the speed of one reluctant to reach his destination. When he did, gulls were mewling high overhead, a sound he would ever afterwards think of as a lament for the sorry figure they circled.

The king's body had been turned upwards, though beneath the black crust of a face savaged by sword and arrow and axe few would have recognised him. His chain mail coat was torn, and around his shoulders the mantle bearing his coat of arms lay in shreds, its lion slain. His helmet was trodden into the earth by his side, where his standard bearer lay, the boy fallen upon the Scottish flag, now stained with his dying.

The baron barely noticed him, looking only at James. Crouching

by the side of his old enemy and friend, he wrenched an arrow out of his neck and hurled it aside. For a moment, mist clouded his vision. He rubbed his face, and the king came back into sight. Dacre lifted an ungloved hand, almost severed from its wrist, and saw the marks where night-time scavengers had removed the rings. He laid it down, as one would a sleeping child's.

Raising the metal tunic, he found the proof he needed. The Warden General of the English marches, whose soldiers had helped bring about the Scots' defeat, lowered his head in sorrow. There could be no doubt. The king's iron belt was locked around his waist, chafing purple on clay-coloured skin. Dacre counted the links, and found one for every year since the death of James's father, in whose memory he wore it.

With a long sigh, he got to his feet. 'This is him, James IV, King of Scotland no longer. You've done well to find him. Had he gone missing, rumours would have kept him alive for years.'

He straightened, and put a hand to the small of his back as he stared into the downpour. Beyond the rain lay the sea. He could smell it. So could the gulls, and as if reminded of where they belonged they gave a last call and flew off.

Later, Dacre marched back to the village, ahead of the pall-bearers. 'Get back!' he shouted, as a crowd gathered, jostling for a glimpse of the stricken king. 'It's only another body, like the thousands ye have already seen. Are ye no sick of the sight by now?' He raised his staff to clear the way, but he understood why they peered. How often would they see a king brought lower than they?

Sickened, Dacre shouldered his way past them. James had been his enemy, but also a friend, a man who could be trusted. The same could not be said of his own king. Brushing rain out of his eyes, the Warden General thanked the saints that Henry never ventured this far north. Should he ever show any interest in the borderlands, it would bode as ill for Dacre as for the Scots.

Part One

1523

Foul Deeds Will Rise Again

CHAPTER ONE

March 1523



From the crown of a grizzled oak, a buzzard blinked as three men rode out of the woods and onto the empty hills. Hunched as a tax collector counting his coins, the bird did not shift from its perch but kept the riders in its sights as they moved steadily across the valley. Only when they had reached the farthermost peak did the glint of helmets and swords disappear, leaving the moorland quiet in their wake. Watchful still, the buzzard scraped its beak and refolded its wings. These men had passed this way often before. They would no doubt soon return.

The threesome rode abreast, bridles chattering. Their dark garb brightened only by steel, they did not speak but cantered over turf and moss, scattering white cattle and goats as they moved west. Adam Crozier's horse was a short head in front, setting the pace and finding the path. The borderer's eyes were fixed on the track, and none would have guessed that his thoughts were not of the assignation that lay ahead, but of the past that raced to meet him at every bend of river and curve of hill.

He had trodden this land since he was a child, and would have known it blindfold: bridlepaths overgrown with wild garlic; river pools where moorhens paddled between soft-scented water lilies or scuttled, chittering, onto the bank; and everywhere the dry, warm scent of beech, hazel and oak, under whose canopy a boy could make a hideaway from branches and bracken as comfortable as anything a bricklayer could devise.

Teviotdale was Crozier's domain, the sweetest nut in the borderlands. A cradle of gentle hills and loamy plains, a sparrow's flight from the English border, it was well hidden from the eye of the authorities

in Edinburgh. Here, in his youth, crops had grown lush under a fitful sun, and animals had grazed, fearing nothing but the wolf. To look at the hillsides and pastures now, where grain barns were as fortified as castles, and livestock were herded each night into byres only a cannon could breach, such a time seemed as distant as the myths bards sang of when they plucked their lyres on feast days.

The riders slowed as the hillside turned to ash, and their horses picked their way over grasslands charred by flame. The borderer's face tightened. His mare skirted the wooden stumps of a hamlet whose cottages had been fired to dust. Barely twenty miles from Crozier's Keep, he reflected, and the countryside was fast becoming wasteland, so often was it scathed by the gangs who roamed these parts. Soon there would be nothing left for them to steal or destroy. Even then it was unlikely the dalesfolk would be left in peace.

That he and his men were on their way to meet Ethan Elliot, one of the most audacious thieves and ruthless killers this side of Carlisle, made the desolation even more bitter. In his time, Elliot had ravaged the middle march of the borders as if it were enemy land and not that of his neighbours. In the Crozier household his name was spoken rarely, and then in whispers, for fear of invoking the evil spirits that none doubted the man harboured or had at his command. For few knew better than they what he was capable of.

In these parts it was commonly believed that it was Elliot who had murdered Crozier's father, when Adam was still a boy. There was no proof, but few doubted it was true. Had he not been so intent these past few years in restoring his family's fortunes, he might have taken revenge, but the condition of his lands, his people, and of the country itself after Flodden, left little room for such an indulgence. Until he reclaimed the honour of his family name – lost long before that fateful battle – and with it their rightful place as leaders of the middle march, he had no spare thought for the man so reviled that they called him the Leper of Liddesdale. If he did not carry the disease himself, he spread a pestilence wherever he went that was almost as disfiguring.

Glad to put the fired earth behind them, the three quickened their pace. Tom Crozier brushed alongside his brother's horse as they

negotiated a narrow trail at the head of a gully and indicated the path wending south. 'See, the prints are fresh. They've been here this past day or so, since it last rained. I reckon they're lying in wait ahead of us.'

'Who, Dacre's men?' asked their companion Wat the Wanderer's, whose skill with the crossbow he carried on his back made more powerful men pause before risking his wrath. 'Unlikely. This season, the Deadwater Marshes would swamp them. If the Warden General is headed into the dale, it'll be by a higher route than the causeway, and we'd have heard of it.'

Tom did not look convinced. 'I don't trust Elliot,' he said. 'It wouldn't surprise me if we're riding into an ambush. And who better for him to summon to finish us off than his paymaster, who can get here in a day by this route, and scarper in half that time?' His eyes gleamed at the prospect.

Crozier gathered the reins in one hand. 'Could be you're right,' was all he said, urging his horse up the slope.

There was a poor crop of honesty when Ethan Elliot was born. In its place was a cunning so deep that as he grew from boy to man it appeared to ooze from his pores, slicking his hair, dampening his palms, and giving him an oily sheen that matched his slippery eye. Crozier had never met him – by the time he found his father's corpse, the murderer and his cronies were gone. Yet when, a week earlier, Elliot's youngest son had arrived at Crozier's Keep bearing a message, the borderer had looked into the boy's defiant face and fancied he found reflected in it a glimmer of the man who had brought his family to its knees.

Edward Elliot had knocked at the gates with a club, leaving his companions at the edge of the woods with their horses. A sentry had stripped him of cudgel, sword, dagger and knife, and left him to await his master in the guardroom. Uneasy in the enemy's camp, black forelock drooping over one eye, he wrung his greasy woollen cap in his hands under the stare of the watchmen who were waiting their turn on the walls.

His father had told him to expect little more than a farmer's house, but it was clear the old man had not seen the place in years. As he

approached, thick outer walls towered over him until he felt like an ant at the foot of a tree. Once through the main gates, an inner wall guarded the keep, whose ramparts and stonework were so immaculately kept one would have thought them newly built, had not the stories of the keep's long history, and Crozier's battles, carried through all the borders. When finally the clan chief and his brother entered the guardroom, the young man's face revealed a temper as overstrung as a new harp. He had been left idle all morning, but the thought of his father's anger if he did not deliver his message had kept him there.

With a look, Crozier sent the guards out, then closed the door and leaned against it. He was not a tall man, but he filled the room. Edward Elliot was ashamed of the tightness of his throat, the prickle of heat in his hands. 'I am sent to you by my father, Ethan Elliot,' he said loudly. 'He requests a meeting with you. He says it is urgent. He must speak to you, and will accept whatever time and place you like, so long as it is soon.' He felt more foolish yet as the words fell onto silence.

Crozier looked at Tom, and back at Edward, who swallowed hard. In that space, all three heard it. There was a long pause. 'Is that so?' the borderer said at last. He took a step towards Edward, who forced himself not to move. 'You are too young to remember, lad, but your father's last visit to this place made him, and now you, the least welcome guests we have ever had.'

Edward raised his eyes to meet Crozier's. His heartbeat quickened, but for his father he would face down any threat, and not merely for fear of his rage. 'He said you would not believe me, nor trust him, and he asked me to give you a pledge of his honour.' He placed a small gold ring in Crozier's hand. 'If ye take a good look, you'll see his and my mother's initials, and the date of their betrothal. It is her wedding band, and since Ma's death it is his most precious possession.'

Crozier handed it back without a glance. 'I need no pledge, son. Your father's word is worthless. Yet I am curious to know what he has to tell me.' He looked up at the arched bricks above their heads, as if searching for an answer. Tom licked his lips, a gesture of anticipation, not fear, and Crozier was pleased. Both of them thought alike.

'Very well,' he said, looking at Edward, 'you can go back to Ethan

Elliot and tell him that I and my men will meet him a week from today, on Blinkbonny Hill on the Overstone Pass. We shall find him at noon, but he must come with none other than you, nor try to trick or deceive us, or he shall dig his own grave on that hill.' He opened the door, and a sentry appeared to lead the young man back to the gates.

Edward was cantering home with his cousins, breathing deep with relief to be free of the keep, before he realised he had dropped his cap in the guardroom. By then, it was on the sentry's brazier, sizzling with sweat yet barely singed, as if even the flames were reluctant to touch anything that belonged to an Elliot.

A crescent of elms topped Blinkbonny Hill, stark against the sky. Crows circled overhead, but they were the only creatures abroad, their cawing the solitary sound. Concealed behind a thicket of scrub overlooking the hill, Crozier and his companions waited.

The sun had not quite reached its peak when there was a crackling of undergrowth from across the valley as riders approached through the woods. When two horses came into sight, crossing the stream that meandered around the foot of the hill, Crozier leaned forward on his mare's neck.

Ethan Elliot rode ahead of his son, his girth swaying in the saddle. A once swaggering figure, with a bull's neck and barrel chest, now Elliot's head drooped as if he knew the fight was over. Crozier frowned. This was not what he had expected. Had he been summoned to hear a confession and clear an old man's conscience before he met his maker?

Plodding up the hill, the Elliots took their place under the elms, where they sat so still they might have been carved from wood. Time passed, and the sun rose higher, as Crozier waited to see if the robber had been followed, or if his henchmen were already in hiding, encircling the hill and its players.

In years past, no man would have ridden to meet Ethan Elliot without first kissing his loved ones a long goodbye. Even Elliot's allies knew better than to turn their backs in his presence. The man had a temper like a rabid dog, they said, docile one minute, savage the next.

His corner of Liddesdale, already famed for its outlaws, had become so feared that the common tracks across his lands were overgrown with weeds, few daring to pass that way in case they crossed his path.

But some could not avoid him, no matter how hard they tried. From his fortress-like castle Elliot's hands hovered over the region, casting shadows across the sweetest harvests and fattest cattle, swooping to pluck the best for himself. Retreating to gloat over his spoils, he would for a spell be sated. There were weeks of quiet while he wined and wenched, gambled and squandered, and grew another chin. Then, when his cellars and coffers and larder had dwindled, he'd go back on the prowl, he and a hundred men, whose hoofbeats and yowling filled the border nights with dread.

Only a leader with greater courage and more men could bring him to heel. One such was Sly Armstrong, whose band of thugs was almost as feared as Elliot's, and five times the number. Nobody who valued their skin would say no to Sly and his brothers, and from time to time Elliot did their bidding. But more commanding yet was Thomas Dacre, Warden General and lord of the marches. Dacre was the only man on earth – and beyond it – who scared Elliot. Though the thief had no scruples, he was not without brains.

When it seemed to Crozier that Elliot had come alone, he, Tom and Wat made for the hill. Dismounting at its foot, they led their horses up the slope. There was no sound but the horses' breath, and the slither of leaves as they advanced towards the watchful figures ahead.

As they drew close Edward Elliot got off his horse, but Ethan stayed in the saddle, swaddled in furs. It galled Crozier not to meet him eye to eye, but when he saw the pallid sheen on the old thief's face, the tremor in his hands, he knew he was looking at a dead man.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Ethan's eyes were red-rimmed and weeping, but they held no hint of remorse. 'Aye, lad,' he said, in a voice still flavoured by his reiver's roar. 'Well might ye stare at me like that. I've done ye no favours, I know. And if you'd been in the room that night alongside your da, I'd have slit your throat as well. I'm no here tae make amends, if that's what you're thinking. God forbid!'

There was a movement at Crozier's side as Tom started forward,

drawing his sword. He did not have time to loosen it before his brother's hand pinned his arm to his side. 'Stay back,' Adam said. 'Leave him to me.'

He reached the robber's horse, and put a hand on its bridle. He looked into his enemy's eyes. 'Tell me what was so urgent that we had to meet, and have done with it.'

Elliot laughed, loosening a rusty nail in his throat. 'Man of few words, eh? Unlike your father.' He raised a hand to ward off Crozier's rising irritation. 'Aye, aye, I'm coming to it. Show some respect to your elders, boy. Were Nat alive he'd be a dribbling husk, just like me. Time reaches us all, son, though we all think we can outrun it.' He wiped his rheumy tears. 'As ye have no doubt guessed, I'm not long for this world. I have spent sleepless nights these last few months, thinking over the past. There's been a lot of memories to keep me company. I've had a fine, full life.' He looked at his son, and his expression hardened.

'One thing aye irked me, though. It was said I had killed your father, and so I did. Clean and fast, as always. Believe me, lad, he suffered less in that last minute than I do now each hour of the day. I'll burn for what I did to him, no doubt, and for worse sins too. But I wanted you to know it was not my doing. Or at least' – he coughed and dragged his hand over his mouth – 'not mine alone.'

'Baron Dacre?' asked Crozier quietly.

Elliot nodded. 'The very same.' He reached under his jerkin and pulled out a folded paper. 'In case ye dinnae believe me.'

Crozier took the yellowed message. It was short, and creased with age. Ink splattered the page, showing the writer's haste. Despatch our mutual foe, it said, and your reward will come far sooner than in heaven. Signed with Dacre's vigorous sprawl, it was dated the day before Nat Crozier's death.

A hush fell over the wood. Crozier's pulse was steady, his heartbeat slow, yet he seemed to be viewing the scene, and himself in it, from somewhere high above. His voice sounded far off and foreign when he asked, 'Can you tell me why? What had my father done to Dacre that he deserved . . . ?' He swallowed, remembering the scene

after Elliot and his men had left, his father bled white like a butchered pig, his mother crazed with terror.

Elliot looked down at his hands, but said nothing. His son stared at him, as if willing the hanging head to rise, but the figure in furs could have been made of straw for all the life it showed. Tom and Wat exchanged looks, but Crozier did not move.

Just as it seemed the thief had run out of words and this audience was over, he drew a rattling breath that lifted his chest like a sail catching the wind. He stared at the borderer, a glint of his arrogant younger self reflected in his eyes. 'Dacre needs no reason. There's some men he admires, and others he hates. But nobody threatens Dacre, or not for long. He owns this land from sea to sea, on his side of the border, and on ours too. He can crush anyone he likes, howsoever he likes, and the king far off in London town won't lift a finger.'

He coughed, and stared at Crozier. 'So long as the baron is in charge, the east march, the west march, and the middle march are his private playground, and we, my lad, are nothing more than his toy soldiers. Your father offended him, I know not how, and he simply wanted him dead. I don't understand it myself. It's not as if Nat was a rival . . .'

He broke off, exhausted, and clutched one hand over the other, to steady their shake. His mouth was slack and wet. Edward stepped forward and stood by his father's side, a reminder that the old man might be helpless, but he was not alone.

Crozier shook his head. 'My father was an insolent man,' he said, 'and he often defied the baron, but there were many as bad who crossed him and swindled him, yet lived to die of old age. You are either afraid to tell me the truth, or Dacre did not trust you with it.' He stared into Elliot's sagging face. 'And who,' he added softly, 'could blame him for that?'

Elliot shrugged. 'What do I care? He paid me well enough.'

'But as Dacre said, my father was your enemy too. What was your grudge, to risk killing him in his bed like that?'

'No, son,' said Elliot, his face lighting up with a malice that had never failed to come running when called. 'I had no beef against your

da. I only played along with Dacre's dislike, so's to secure the job. Tell the truth, I liked Nat. We were two of a kind. If he hadn't grown lazy and slow, more keen on mischief than money, it could be my bones lying under the trees and your old man sitting here, richer than the regent king, and a life of pure pleasure ahint him.'

He leaned forward, his mouth working. 'But just for the record, since I've come all the way here this morning to set things straight, he was also a poxy wee man, your da, a troublemaker, and a braggart. He was as big a thief as I ever was, but not as smart. When he was buried, it wasn't just Dacre was glad he had been despatched. The whole dale rejoiced, though mibbe not all they wenches carrying his bairns.'

A smile was spreading across his face when Crozier drew his sword. At the rasp of steel, wood pigeons rose from the trees with a clapping clatter and flapped over their heads. Elliot's horse shied, wrenching the bridle out of the borderer's hand, and with a grunt the thief slid from the saddle, landing upon the woodland floor with the sound of a rock hitting water. Edward started forward, then checked himself. His father sprawled, his hat cast aside, his bald head blotched yellow and black like a sycamore leaf in winter. He peered up at Crozier, whose sword was pressed at his neck.

'You miserable piece of filth,' Adam said, so quiet in his rage that none but the Elliots could hear. 'You kill my father, destroy our family, just to keep in with the warden. You're as despicable as Dacre himself. You sicken me.' The blade found a chink in the furs and probed deeper.

'Go on, son, you do it,' wheezed Elliot, pulling his shirt aside to bare his throat. 'I dare ye. Show you're better than your old man. If there was one thing he couldnae do, it was finish the kill. He got others to do his dirty work for him. Gutless, was Nat.'

The sky narrowed, the day darkened, and Crozier was about to slide the blade home when he caught the look on Elliot's face. His smiling bravado was not well-disguised fear, but secret relief. His body was tense, but not terrified. He was waiting for his end, and eager for it. This was what he had come here for.

Crozier glanced up, and saw Ethan's surly son, head turned away. What boy would not have leapt to his father's defence? But Edward

was following orders, and finding it as hard as any would to watch his father threatened.

The borderer's head cleared. He took a deep breath, and sheathed his sword. 'Get up,' he said. Like a wounded bear, the mound of furs stirred as, slowly and shakily, Elliot got onto his knees. Edward helped him to his feet, and he leaned against his boy. He was trembling, all expression wiped from his face.

'Go back home, old man,' said Crozier wearily. 'I won't be your executioner, whatever you'd come here hoping.' Taking the reins from Wat, he got into the saddle, and wheeled his horse close to father and son. He looked down at Elliot, into his bloodshot eyes. 'Maybe you'll find another who'll be happy to murder you – a man of your own sort, no doubt.' His mare kicked up leaves as he rode out of the wood, their flutter mocking Elliot's palsy as he stood, shaking and helpless.

The buzzard was at his post when he heard the riders return. They were moving fast, approaching the wood from across the night-time hills. As they passed in darkness under his sentinel tree, his yellow eyes blinked.

A day's ride away in the west, the clouds parted and a half-moon lit the scene. A black shape dangled from the bough of a tree, knotted reins around its neck. Some distance from the swaying boots, the unbridled horse cropped the grass and, several miles beyond, the hanged man's son was galloping home at his father's command, believing him not far behind.

The borderer was back in Crozier's Keep when Ethan Elliot died, but it was quickly rumoured, then accepted as fact, that he had murdered the old man as the first of his acts of revenge.