Robert the Bruce

Over dark moors, a dreadful wind howled at the stars and prodded and poked at a rickety wooden door, making promises of snow and ice. Beyond the door and inside the dirty but dry hut that had seemingly been cast adrift on a sea of heather, Robert the Bruce pulled a thick fur blanket tighter around his shoulders. A small fire fought back against the elements though Robert was disgruntled to see it was more ash than flame.

"Curse you, vile weather, and curse you Longshanks. I'll have my revenge yet!" Robert, the exiled king of Scotland, shouted his daily curse to the night sky. He snatched up a scrap of near-mouldy bread from a rough earthenware plate and tore off a chunk. He ate it dry; the cheese been devoured many weeks ago and what little milk he'd been able to pick up on his travels to the forsaken hut had long since turned sour. He picked up a small flint and carved a line into the soft wall: one amongst a thousand other siblings.

"Four months," he muttered to himself. "Four months and six battles since that upstart Edward first came north." He turned over in his bed and stared at the ceiling. The cinders were glowing just enough to make out subtle shadows on the walls. When he'd first arrived - hungry and cold but still strong - Robert had set about preparing himself for vengeance. He'd sharpened his sword and worked his muscles but, eventually, he had grown weak with hunger and cold and then winter had set in. Now he spent his evenings lying on his mean wooden cot hurling curses at the mice and spiders. Even now, as he lay and watched, a small spider was spinning a web where two beams met at an angle.

"They chased me out of Scotland, ya ken?" Robert said. If the spider had any opinion on this, it didn't offer it. "It all went awry at Methven. He had too many men, there was nothing I could do. They chased us hard, och aye, but they dinna like it when we fought 'em in the mountains." For the briefest moment, a tear twinkled in the king's eye before his brow furrowed and his lips pursed. "I had a wife too, Kildrummie, and a brother. He's dead now, executed. She's been captured. The took

everything, the blasted English, that devil Longshanks."

Robert threw himself back down in a huff and tried to get to sleep, but the small spider occupied his thoughts. Up above, the arachnid was attempting to cast a web from one beam to another; each time it would throw itself into the abyss and fall just short, plummeting towards the ground before its safety line pulled it to safety. He watched captivated as it tried over and over again: four times, five, six. The irony of the spider trying and failing six times (as many as Bruce had failed against the English) wasn't lost on the king, and he sat bolt upright. If the spider makes it this time, he thought, then I too will try a seventh time. If it fails, I will travel to the Holy Land and join the Crusades.

Sure enough, the spider leapt again between the beams and, this time, it made it. Snatching up his sword and armour, Robert the Bruce set out into the bitter night and led the clans of Scotland to victory over the English. He went on to become one of the most loved kings in Scottish history.

INFERENCE

1. How is Robert feeling in the first paragraph? How do you know?
2. What do you think he was doing when he carved a line into the wall?
3. How does Robert feel as he's telling the spider stories of his battles? Explain.
4. Why was the spider occupying his thoughts?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V What do you think "Ya ken" means?

V What contraction does "dinna" replace?

E Explain how Robert used the activities of the spider to influence his own thoughts.

R How many times did the spider fail?

S What is the moral of the story?

Answers:

1. Cold and lonely. He wraps the blanket around him and is grumpy about the fire

2. Keeping track of the days

3. Proud and reminiscent - there's a sparkling tear in his eye

4. He is fascinated by it - it's his only company

V: You know/understand

V: Didn't/don't

E: He used its perseverance as inspiration

R: Six

S: Don't give in - keep trying