

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 1

Janine stumbled and fell, for a second time, cursing her clumsiness under her breath. She quickly looked back over her shoulder, to see if the men who were chasing her were within sight. They weren't. She could, nonetheless, still hear them crashing through the undergrowth, far too close for comfort.

She hadn't trusted the men from the moment she had seen them on the road. Their mock friendliness had put her on her guard, straight away, and the way the two younger men kept looking her up and down, had made her flesh crawl.

The ground was treacherous. The trees and bushes had given way to thick, long grass, strewn with ferns and nettles. Sharp outcrops of rocks made the going even worse, rearing up at intervals, each with an apron of gravel at the base of their downhill side. As the terrain got steeper, the ferns grew darker and sharper and more reluctant to let her fight her way through them. They tugged at her dress, snagged her shawl and scratched her legs until they stung and bled.

Suddenly, her legs slipped from under her and she fell. She hurriedly got back to her feet and set off again, ignoring the pain in her leg. She was nimble and speedy when she wasn't making clumsy mistakes with her feet. Her heart was pounding like a hammer on an anvil in her chest and she could feel her pulse in her neck.

Suddenly, as she reached the top of the rise, there was a shout from behind her. One of the men had spotted her. Her heart almost broke with dismay and she began to cry. She had promised herself that she wouldn't, but she couldn't stop herself.

Janine crossed the top of the ridge and began to run down the slope at the opposite side. The incline stretched below her, the vegetation sparser, but still cluttered with swathes of ferns and nettles. Her feet refused to keep connection with the ground hidden beneath the greenery. At times, she sank deep into the hidden gullies, causing her to stagger wildly. She swayed and lurched, but managed to keep her feet. Hot tears began to stream down her face. She whimpered and, then, hearing the sound of her own distress in her ears, she growled with annoyance.

All at once, she was filled with embarrassment. Embarrassment that she would be letting her mother down by behaving in this way.

"Feeling fear will harm your chances," Her mother used to say, "But showing fear will damn them."

Her mother wasn't like she should have been. She was prouder than an impoverished crofter's wife should be. She was more graceful and – although she did her best to hide it – she was strangely refined.

Her mother had observed and passed on to her some customs that were novel or uncommon and others that were known, but had fallen into disrepute.

Janine's Uncle had once said that there were rumours that, "back in the day", there had been witches among their family. She recalled that her father, on hearing those words, had leapt at him and pushed him to the ground. They had struggled and scuffled and Janine had instinctively known - even as a small child - that this wasn't the normal "play fighting" they sometimes did.

Her father had been sullen and distant for some time, after that. He had told her that her mother's family had fallen on hard times. He said that the Laird of their region had supported the wrong side against the king and that the Laird's land and holdings had been seized and given to a neighbouring "loyal" Laird. Her father said that arguing about this was what the fight had been about. Janine knew - for no reason she could quite explain - that this was not the true reason for the conflict.

This new Laird had treated the 'small folk' cruelly. He had forced most of them off the land, dispossessing them. Some of them had starved to death. They had resorted, in the end, to eating leaves and grass. They had died with bloated bellies and hollow, sunken eyes.

Janine flinched at the thought and shook herself back to reality. She needed to keep her wits about her. She needed to think. She needed to survive. The men chasing her would likely beat her savagely and then rape her, if they caught her. They would also likely kill her to stop her talking.

She had picked up a sheep trail, but it was dangerous footing and the undergrowth brushed against her from both sides. She hurriedly clambered over some fallen logs and almost slipped, again. She recovered her balance and then almost tripped over some roots growing out from a nearby tree. She managed to stay upright and the path ahead of her became more distinct and she put on a burst of speed.

She heard a noise to her left, in the bushes, and desperately hoped that it was just an animal - a boar or a deer she had frightened - and not a person. She ran faster, but the noise kept pace with her. After a couple of minutes, she reached a clearing where the path widened out and, breathless and panting, she stopped for a moment by the gnarled, moss-covered trunk of an old tree.

She subconsciously twiddled her mother's ring on her finger, something she did often when she was nervous. The ring was all she had from her mother, who had died when she was small. They had been poor crofters, breaking their backs to make ends meet. They had always struggled. Money had always been either very short or completely non-existent. The ring, however, was strangely intricate and meticulously worked. An odd possession for people of such humble means.

She looked all around her. There was nobody there. She was aware that it was dangerous to tarry. Still breathing hard, she straightened, in readiness to set off, again. A second later, the youngest of her pursuers - the man with the mean, narrow lips - jumped out into her path.

"If you hadn't run," he said, gasping for breath, to tell his lie, "We might not have ended up hurting you." He leered at her, then added: "But now....". He let the sentence hang in the air, menacingly, and shook his head, sadly, in an evil parody of regret.

"Please!", she cried, "I haven't done anything!"

This appeared to amuse him.

"No?", he asked, still panting heavily from his exertions.

"I've done nothing to you at all!", she insisted.

The man's mean, narrow lips contorted into a mocking smile, "Then you have nothing to worry about. Do you?", he said and laughed a disgusting laugh.

Behind her, Janine could hear the approach of the man's companions in the distance. Her heart sank. The man started to approach her, stepping slowly and with exaggerated care, as if he were trying not to frighten a horse he wanted to harness.

Janine took a step backwards, away from him. Her foot shifted on a stone and she fell to the side, automatically reaching out to steady herself against the nearby tree. As she did so, something sharply spiked sank deep into the palm of her hand. She winced and cried out in pain. The man hesitated in his advance for a moment.

Somewhere in her head, clearly and distinctly, Janine heard the sound of bells. Tiny bells that tinkled softly. Their sound peculiarly comforting. The noise they made was like a wind chime caught in an unexpected breeze.

Janine's cry of pain stopped abruptly, remaining incomplete. She stood to her full height. The sensation in her hand was completely gone. Slowly and deliberately she turned her gaze from the trunk of the tree to meet the man's eyes.

The man froze. He stared at her as if he hadn't seen her before. His eyes widened. Whatever he saw unquestionably made him afraid. His eyes shot over her shoulder, scanning the distant foliage, vainly seeking the reassurance of his friends' approach.

With a fluid movement, Janine dropped into a stoop and picked up a long, thick length of stout wood with a jagged point at the end. She then slipped into what the man immediately recognised as a fighting stance.

The man stared in open-mouthed disbelief. A question was writ unmistakably on his face: "When had this weak and defenceless girl suddenly become dangerous?"

In a single second, as she struck, the man's expression turned from fear to terror. The wood came up towards him, at lightning speed, striking him under

his chin. Janine lunged her weight onto her forward foot and the spiked end of the wood pierced up through his jaw and into his mouth. Blood gushed from his lips and he made a gargled sound of surprise.

Janine reached and firmly arranged her grip on the shaft of the pole. Then, gracefully repositioning her feet, like an elegant dancer, she crouched slightly to bear the force of her next move. Leaning forward into the motion, she lifted the end of the makeshift weapon upwards, raising the man off his feet and suspending him in the air, impaled and writhing in pain.

The man with the mean, narrow lips gave a shrill, ear splitting cry of agony that rose higher and higher. As the spiked end of the pole penetrated the roof of his mouth and plunged into his brain, his cry peaked and then trailed mournfully away, echoing through the forest.

Behind her, the two men making their way through the bushes, in her direction, instantly halted in unison. They exchanged wide-eyed looks of horror, the blood curdling scream still ringing in their ears. Fear, like fingers of ice, climbed up their spines. They shuddered.

After a fleeting moment of hesitation, without exchanging a word, the two men took off as fast as their legs would carry them. They ran with a frantic desperation. They ran in the opposite direction. They ran away from Janine. The primitive instinct of 'fight or flight' told them to put as much distance between them and her as quickly as possible.

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CHAPTER 2

Alex Brennan cried out in his sleep. His head thrashed first to one side, then to the other as he gasped and choked to say the words his sleeping body would not permit. After a few moments, he seemed to calm.

On the nightstand by his bed, stood a candle in its holder, its flame not long extinguished. The pool of hot wax around its wick bulged precariously around the brim of the candle, threatening to spill over. It hung there, like a bird on a cliff unsure about taking its first flight, before gradually solidifying, its escape to join the rolling waves of wax down its shaft, thwarted.

Next to the candle was a silver cloak clasp in the shape of a bird's claw, an antler-hilted knife in a leather cover, that was almost black with age, a brass uniform button and miniature tinder box, the size of an adult thumb.

The owner of these objects stirred, again, his body momentarily tensing in the motion of a person straining against something, before slowly relaxing and resuming sleep.

Presently, however, he began to whimper. Soon after, he cried out, again. The words were incoherent and babbled, tumbling from his lips with urgency and desperation.

He arched his back and clenched his teeth, as if trying to stifle sudden pain. His hand rose to his neck, clawing at the sweat soaked collar of his nightshirt. He had already kicked his blanket down to his knees and now he flailed his legs, as if hurriedly walking on the spot. The blanket eventually tumbled to the floor in a heap on top of his kilt.

All at once, he became calm and his body relaxed, a smile flooding to his lips. He could hear a vague roaring sound. The noise of a waterfall? He strained his ears, in his dream, to hear. No, it wasn't the sound of a waterfall. It was the sound of flames. Something was burning, but he couldn't tell what was on fire. Whatever it was, it was close by, not far from the window.

Alex became vaguely aware that he was asleep. He tried to open his eyes and wake up, but his lids were too heavy. Hanging midway between sleep and wakefulness, his smile widened. He could see the glow of the flames dancing on the wall. In the real world, his brow creased as he studied the flames in his dream. They were friendly flames. They were good flames.

He sighed a long, heartfelt sigh and returned to a deep, tranquil sleep.

In the hallway, beyond the door to his room, the Inn Keeper stopped, his leg frozen in mid stride. His candle, which had been flickering and swaying precariously, as if it had caught a hidden draft, suddenly began to burn steadily again, its flame once more rising, serenely, straight up.

The Inn Keeper, a kindly old man with the weathered, salt-scoured face of a sailor, listened intently for a few moments, cocking his head this way and that. Satisfied that his guest was no longer in any kind of distress, he slowly turned around and crept back to his own room. With the practised stealth of a smuggler, he silently lifted the latch. A few soundless steps later, the door was closed and he was carefully and gently climbing back into bed.

His wife, alerted only by her inexplicable awareness of his presence, opened her eyes and peered out at him from under the blankets. As the candle flame wafted and swayed, throwing its crazy lengthening and shortening shadows across the walls and ceiling, he spied a questioning expression on her face. He shrugged his shoulders, pursed his lips and rocked his head from side to side in a gesture of cluelessness. His wife smiled a weak wistful smile and shook her head, sadly.

"He's a good man.", his wife said, before yawning and falling back to sleep.

The Inn Keeper laid awake for a while, listening to the wind and rain outside. An owl hooted, bad temperedly, somewhere in the bright moonlit night. Further up the valley a fox barked, softly, as if in reply. Straining his ears, he could hear the gurgling of the little waterfall at the foot of the valley wall, to the West. Across the yard, the handle on the winch, atop the well, began to squeak as the wind gusted and caught its dangling rope.

The Inn Keeper leaned up on his elbow and blew out the candle on the bedside stand. It extinguished with a little flutter and he watched the glowing red tip of the wick appear to hover in the air for a few moments, before it winked out.

Leaning back into the pillows, he looked up at the wall, studying the constantly changing patterns thrown by the moonlight shining through the rain on the window pane. The light was, at one moment, pale yellow, and then – the next – a ghostly white.

As he yielded to sleep, his eyelids flickered and reopened a couple of times, before finally closing. His lips began to form a smile as he began to hear the soft, oddly comforting crackling of a fire. Now, in his sleep, he could see the fire on the wall. A friendly patchwork of yellow, orange and red flames was dancing and shimmering from floor to ceiling.

The stranger, across the hall, had brought a warmth to the inn since his arrival a few nights ago. A feeling of peace and tranquillity. A feeling of warmth.

Next to the Inn Keeper, his sleeping wife shared his smile, and gave a little sigh at the beauty of the flames.

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CHAPTER 3

Annis stretched and yawned. After a few moments, she repeated the action. Shortly after that, she did it for a third time. She sighed heavily and stared, sullenly, at the taut canvas above her head.

The wind was not particularly strong outside the tent, but the occasional bluster would cause the material to flap. Just the right strength of wind would make the ropes holding the canvas hum for a few moments. She liked to hear it.

The wind thrumming the tent's ropes reminded her of being a child. When she was little she used to call it "Listening to the wind talk". Her mother and father would always smile when they heard her say that.

Annis stretched her foot to rest, tentatively, against the iron pipe that disappeared up through the tent's roof. It was still warm. She relaxed her leg and allowed her foot to rest firmly on the pipe, absorbing its heat. The fire, in the hearth beneath it had been kept alight, through the night, by at least 4 visits by her attendant, Morag, who lay, gently snoring, beyond the curtain at the far side of the tent.

If Annis were to stir too noisily, now, Morag would waken and would propel her to her trunk to get dressed. Dressing, today, would be even more of an ordeal than usual. Today, as Queen of the West, she must walk the River Spey to assert her royal authority.

As if able to read her mind, even from within her sleep, Morag snuffled and snorted awake and Annis could hear her push open the outside flap of the tent.

"Och!", exclaimed Morag, "The sun is rising and the birds are singing!"

Annis had not failed to hear the birds. They were the reason she was awake! They had been loudly celebrating the new day, calling from here to there across the forest, for almost half an hour.

"My Queen," Morag said, "I'll prepare you for the ceremony, if I may?"

"Aye," Annis replied, "If things are to be done, then we had best do them."

Morag bustled into the main chamber of the tent and promptly pushed the Queen into a low, woven chair. Drawing her lower lip over her bottom row of teeth, Morag pressed her tongue behind her top front teeth and emitted a sharp whistle. A commotion could immediately be heard from within the tent pitched just behind them and, within a few moments, two young girls of around 10 years old, padded across the grass and sprang in thru the tent flap. Without a word, the two new arrivals began to industriously comb and untangled the Queen's hair.

Morag, meanwhile, had lifted the lid of Annis' trunk and was clucking and tutting to herself as she rummaged among the contents. She busily set about pairing and assembling various items of clothing and hanging them onto hooks attached to a wooden rod fixed along the eye level seam of the canvas wall of the tent.

Annis watched Morag from the corner of her eye and allowed a faint smile to flicker on her lips. Annis knew that Morag was careful to plan and organise everything a long while ahead. She knew that Morag took extreme care about even the slightest detail and would have chosen each item of clothing, with great diligence, a long while back.

After her painful and earnest deliberations were concluded, Morag presented the selected attire to the Queen for appraisal. Queen Annis, in turn, made a pretence of assessing the suitability of the clothing, pursing her lips and screwing up her nose in mock contemplation, before affirming solemnly that the choice was, indeed, wholly commendable.

Morag supervised Annis being undressed and then dressed, again, fussing over aligning the garments and smoothing them, carefully positioning them to perfection, before allowing her royal charge to look at herself in the mirror.

Annis knew, from long experience, that to commend her clothing too quickly and declare it suitable too soon would be to catastrophically undermine any opinion she expressed. Instead, she turned this way and that, judging herself from different angles, before finally announcing that she was extremely happy with the result of Morag's work.

Morag glowed with pride.

The two juniors, who had been standing quietly and pensively, both visibly relaxed. Morag gave them an almost imperceptible nod and they scooted out of the tent.

Annis was still considering herself in the mirror. She reached up and touched her hair, adjusted her collar and studied her own face. She wondered - as she often did - what her ancestor, Kiffan, had looked like. Kiffan who had stood against the Vikings. Kiffan who had fled to the mountains from her fortified strong house and taken up the nomadic life that had been passed down to this day.

Annis suddenly recovered from her reverie and sensed Morag watching her quizzically. Annis smiled a weak smile, "I was thinking about my ancestor, Queen Kiffan." she confided.

"It's not invaders we need to fear now," Morag said, "It's the loyalties of the Clans. Loyalty in good times is different from loyalty in hard times."

Annis turned and met Morag's gaze, giving her a blank, expressionless face. Morag dropped her eyes, bowed and left the tent.

Annis took a deep breath and pushed open the flap of the tent, emerging into the bright sunlight of a day that was rapidly warming, but which still had a chill in the air. The encampment was awash with the busy noises of a dozen different activities as people bustled about their tasks and labours.

Immediately, on catching sight of Annis, her attendants all lowered their heads, stopping what they were doing to show their respect. Those who had not noticed her became quickly aware of the stillness around them and turned to look in the general direction of everybody's gaze. Seeing the queen, the men all bowed, the women all curtsied and the children all dropped to crouch on their haunches for a moment before bobbing up again.

Annis raised her arms in front of her and then quickly crossed them, fingers tips resting on opposite shoulders. Holding the pose for a few seconds, Annis then held her arms wide, in a symbolic embrace of all those gathered there.

In the background, a group of McRory Clansmen - her armed escorts for this journey - had exchanged glances for several seconds, almost uncertain, before they had bowed. There was no reluctance, but Annis noted their lack of spontaneity.

The loyalty of Clan McRory had been pledged, for generations, to the Laird of the McDonalds and their Clan Chief was always honoured with a seat at the top table at Clan gatherings. The warriors of the McRory Stronghouse had been assigned to guard and protect Annis and her attendants. The armed troops Annis had, of her own, were only a small force of around fifteen men. The Laird of the McDonalds - or, simply, "The MacDonald" as his people tended to call him - had a heritage with its roots in the islands off the West Coast of Scotland, where loyalty to The Queen of the West was still fiercely observed.

Annis, herself, had a blood line that stretched straight back to Viking times. She was the direct and undisputed descendent of "Queen Kiffan the Defiant". Kiffan and her followers had declined to yield to the Viking invaders and had harried and attacked them, relentlessly. They had constantly probed their enemy's flanks, picking off small bands of isolated Vikings they found. They had tenaciously patrolled their rear, whenever they moved their forces, intercepting supply wagons and burning what they couldn't steal.

The Vikings called Kiffan and her people "Brydda", which translates from Old Norse to "Duilich" in Gaelic or "Annoy" in English.

The Vikings - in response to her unrelenting stubbornness - would maim, mutilate and flog anybody they suspected of having even the remotest connection with her. They would flatten villages, burn crops and pollute wells with dead animals.

They liked to impale suspected sympathisers at the end of poles which they dug into the ground and propped up at a sixty-degree slant, using boulders, soil and logs for support. The locals called these victims "Cunnartan". A Gaelic word for "Danglers".

Their other favourite form of execution was the "Blood Eagle". Here, they would use an axe to sever the victim's ribs from either side of their spine, all the way down their back, from top to bottom down, then prise the disconnected ribs apart, like lifting so many levers, splaying them like wings of a bird.

The Norse invaders subdued the Scottish inhabitants brutally, making slaves of many, and bending them to their will. Resistance was crushed with maximum bloodshed and cruelty. Only the Brydda continued to resist them. Despite their best efforts, the Vikings failed to suppress the Brydda. The Vikings would mount massive offensives against the Brydda, driving them back, diminishing their numbers and dispersing them, only for them to reappear again, a few months later. Kiffan and her "strike and flee" army of fierce warriors were simply unstoppable. With a reluctant weariness, the Vikings slowly began to develop a grudging admiration for them.

Just as surely as Winter will always, eventually, yield to Spring, the virtual annihilation of the Brydda - no matter how many times it was repeated - would always be followed by the monotonous inevitability of their re-emergence. Sometimes it would be weeks, sometimes it would be a month or more, but - like weeds - they could never be fully suppressed.

Time and destiny are merciless predators and always get their way in the end. In this regard, as history would one day tell, the Norse King, Urokmort, and Kiffan, Queen of the West, would ultimately meet face to face. In that momentous meeting, one would be the prisoner of the other.

Annis was abruptly brought back to reality by the clatter of hooves as the McRory horsemen began mounting their steeds in preparation for riding ahead to scout the road for possible ambushes. They were not far from the bank of the Spey and, in the region ahead of her, the Queen of the West could not rely upon the general goodwill of the local populace for her safety. The Spey marked the boundary of her territory and she must cross it, annually, and travel a mile up the opposite side, to show her sovereignty.

Her camp of twenty followers and fifteen soldiers were in the final phase of loading their mules and piling things onto their carts. Behind her, in a flurry of activity, her tent was being dismantled and packed away ready to move off. The cooks were busy covering the embers from her fire with a thin layer of soil and moss. This would then be used to keep food warm on their later journey.

Annis was aware that everybody across the camp had been poised and ready, just waiting for her to wake up, but carefully concealed her embarrassment at this realisation. Her mother had often told her: "When you are a Queen, you must act like a Queen. People will have expectations of you. You must not become aloof, but - nonetheless - you must never disappoint them by throwing their care, their dedication and their wish to serve you well and selflessly, in their face.

Annis walked around the camp, greeting people who had come up from the nearby villages and hamlets to pay their respects. She reached to shake their hands, but most grasped her fingers, instead, and kissed them. They would lower their heads and mutter words of respect and subservience.

As Annis move from group to group, she would smile, she would act graciously and she would grieve for her mother, in equal parts. It was so short a time ago, she felt, that she had trailed behind her mother as she did this exact same thing.

At the rear of their encampment, Annis heard the distinctive sound of her armed escort noisily donning armour to themselves and their horses. The McRorys were clearly not intending their final preparations to be discreet and bashful. Annis felt the slightest flutter of annoyance, sensing – at the back of her mind – that she was being hurried up.

The huddles and clusters of locals began to disperse and Annis only had time to greet a few more people before they began to look distinctly ill at ease, glancing nervously across to the McRorys with increasing worry on their faces. Annis clenched her teeth. She was Queen of the West. This was her territory. She would take as much time as she wanted. She would not be rushed.

Annis whirled around and began to stride purposefully towards her armoured escort, her hands bunched in fists. Suddenly, she stopped dead in her tracks. She stared at the vision ahead of her. Her eyes widened. Her surprise could not be masked.

The McRory Chieftain stood quickly to attention and his close retinue also abruptly straightened, standing their tallest. Annis had to fight to stop her jaw from dropping open.

There was complete and utter silence across the encampment.

Her eyes flicked from the soldeirs' highly polished helmets, down to the gleaming copper-bronze of their body armour, down to their magnificent metal gloves, to the dazzling blades of their huge claymores and to the big circular battle shields they carried, each quartered in dark blue and gold with prominent burnished metal hubs at their centre.

Unlike the other fifty soldiers in their contingent, these seven wore kilts of the light green, formal tartan of the McRorys. This was the more splendid tartan used for ceremonies and special events.

The Queen of the West quickly regained her composure. Her gaze flashed, from each to the next, in their line. They must, she realised, be the McRory's best warriors. This meant, therefore, that the McDonald was making a clear and unmistakable tribute to her that he wished to be noted and understood by all those that they might encounter on this expedition.

These men had faltered before bowing to the Queen when they had seen her. She had felt a fleeting pang of vague offence. She had scarcely allowed herself to acknowledge, at the time. These men had been sent as an expression of esteem by The McDonald to accompany her as a formal Honour Guard. The tradition of the old times was that such as these were not required to bow. These fighting men were regarded as being at one with their monarch and their loyalty deemed to be complete and absolute. As a result, they were above such gestures.

With a force that physically shook her, she swept her right fist upward, in an arc, striking herself in the chest over her heart. She paused for a moment - a moment that seemed to hang in the air - then repeated the motion, this time with fingers drawn into a claw. She held the pose for several seconds before thrusting her arm towards the seven soldiers, her fingers gripping the air as an eagle might grip its prey.

"Aon chridhe!", she cried, this being the Gaelic for "One heart".
Her escort shouted back the same, at the top of their lungs.

"Aon adhbhar!", she cried, using the Gaelic for "One purpose".
Her escort shouted it back, loud and clear.

"Aon anam!", she cried, the words meaning "One soul".
Her escort returned the words at almost deafening volume.

Their voices echoed through the trees, sending birds to flight. Their voices rebounded from the hills, startling sheep and deer. Their voices reverberated across the river surprising cattle that were stood drinking.

The troops camped at the far side of the river heard their voices, too, and they felt a chill run through them, as if someone had walked on their grave.

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CHAPTER 4

Janine kept her eyes firmly shut and tried to control her breathing. She knew, from experience, that – when the danger had passed – her anonymous rescuer would have gone.

She took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes. Everything was deserted. There were no people, no animals and no birds. The forest was unnervingly silent.

She shook her head, as if to dislodge the remnants of confusion, and wondered if she had been knocked out. She felt her head but could find no tender spot that might indicate a blow. Struggling to bring her thoughts into coherent focus, she vaguely recalled a man about to attack her. From that point, her memory was blank.

Janine cautiously stepped forward and searched for any signs of any struggle and conflict that might have occurred.

A little way to her right, she could see a pair of feet sticking out from under some vegetation. She shivered, involuntarily. Terrified of what she might find, but – nonetheless – overwhelmed by curiosity, she approached the motionless feet and kicked them. There was no response. Tentatively, she swung her foot at the low branches of the dense greenery surrounding the spot. In reply, the thick stems of the bushes swayed back and forth. As they moved, they alternately hid and revealed the horrifically wounded and bloodied head of what was, obviously, a lifeless corpse. The eyes were wide open and stared vacantly upwards, an expression of shock and terror permanently frozen into them. Janine shuddered, again, and backed away.

She fought to quell her dismay at not being able to express her gratitude to her rescuer in person. This had not been their first intervention. She hoped that, one day, she would be able to catch him and thank him. She was sure that it **was** a 'him' because clearly – judging by how they were able to deal with an opponent, they must be as strong as an ox.

She looked around, in all directions, to ensure that she wasn't being watched, and then - gathering her wits - began to make her way back onto the forest trail and hurriedly set off along it.

She scanned this way and that, for any sign of her benefactor, but she knew that - whenever he had helped her out in the past - he would always be well clear before she recovered her composure. She wondered if he tracked her, for a while, to make sure that she remained safe. She also wondered if he had followed her, on a regular basis, since he had a habit of turning up at the most opportune moments.

As she walked, she said a little prayer. A few words of gratitude to God and to fate for her salvation and a formal thankyou to whoever had intervened for her. She was blessed, for sure, with her own personal guardian angel.

She suddenly became aware of a pain in the palm of her hand. Looking down at it, she found a wound at its centre, slowly welling blood. Ripping some fabric from the length of rough spun cotton she had had draped over her shoulders as a makeshift shawl, she wrapped it around her hand to stem the blood.

Her pace immediately slowed as her face contorted in thought. She had hurt her hand. When had she done this? She dimly recalled something about it, but it was like trying to grasp a wisp of smoke and the inspiration slipped away from her.

A wave of desperation overtook her as, without meaning to, her mind began to assess her situation. Early that morning, she had run away from her employer, taking with her a pillow case stuffed with her meagre possessions. A pillow case that she had hung in a bush, by the roadside, while she had used a nearby dip in the ground as a makeshift toilet. It was when she had come back onto the road that she had come across the three men. Her heart lurched and her pulse raced at the recollection of the event.

If she were lucky, the pillow case might still be where she had left it. It wasn't directly visible from the road to anyone passing by, so it could still be safe. The thought of going back there filled her with dread, but – having no other option – she took a deep breath and cut right towards a path that would intercept the road.

She had set off on her journey, that morning, in the back of a hay wagon, along with the cook's lad, who was also running away. Unfortunately, a guard had spotted him sticking his head out, one too many times, just a hundred yards from the gate. He had been dragged out and, from the subsequent screeching and cries of pain, had very likely lost an ear for his trouble.

Once they were safely a good distance away, the driver had invited her to sit up front with him. The driver, as it turned out, had wandering hands and he found difficult to keep them to himself. She had soon been thrown off the wagon, and left to walk, after rejecting his repeated advances.

She had realised, immediately, the dangers of being alone on the road and had very nearly turned around. The likelihood of being discovered while sneaking back into the house, however, had horrified her. She had been beaten, all too often, for no apparent transgression. She hardly dared imagine what she might have had to endure if she had given them an actual reason!

With great trepidation she made her way back to the bush and, after the best part of an hour - and after mistaking the wrong location, once or twice - she found her pillow case. She was grateful that it was exactly as she had left it. She was also grateful that it had not rained. She appreciated, now, that she should have wrapped her oiled coat around the pillow case rather than rolling it up and putting it inside, but she hadn't – at the time - been expecting to have to abandon it.

She resumed her journey with a new and more pressing awareness of her vulnerability and with a great deal more haste. She knew full well that the Rangers, known by many as the "Watch", despite being charged with keeping some sort of rudimentary law and order, were as much a threat to her safety as protectors of it. Some of the Rangers, it was known, could be found taking advantage of their status to commit acts of robbery, extortion and rape of their own. The tax they were permitted to gather, to sustain themselves, was often unduly inflated and was frequently extracted at the point of a sword or at the end of a pistol barrel. Fingers trembling, she took off her mother's ring and slipped into a hidden pocket in the band of her skirt.

She had been walking for an hour and a half, quickly getting clear of the road and hiding, both times she heard riders coming, when she became aware of the sound of a wheeled vehicle heading her way from behind. She made her way rapidly off into the trees and bushes and hid.

Presently, a small coach came into view, pulled by not one but two horses, both of which looked in far better condition than most found in these parts. The driver and his companion were well dressed and wore something approaching a uniform. Each was armed with both a musket and a pistol; all four weapons being set prominently on display. In addition, a pair of tall pike staffs were attached, like flag poles, to either side of the coach body at the front. Rippling from their tops, below the blades, were long purple banners bearing a white cross.

Janine breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of these banners. This, she recognised, was the conveyance of a bishop or a very highly placed priest.

She moved out from the cover of the greenery and stood at the roadside as the carriage came closer. One of the coachmen leaned to the side, turning his head, and clearly called something to the occupants. A head appeared, briefly, from a window and – after a shouted exchange – it popped back in again. She could hear neither the question, nor the answer, but the tone of both parties sounded amiable.

At ten paces from her, the driver called to the horses: "Whoa!" and they obligingly came to a halt, stopping no more than an arm's length from where she stood. Having travelled to Edinburgh, several times, with her mistress – one of the privileges of a personal maid – Janine knew that these horses were well trained and that they were used to town work, where distances and positioning were essential for safe and comfortable travel.

"A bheil feum agad air cuideachadh?", asked the driver, in a mediocre Gaelic approximation of "Do you need help?".

"I would be most grateful for your help, Sir.", she replied in perfectly enunciated English, "I have been chased by some men who meant me harm. I lost my travelling companion and I find myself in a terrible situation."

"Where are you heading?", asked the driver.

"Anywhere that isn't here, if you please!", she replied.

At this, there was a snort of laughter from inside the coach: "That is the story of my life!", a man's voice called to her, followed by the noise of him slapping his leg in merriment.

She reached out to the horse. The horse ignored her, remaining studiously aloof.

"You don't exist until I tell him it's okay.", the driver told her.

After a slight pause, the driver spoke to the horse: "Stand easy."

The horse gave a soft neigh and seemed to visibly relax. It turned to her, the big intelligent eyes studying her for a moment before the big muzzle gently snuffled at her and nudged her approvingly. The horse sniffed the neck of the pillowcase she held and then look directly into her eyes, with an unmistakable twinkle in them. Janine smiled and reached into her makeshift sack and withdrew an apple. She placed it on the palm of her hand and offered it to the horse. With infinite care and slow, calculated precision, the creature took the apple in its mouth, but did not chew. The other horse looked across at Janine, quizzically, and then – after a few moments – nudged the first horse lightly on the nose. The first horse began to chew, reluctantly. Janine quickly produced a second apple and, leaning across, gave it to the far horse. They both ate, now, happy that neither was neglected in the feast.

The driver gave a little chortle and said: "They are almost welded, one to the other. They can't abide that one might have what the other does not. You're lucky that he didn't spit that apple out and stomp in two with his hoof so that the other could share it!"

"They like you," said the man from within the carriage, hanging his head out of the window, "And horses are a good judge of people."

"I'm glad I meet their approval", replied Janine, with a chuckle.

There was a click and the door to the carriage opened, ajar, and the occupant leaned out. "Is there somewhere we could take you?", he enquired, arching an eyebrow.

"I believe that there is an inn, a few miles ahead," she said, "I was making my way there, before..." She shrugged her shoulders, almost apologetically, and left the sentence unfinished. The man nodded, solemnly, "Before your incident", he offered. Janine nodded, her bottom lip beginning to tremble.

The man jumped down, landing with unexpected grace for a man she guessed to be in his early forties. Janine opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. The man held up his hand, happy to do without an explanation in light of her clear distress.

His eyes took in the rips in her dress, the blood still caked on her leg and the tears smudged on her cheeks and immediately looked sad. His hair, neatly

tied behind his head, was a dark brown with highlights of copper and red and a few random strands of grey.

Seeing his fine shiny boots, elegant white shirt and waistcoat, and the silk handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket, Janine quickly dropped into a curtsy. Her eyes then alighted upon the stiff purple collar, hung open and loose, around his neck and she added: "Your Holiness."

The man smiled a smile that hovered on the brink of laughter: "That's a little formal, for me, Mistress. I am to be consecrated Bishop in Brechin, in a few weeks, but – for now – I am a humble priest!"

A voice rang out from inside the coach: "Though happy and content to ride in a fine carriage to keep his humbleness under strict control!"

"Pay no attention to my brother," he told her, "He is jealous that I inherited the lion's share of both looks and brains in our family!"

This reply was met with roars of laughter from within.

With a deft nudge of his toe, the man dropped the folding step of the vehicle and then, flailing his arm with absurd exaggeration of manners, bowed deeply to her and said: "Madam, our transport is at your disposal".

Janine took the hand he offered her and allowed him to help her up and into the carriage.

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 5

Alex Brennan went to the window of his room. Drawing aside the curtain, he peered up at the sun. He did a quick mental calculation and decided that the time was around Ten O' Clock. His brows furrowed and he pursed his lips. He had not intended to sleep so late.

He scanned down the road, along the short level section that swept past the Inn and into the long curve that disappeared into the forest. Then he scanned the opposite direction, up the shallow rise and then up the long climb, into the far distance, to the top of the hill.

There was no sign of anybody. The road was deserted. He knew, for sure, that anybody on their way from Perth to Fort William would have to pass this way. There were only six routes in Scotland that were more than just mud tracks and this was one of them. He was happy to wait a while and bide his time.

He dressed quickly and strode to the door. Gently lifting the latch, taking great care not to make any noise, he slowly opened the door. There was no sound from the hall, outside. Alex waited for several seconds and then poked his head out, looking both ways. There was nobody there. He paused, listening intently. All he could hear was the clanking of a spoon against a metal pan, downstairs in the kitchen. He sniffed the air. Somebody was making porridge. It smelled delicious. His mouth began to water as he caught the vague whiff of honey and nutmeg.

Alex straightened his kilt, adjusted his shirt and ran his fingers through his hair. Feeling reasonably presentable, he descended the stairs. As he came around the narrow turn, half way down, he could hear the Inn Keeper, Hamish Pottle, in the public bar, sweeping with a coarse brush. Alex turned right and took the few paces to the door of the bar, tentatively standing on the threshold. Hamish saw him and nodded, cheerfully, reaching to tip an invisible cap to him.

Alex stepped in and glanced around the bar, taking in the decorative objects on the shelves with their indisputably maritime theme. He knew that Hamish had spent most of his life at sea and that these objects - including compasses, spyglasses and pieces of rigging - were, therefore, all the real thing rather than mere replicas.

The Inn Keeper went back to his sweeping, whistling and humming as he worked and, occasionally, throwing in a few impromptu dance steps in time to the tune.

Alex' gaze followed the line of little triangular flags that stretched from behind the bar, up to the ceiling. Obviously, these had once flown above the deck of a ship. Unusually, he noted, the ceiling was composed of a series of varnished wooden panels, set in a frame of thin wooden beams. This was a form of decoration a little ostentatious for such a venue, he thought.

Hamish did not pause in his sweeping, but Alex could feel his attention on him and felt himself being watched from the corner of an eye. Alex returned his gaze to ground level and, almost imperceptibly, Hamish appeared to relax.

If the ceiling panels were to be subjected to closer scrutiny, at arm's length, one or two of the panels would be seen to be slightly worn along their edges. From the outside of the inn there was nothing unusual about its construction, but – if the heights of the two interior floors were to be carefully with a pole – there would be some vertical distance found missing. This was accounted for by the crawl space hidden between the two floors.

Hamish Pottle was, in all general respects, a wholly law-abiding citizen, but was usually in possession of a few casks of spirits (in his "unofficial loft") that didn't have the red crown of the King's mark burned into their lids to show that customs duty had been paid! His continued connections with seafarers, from his past, meant that he still had acquaintance with a few smugglers, here and there. The temptations that this entailed had proven irresistible to him.

Alex bade farewell to Hamish, who continued diligently sweeping, and walked across the corridor into the kitchen. As he opened the door, the steam and heat hit him. It was like a wall of sweltering dampness.

Caitlan, the Inn Keeper's wife, turned to greet him, wiping her hands on her apron: "A bonnie morn' to you," she enthused, "I hope you slept well, Sir?" She felt a stab of guilt, as she knew that he suffered from nightmares.

"I slept wonderfully," he replied, "The feather mattress makes it feel as if I am sleeping on a cloud!"

Caitlan smiled and gave a little chuckle, "Well, your silver bought you the good room with the best bed. Don't go spreading the word about your mattress to the other folk sleeping atop bags of straw!". Alex joined in her laughter

"I have to say," Caitlan declared, "That it's been a long while since we've had so many logs split and stacked. Your skill with an axe is impressive! So is the enthusiasm you apply to using it!"

"I... I've...", Alex stumbled and hesitated, awkwardly. "I have things... Events..."; He shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, "Stuff that I would rather not remember. Things from my time abroad. They are quickest forgotten if I put my back into something to distract myself."

Caitlan nodded. Her expression was sympathetic and concerned. She decided that not saying anything further was the best way she could help.

Submerging her ladle into the bubbling, churning mass of porridge, she scooped up a generous portion and delivered it to a bowl in her other hand. Alex Brennan took the bowl from her, as she held it out, and then accepted several generous spoons of milk, to cool it down.

"You'll only need to go a few miles down the road, South towards Stirling, and they'll be putting salt onto your porridge. Unlike them, with their

warmer weather," She winked, conspiratorially, "We know what real Winters are about!"

They both laughed.

"On that basis," Alex retorted, mentally estimating Stirling to be only half a day's ride away, "You'll be regarding London as sharing the same weather as the West Indies?"

"Well," Caitlan replied, "I am told they have streets paved with gold, down there in London! I am presuming they have a golden sun to match. No sense in our Good King James squandering his time in the wind and rain, up here, when he can sprawl out on a lawn, trimmed short by servants with scissors," She motioned in the air with little snipping actions, "And soak up all that sunshine!"

They both laughed, again, heartily. Caitlan Pottle turned, as she heard - from the doorway behind them - her husband's laugh boosting the volume of their own.

"I fear that Good King James has taken a fearful liking to London," Hamish Pottle declared, "I hear tell that his face is as long as a Summer day in Orkney when he has to consider travelling back up to Scotland!"

"We may not see him, again, in my lifetime!", Caitlan quipped.

"We may all be strumming a harp in the clouds", Hamish confided, with exaggerated gestures of harp playing, "Before he returns!"

Smiling broadly, Alex pressed a forefinger to his lips and cast his eyes skyward, as if seeking divine inspiration, then said: "I believe that, in the Colonies, they refer to it as 'Going native'...."

This remark seemed to tickle their sense of humour and left the husband and wife proprietors of the Inn unable to stand straight. They laughed so hard that they staggered and leaned against the furniture to keep themselves upright. Alex, unsure if he, himself, were laughing at their merry behaviour or the words he had just spoken, found himself joining in and ended up laughing so much that his sides ached.

Tears streamed down all their cheeks and, each time they were almost back under self-control, one of them would spot the face of another and this would set them off, again.

Eventually, Hamish marched first his wife, and then his guest, into opposite corners of the kitchen and pressed their necks to incline their heads to rest against the wall. Hamish then retired to a seat against the fireplace across the other side of the room. Thus, split up and isolated, the three eventually regained their composure. This was not, however, without a couple of relapses along the way.

At last, the three of them slumped in a line along the bench at the big, heavy table. They shook their heads, cleared their throats, wiped their eyes and each, eventually, recovered their restraint.

Alex studiously occupied himself eating porridge, suppressing the odd smirk of recollection, but managing to remain restrained. The two maids who, from time to time, had poked their heads around the door in bewilderment, during this performance, now judged it safe to enter and crept back in, hesitantly, to set pans on the stove in preparation for Lunch.

Hamish Pottle hugged his wife and slapped her bottom, then hugged Alex and slapped him between the shoulder blades. They exchanged glances, beaming at each other, but – by common, unspoken consent – ventured no words, for fear of subsiding into uncontrollable laughter, again.

“I stood shoulder to shoulder, in Austria,” began Alex, deliberately injecting solemnity, “With Englishmen and with fellow Scots, holding the line against the enemy, each of us glad for King James’ resolve to support our allies and keep they and us free.”

There was silence and the two maids paused in their stirring of the pots, so as not to break it. Only the hissing and bubbling of these huge pots, now suspended over the fire, interjected.

The unseen stranger who had come and stood quietly behind them in the doorway had arrived without announcing himself or drawing attention to his presence. Within a few further seconds, however, all three - Caitlan, Hamish and Alex – had become eerily aware of him. The three of them turned, in unison, and the intruder graciously inclined his head and upper body in a bow.

The newcomer was tall and well-muscled. His cloak was drawn back over his shoulders revealing a broad chest and strong arms. His powerful physique was only thinly disguised by his tunic. He wore trousers rather than a kilt, which was uncommon in these parts. The trousers disappeared into a pair of high, black, well-crafted riding boots. It was clear that he was neither local nor from anywhere in the surrounding area. His eyes twinkled as the hint of a smile played on his lips. It was clear that he had heard their raucous merriment.

A long silence hung like a ponderous weight, awkward and uncomfortable, before Caitlan spoke: “A fine Noon to you, Sir.”, she said.

The stranger nodded and smiled. His lips were bordered by his well-kept beard, which was flecked with early signs of grey, matching his grey eyes.

“How can we be of service to you?”, Hamish managed, rising from his seat.

“I am on my way to Fort William and wish to break my journey for the day,” he replied, amiably.

“On some kind of business?”, ventured Hamish.

"Yes," Replied the stranger. Then, after a pause, he added: "The King's business."

Hamish fought to keep the shock from his face and failed.

"What kind of business would that be, if I may ask?", the Inn Keeper enquired, recovering himself.

"I am a Constable.", the other announced.

Hamish knew that the stranger was studying his face and did his best to show no further surprise or alarm, hastily putting thoughts of his contraband whiskey, brandy and rum as far from his mind as possible.

Hamish knew that there were two Constables in Edinburgh, at least one in Glasgow and one each in Stirling, Perth and Dunfermline. His mind, whirling and tumbling, could make no sense of one of them straying this far to the North West. He knew that Constables were always well-connected people from privileged backgrounds and high social standing. He also knew, as the position was mostly unpaid, that they had to possess a good income of their own.

Caitlan shrugged and looked puzzled, "In these parts, law and order is usually attended to by the Rangers or by the Laird."

The Constable crinkled his forehead questioningly, "How do you get along with the Rangers?"

Hamish snorted, "They are not usually my most favourite of visitors to these premises," He contorted his face in mock disgust, "And I tend to rarely look back on, or forward to, their coming with any degree of joy."

The Constable seemed to weigh up this reply in his mind, before nodding slowly.

"The Rangers, or 'The Watch', as they call them, further up," Caitlan gestured to the hills, up the road, that led into The Highlands, "Can be a blessing, under the right circumstances. Often, in fact. Especially if they are on your side!"

She frowned.

"But...?", the Constable asked, responding to the hanging question.

"But," Caitlan continued, "While they are good at tracking down cattle, horse and sheep thieves, they are not above taking the odd animal themselves! While they do deter burglars and they do catch pickpockets at the fairs and markets, they lack the discipline of soldiers and they don't have a soldier's honour. Only a few weeks ago, two young girls were raped on the road to Stirling and people who are well informed and who know what goes on - people whose word is held in high esteem - are convinced that The Watch were the ones who did it."

The Constable looked to Hamish and raised his brow in query.

"But," Hamish took up, "Their idea of justice can be affected by what they see as being good for them. A bit of generosity, by one person or another, tends to alter their idea of what is fair or unfair."

The Constable shook his head, sadly.

Hamish continued: "The Laird allows them to draw a tariff from the people they serve, but they tend to want more than is reasonable. Especially if they sense that somebody is weak or they have something to hide."

Their visitor pursed his lips in a tight smile, "You are an Inn Keeper. You sell alcohol." he replied, "I have no interest where you obtain it."

Hamish blinked at the other's bluntness. His mouth dropped open. Quickly closing it, he opened it, again, to speak, but his shock at this remarkable directness rendered him dumb. The Constable raised a hand, wagging it in the air in dismissal, then shook his head in reproach of any need for a response.

The Constable cocked his head, "These people are a little expensive to maintain?"

Hamish smiled, ironically. "Yes," he replied. Then added: "The Rangers in these parts tend to be from the McRaes." He left the implication of this to speak for itself. The Constable didn't seem to miss it and smiled ruefully.

Attempting to dispel the awkwardness, Hamish decided to change the subject. Pointing to the man's boots, he asked: "The lad is attending to your horse, I take it?"

"Horses," The man corrected, "And, aye, he is."

It was Hamish's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"One is to ride and one to carry.", the Constable added, as way of explanation.

Hamish nodded, not quite sure if it would be tactful to pry into such an arrangement, but – after a few moments of heavy silence – decided there was nothing to be lost: "You have a cargo?"

"Yes. I have a cargo,", Replied the law man, "A McRae."

Neither Hamish nor Caitlan could disguise their shock and exchanged worried glances.

Recovering himself, Hamish said: "I have a fine room for yourself, Sir, and I have a bunk room off the stable for your...." He hesitated, searching for the words, "Your fellow traveller. It might be cold, tonight."

His new guest looked straight at him and the merest hint of a smile danced in his eyes and on his lips, before he replied: "That won't be necessary. He won't be feeling the cold anymore."

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 6

Annis' Honour Guard set off at a steady, solemn pace, giving time for the stragglers to draw together, move out behind them and catch up. There were 4 riding behind her and 3 in front. They all sat tall in their saddles and could not fail to impress in their gleaming armour.

Annis smiled in amusement as she suddenly noticed the tail of the horse in front of her. Her Honour Guard had actually gone to the lengths of plaiting and braiding their horses' tails.

Her mother, Queen of the West before her, had been escorted by an Honour Guard the day that she had been betrayed. They had been tall, athletic men in breastplates and full helms, mounted on fine horses adorned with banners and streamers. They had looked like something from a fairy tale in one of her story books. Whilst, even now, her hatred and contempt for those men of Clan Campbell was something so powerful as to be almost unbearable, she could never relinquish the fact that she had been in awe of their splendour, that day.

As a little girl, she had loved to read books about knights in full armour, sat astride milk white horses, dashing to save the Princess in distress. She had dreamed about magical castles and elves that granted wishes. She had fantasised about lavish tournaments where knights would compete for her hand. She had imagined her suitors charging at each other with lances and shields, one sending the other crashing to the ground from their saddle. In her dreams, her secret Prince, posing as just a knight - until he was victorious - would carry her kerchief tied to his lance as a token of her favour.

Annis found her mind swimming with these recollections. The way that things had once been. The happiness. The youthful joy of life. The delight and thrill of new discoveries and experiences. She recalled presuming, so innocently, that it could all go on forever. Then, came the grief. The loss. The tragedy. The days and weeks and months of numbness and despair.

Abruptly, the shrieking alarm call of a bird in the trees, alerting its neighbourhood of their approach, jolted her back to the present. She surveyed the scene around her and found reassurance. These men, she reminded herself, were allied to the Clan McDonald. These men would serve and protect her to the last drop of their blood. They were bound to her by a **McDonald** oath and each of them was blatantly proud to serve her. One of the men caught her looking and, though it seemed impossible, he managed to sit even more impressively on his horse.

These were the finest of the McDonald fighting force. These were their cavalry. Cavalry were a rare thing, indeed, in the Scottish Highlands. The traditions of these lands were of fighting on foot. An attack was usually delivered not by troops on horseback, but by a mass of bare chested, painted men, charging in screaming hoards, blistering the air with blood curdling war cries. It would be a

brave person, indeed, who could stand their ground and not flee when faced with such a wave of undiluted fury.

For these McRorys to be selected to be part of the McDonald cavalry was an honour in itself. They must be fine horsemen, she thought, remembering that the West of Scotland had belonged - for a long, long time - to the Picts and that they had taught the Scots about mounted warfare. Their first lessons had been in repeated, humiliating defeats. The Clan McDonald had taken this trouncing to heart. Eventually, when - after many years - they had inherited these lands, after the reign of the Picts had ended, they had sworn an oath that such a lesson would never be needed again!

Annis smiled as she recollected that her mother had said that they had both been able to ride a horse before they had learned to walk. Even now, Annis was baffled as to whether that could have been true!

She looked back to where Morag rode - just behind the four riders who trailed her own horse - and smiled to her. Morag smiled back. Since the age of eight, when she lost her mother, Annis had found comfort in Morag's kindness and support. Morag had been widowed because of Annis. She had lost her husband when he had saved Annis' life when the Campbells had found her hiding place. Despite this, she had never blamed Annis or resented her.

Morag was currently talking to one of the McRory cavalry-men. Morag was evidently enjoying the man's attention. Annis had heard her laugh from time to time and had seen her look slightly shy, too, when the man had leaned across to her, from his saddle, to speak more confidentially. He had a kind face and a pleasant manner. The Queen of the West waited to catch the man's eye and, when his gaze lighted on her, she nodded to him, slowly, without breaking eye contact. The soldier quickly looked away from her, respectfully, but she felt reasonably certain that he had discerned her approval.

Their column, having the majority of its members on foot, was obliged to stop at regular intervals to prevent the rear of the party from being left behind. The distance they had to cover was a brisk fifteen-minute walk, or half that time atop a horse, but was looking likely to take them half an hour.

Balgair, the Captain of the McRory force, had been riding back and forth, from the front of their company to the rear, checking on his men and on the safety of the Queen's people. The elite seven at the front appeared unconcerned by Balgair's presence, but the other thirty of his cavalry-men visibly stiffened whenever he was near.

Balgair seldom spoke to Annis, making only formal pleasantries when good manners required it, but didn't seem at all unfriendly. His smile, on the rare occasions she witnessed it, always appeared genuine and not forced.

Balgair passed Annis, close by, then gently fell back to come alongside her. It was his habit, she had noticed, that he would never approach her from outside her line of vision. She turned to him. He nodded to her.

With extravagant emphasis, Balgair reached down and straightened and smoothed his kilt, raising the leg closest to her for show. She looked down, her curiosity stirred, and her eyes sprang wide in surprise. Balgair grinned at her and ostentatiously pretended to brush some none existent fluff from the material.

"The McDonald Tartan," Balgair declared, "For the benefit of Clan Grant, at the far side of the river, Your Highness!"

She laughed and could not suppress a huge smile as she gave him silent, pantomime applause, her hands describing enthusiastic mock clapping in the air.

He beamed at her, both thoroughly proud and thoroughly amused at his choice of attire. She leaned across and patted his arm. Although her head was already turning to look to her front, she was sure that, from the corner of her eye, she had seen his smile falter and his cheeks briefly flush with a hint of pink.

Annis made a mental note that this man seemed to have limited experience of women and likely had no sister as a child. She wondered if he had been brought up by his father.

Balgair touched his horse with his heels and went forward to talk to the three lead riders. In response to whatever he said, they urged their horses into a trot and disappeared up the road to confer with the scouts, who had just broken cover from the edge of the forest, in the distance. Turning, Balgair raised his arm for everyone else to halt.

The two groups of riders had a brief, animated discussion before the riders Balgair had dispatched wheeled their horses around and headed back towards them at a gallop. The leader brought his horse to a stop, as he reached their party, its hooves ploughing into the ground and throwing up soil. Steadying his horse, the man brought his mount up alongside them and touched a hand over his heart in salute to the Queen.

"According to the scouts, there are plenty of hoof marks on the opposite bank of the Spey" he announced, "They say that they look to be fresh. There are broken twigs and branches and disturbed undergrowth leading up into the woods. Our scouting party didn't cross, to search around, in case it might look like a provocation. They say they could smell campfires, reasonably close."

Balgair turned to Annis to speak, but she put her hand up to stop him: "I am a nineteen-year-old girl," she said, "And surely no overwhelming threat to a group of soldiers overlooking our territory from their own." This was a statement and not a question. "What my presence represents, however, is a tradition from the old days that doesn't sit well with some people."

The riders exchanged glances, but none of them spoke. They seemed willing to wait to hear where she was heading with her words.

"The Highlands are steeped in tradition. The people who live here are, themselves, a living tradition. Across the river, those people are not Lowlanders, but nor are they Highlanders. They see themselves as different from us and

different from the lowlanders. They are not as fiercely wed to heritage and to the past, as we are, but they are not as happy to change their way of life as those who live around and below Perth and Stirling."

There were nods of approval and agreement amongst the men and some raised their eyebrows, expressing surprise at the wisdom of one so young and of one who was, after all, just a mere woman. Any significant negative thoughts they may have had were carefully guarded and kept strictly in their heads, rather than expressing themselves on their faces. She was Queen, and this had to be taken into consideration, as their lives could be abruptly ended at her whim.

Balgair looked at them with the vaguest hint of something that appeared like pride in her. The men, interpreting their commander's expression, quickly looked even more appreciative of Annis' words and grunted their accord.

Coming towards them, following up Balgair's returning riders – but at an unhurried, almost leisurely pace - came Gavin. Gavin was her personal guard, or had been, until the arrival of the McRorys. His brief had now become wider and he had ridden off, that morning, with the McRory scouts, to check their intended route for possible dangers.

Gavin pulled up his horse and bowed to Annis, "They've been here. They're not here now. They're not far away." He confirmed, succinctly, glancing between the assembled riders.

Queen Annis nodded her acknowledgement and Gavin added: "They have a point to make, so they'll be back, for sure."

"I have a point to make myself.", Annis declared, gesturing up the road, "The banks of the Spey are separated by two hundred feet but, more importantly, they are separated by over six hundred years."

Everybody nodded sagely.

Annis pointed first to Balgair, then to Gavin and then up the road before encouraging her mare forward a little way. Balgair and Gavin obligingly followed her. Now a group of only three, she spoke frankly:

"What has come about that the two of you are no longer stern and distant in each other's company?", she enquired.

"I think we are a little more appreciative of each other's situation.", Balgair announced.

"Aye, it's so.", confirmed Gavin.

Queen Annis remained pointedly silent and looked at each of them with eyebrows raised in question.

"He," said Balgair, "Is here because he wishes to be. He left his stronghold and gave up his Lairdship to follow you. He did so because he believes in your cause and because he believes in you."

The two men shared a glance of solidarity.

"He," said Gavin, "Is here because he was sent. That is not to say that he would not have volunteered, for he – like me – he is committed to your cause. He, however, is a McCrory far from home and this makes him, by far, the braver man."

As the Queen's brows knotted in puzzlement, Gavin paused and bowed respectfully to Balgair.

"If we are defeated in battle and I survive," Gavin explained, "I can rely upon Clans loyal to us to protect and shield me on my way home. Balgair, on the other hand, would have to cross Campbell land to reach home. If we suffer defeat, the Campbells would likely be waiting to ambush any McRory survivors. For him surviving defeat is still a death sentence."

Queen Annis tried to stifle her shock but was aware that it was with little success. Balgair look slightly bashful. Annis bowed to him, too, and he looked both slightly surprised and slightly embarrassed. She looked across to Gavin and he was looking tactfully away.

The riders in the main column were getting restless and so, in response, were their horses. They were close to their objective, now, and their mounts could sense the general air of anxiety.

Annis waved for the cluster of riders they had left to their rear to join them and they trotted up dutifully.

"Your Highness," Gavin began, once their gathering was reassembled, "You could go to the Spey with just your own personal troops." He looked purposely across to Balgair, "That would be unthreatening but could be risky if there were any problems with Clan Grant." Gavin met Balgair's eyes and the other made no effort to disagree.

"You could", Gavin responded, "Go with a fair number of your McRory riders, instead, or in addition to your own. That would make you appear strong but might make Clan Grant think that you were not being particularly peaceful."

Gavin and Balgair exchanged glances, evidently still in agreement. Gavin motioned to Balgair, who promptly accepted his unspoken invitation to take over talking.

"You could," Balgair began, "Just take your Honour Guard and a limited number of other troops." Balgair advised. "But parading an Honour Guard, especially one dressed up in polished armour and plumes, might look, to them, like a challenge."

Annis looked from one to the other and held both her palms upwards, encouraging them to continue.

"The other option," Balgair offered, "Would be to simply set caution and calculation aside and take your entire force, but..."

"That," interrupted Annis, "Would give them the impression that I am wanting to start a battle!"

"Or", Gavin retorted, "That you are wanting to face them down with superior numbers and shame them."

Balgair was quick to respond: "And that could store up significant problems for later!"

"And we can't be sure," Annis rejoined, "Just how many men they have brought with them!"

Gavin and Balgair both nodded, exchanging glances and making faces that distinctly indicated their happiness with her grasp of things.

"Whatever you decide to do," Balgair warned, "We risk Clan Grant misunderstanding or misinterpreting our intentions."

Annis rubbed her hands together, slowly and thoughtfully, looking up into the sky in distant contemplation. As one, they all waited respectfully for her attention to return.

Annis clapped her hands, in apparent triumph, and glanced around her audience. They looked expectantly at her. She gestured for them to come closer and the group of riders coaxed their steeds into a huddle.

"I believe I have a solution," the Queen proclaimed.

She leaned forward, conspiratorially, in her saddle and the assembled group responded by leaning forward, themselves, pressing their horses to bunch still tighter.

"This," Annis began, "Is what we need to do....."

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 7

Janine stepped up into the coach, having accepted the priest's hand to help her, and lowered herself into the middle of the seat across from its current occupant. The priest climbed in behind her. Reaching for the door, he paused to shout to the driver to continue their journey, then pulled it closed. He sank into the seat next to the other man.

Janine stared at the two men, open mouthed, her eyes furiously flitting between them, her face a perfect picture of confusion. They both laughed, good humouredly, revelling in her consternation.

"I am Brian.", said the priest.

"I am Bruce.", said the other.

"We are identical twins," Brian announced.

"But," Bruce chirped, "Only one of us is a priest."

"As far as we know!", Brian chortled. This seemed to thoroughly amuse them both and they subsided into gales of laughter. Janine found herself laughing, too, and this only seemed to encourage their mirth!

"Of course," the priest, declared, "It maybe **he** who is the priest and I just put on the wrong clothes this morning!" This was a cue for more laughter and Janine could not stop herself from joining in.

"He is the thin one!", the priest offered.

"And he is the fat one!", his brother retorted.

The two men, of identical girth and stature, both adopted mock frowns and scratched their chins, simultaneously, in feigned concentration.

"Of course," the priest admitted, "It **could** be the other way around and I am simply confused!"

The two brothers chuckled at each other's wit, looking down and shaking their heads in a parody of exasperation. Janine was shocked at how their mannerisms were every bit as identical as their appearances. She found this both fascinating and, at the same time, somewhat eerie and disturbing!

They caught sight of her look of bewilderment at the same time and, once again, dissolved into fits of laughter. Janine tried to suppress a chuckle but, after a few moments, was forced to abandon any attempt at composure.

Bruce leaned forward to her, confidingly, and – gesturing towards his brother – said: "I am weary of the number of times, while we were growing up,

that a female guest or acquaintance would march up to me and cuff the back of my head or, even, slap my face for some crude and over affectionate move on my brother's part, clearly thinking that **I** were **he!**"

"That stopped when I became a priest.", the other protested, then – in response to his brother's reproachful look – added, in wounded tones: "Didn't it?"

This provoked another mutual bout of sniggering and chuckling to which Janine, again, succumbed.

"The servants were continually getting our names the wrong way around," Bruce told her, "Until I came up with a solution!"

Brian gave his twin a withering look.

"Brian was somewhat godlier and more religiously inclined than me from a young age and always looked a lot saintlier!", Bruce explained, prompting more chortles, "So I told everyone to remember that "Brian" was "spy'en" – making sure it sounded like it rhymes - for the Lord, checking that we were all being good! That seemed to do the trick!"

After the joviality had subsided, Brian slid forward and spoke in hushed, secretive tones: "I am the fortunate one," he told her, giving the other a look of mournful pity, "For I managed to hold on to my sanity and a full grip on my mind." He contorted his lips in an anguished smile, glancing, for a moment, to his companion. Then, tapping his temple with a finger, he added: "Our mother was grief struck and broken hearted over my brother's tragic mental condition." He sighed deeply, gulping in apparent sorrow and gave a pathetic snuffle. He seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Janine's embarrassment was plain and her face quickly changed to a sombre and melancholy expression. She turned to the window, composing herself, before turning back to express her sympathy. She had only just opened her mouth to speak, when there was a sudden shriek of laughter from the other man, who threw back his head and guffawed loudly. Janine watched, helplessly, as he slapped his knee, repeatedly, in delight. Brian, meanwhile, snorted, clapped his hands together and began gleefully drumming his fists on his knees.

It took only a second more before Janine realised that they had been teasing her. She began to giggle. Before long, she had joined them in uncontrollable laughter. The two brothers were now sprawled half on and half off their seats, flailing their legs, holding their sides while they chortled and snickered until tears streamed down their faces.

After a good while, all three of them were able to resume a more or less respectable demeanour. Brian and Bruce were still breathing heavily from the exertion of the previous ten minutes while Janine had just surfaced from a final bout of silent laughter, her stomach and chest shaking as she suppressed any sound.

"This reminds me," Brian announced, straightening his clerical collar, "Of when we were children and our disgraced Uncle would visit and have us kicking and screaming on the floor with laughter at his stories!"

Bruce nodded, enthusiastically, with a huge smile on his face.

"Your **disgraced** Uncle?", Janine asked.

The two brothers straightened in exaggerated solemnity, and Bruce placed his finger vertically over his lips, imploring her to secrecy, as he said, gravely: "He ran away to sea!"

Brian shuddered and looked utterly appalled, before exclaiming: "The shame!"

The two laughed and Janine was relieved that, this time, it didn't incapacitate them!

Brian, putting a hand on his brother's elbow to urge his silence, cleared his throat, before launching into ludicrous mimicry of what Janine took to be their mother's voice: "You are a bad influence on your nephews! You are disgusting, disgraceful and vulgar!"

Bruce could not resist joining in, employing similar whining tones: "You are a blot on your family's character!"

Janine giggled, covering her mouth with her hand.

The three sat in comfortable and easy silence for a while, the coach swaying and bumping over uneven sections of the road. Eventually, the brothers decided that it was time to talk, again.

"Where are you bound...", the priest asked, twirling an index finger in the air, as if cranking the bucket of a well, to show he didn't know her name.

"Janine.", she offered, obligingly.

"Where are you bound, Janine?", he asked, appending her name to his question.

"I.... I....", she stammered, "I need to get away."

"You're on the run?!!", gasped Bruce in theatrical astonishment.

"No!", Janine objected, then shook her head, perplexed, "I wouldn't say that. Well, not exactly...."

The two brothers, almost completely synchronised in their movement, grabbed their chins, craned forward and looked at her with expressions of complete captivation on their faces, appearing – for all the world – like a pair of dullards.

"Do go on!", implored Brian, in tones of incredulity.

"Do accept my apologies for my brother's intrusiveness!", gasped Bruce, mortified that a priest should be so nose-y.

Brian, keeping his eyes fixed on Janine, flapped his hand in the air towards Bruce. With a farcical pretence at absent mindedness, he tapped and flicked at the other's face, as if he were a busy and impatient parent warding off an over enthusiastic child.

Janine could not suppress her amusement at these antics. She was completely enthralled by the buffoonery of these two men!

"You have us," began Brian, "In the palm of your hand!"

Bruce scoffed in derision: "**You** have my **face** in the palm of **your** hand!", he protested.

Brian pulled back his hand - as if he'd placed it on a pile of horse manure - and made play of wiping it on his cloak. The both chortled, loudly.

Janine, feeling inexplicably relaxed and at ease in the company of these two, thrust her hands indignantly on to her hips, huffed imperiously and made a displeased face at the pair.

They froze, dramatically, and feigned discomfort, both looking thoroughly abashed. Casting their gaze downwards, they stuck out their bottom lips, as if sulking.

"I was at Orchy Manor," Janine began, "I was a maid to the Lady, there."

"You have a fine and noble face for a maid.", Bruce interjected.

"Thank you," she replied. Then, after a pause, she added: "It was the way God made me."

"Just so!", exclaimed the priest, reprimanding his brother with a stern look.

Bruce fluttered his hand, dismissively, "Go on.", he urged.

"The Laird and Lady were kind to me and treated me well," Janine attested, "But the Laird's Chief of Arms started to cause me problems with the attention he began to pay me." She blushed and bit her lip.

Brian arched an eyebrow, then inclined his head, solicitously, encouraging her to continue.

"I made it clear to him that his advances were unwelcome," Janine advised, "But he became more and more insistent."

The two brothers nodded, sympathetically.

"I told him that he had to stop and that, if he didn't, I would be forced to tell her Ladyship about what he was doing. He touched me..." Janine grimaced in disgust, "in private places, through my clothes."

Suddenly Bruce gasped and threw his hands up to grasp his head. Reaching out, he shook his brother's shoulder to draw his attention. "Orchy Manor!", he cried, "Wasn't that where a man was murdered, last week!"

Janine looked immediately sheepish and lowered her eyes. Her face had gone extremely pale. Her look of anguish prompted the two men to exchange agitated glances.

"Yes.", she replied, dully.

The brothers both shivered, involuntarily.

"The Chief of Arms flew into a rage and he attacked me," she sobbed, "He grabbed me by the throat and pushed me against the wall, striking my head against it. Then he pulled out a knife!" Tears flooded, unbidden, to her eyes as she spoke, "He said he was going to kill me! He said that he would dump my body in the woods and make it look like I had been robbed."

Janine began to tremble and couldn't stop herself from sobbing.

"You're safe, now.", the priest assured her. Timing his move to the jostling and swaying off the coach, he clambered across to the seat beside her, took both her hands in his own and kissed them. "You're safe, now.", he repeated.

"He told me to get my cloak, then started dragging me to the door!", Janine said, putting her head on his shoulder and burying her face in his scarf, "He said that he would see to it that my "attacker" had raped me, repeatedly!"

Janine's chest heaved as she wept. She gasped and choked on her words as she tried to speak, again. The priest made soft "hushing" noises as he patted her back and whispered words of consolation in her ear.

At least two minutes passed before anybody spoke, then Bruce, sat across from them, ventured a question in hushed tones: "How did you escape?".

"I don't know," she replied, becoming nervous and distracted, "He took me down the back steps. He was pulling and pushing me all the way. We passed the first floor that leads into the rooms behind the kitchen. We continued down and passed the floor for the store rooms, then he kicked me down the short run of steps to the cellars." She paused to sob and swallowed hard, before continuing, "He raced after me and stepped over me. He grabbed me by my hair and dragged me into the cellars. He threw me on top of some sacks, then turned me over. He pulled my cloak away and lifted my dress." She sobbed, again, her face contorted in anguish at the memory, "He said that if I screamed he would kill me slowly and painfully and that he would make sure that I suffered. He said if I were quiet, he would make it a quick and easy death for me. I told him that I wouldn't say

anything if he let me go. I promised I wouldn't say a word to anybody, but he said he couldn't trust me and that it had to be this way."

Bruce hugged her and rocked her gently until she was sufficiently recovered to be able to speak, again.

"He took out a knife and he put it to my throat. He pulled up my underclothes." She flinched at the memory. "He told me to keep quiet. Then..." She fell silent, a look of confusion overtaking her. She screwed up her face, straining to recall the events. She looked troubled, then – after a few moments – she shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what happened," she continued, "I must have fainted. That's what it must be. I came around sat up against the wall. My clothes were all straightened out." She hesitated and furrowed her brow, deep in thought. "He must have been interrupted. He hadn't touched me. He hadn't done anything..... shameful to me. I was still..." she blushed crimson, "I was still... pure."

Bruce leaned over and patted her hand, gently, while Brian made soothing noises. She choked back a sob. With a sniff, she resumed her story.

"He wasn't there. I looked around, but I was frightened and I didn't dare stay down there. So, I went back upstairs. I took off my cloak and washed my face. I laid down on my bed. A little while later, there were shouts and I could hear running feet and a lot of activity. I heard some men speaking, passing my door, and one told the other that the Chief of Arms had been found dead, in the cellar. They said he had been stabbed, with his own knife,

Janine sniffled and whimpered, then drew in a deep breath. Brian, manoeuvring her slightly to one side, reached into his pocket. A moment later, he produced a handkerchief, which he handed to her. Janine wiped her eyes and her cheeks but then stopped, holding the handkerchief in front of her, looking at it uncertainly. Brian gave the tiniest, good natured snort and smiled. He nodded to her, encouragingly, but she still looked hesitant. Brian brought his hands up to his face, cupping his nose between them, then inclined his head into them in a gesture of blowing his nose. Janine looked wistfully at the handkerchief – it was beautiful – then raised it to her face and blew her nose, all the time looking at Brian apologetically.

"Your gracious manners are at odds with your humble status.", observed Bruce, from the seat opposite.

Janine looked at him guardedly and then shook her head. There was deep sadness in her eyes. She looked out of the window, her gaze distant and meditative, as if she no longer saw them. She sighed a deep, long sigh. The brothers traded glances. There was a sudden air of gloom about this girl.

The two brothers sat still and waited patiently. A full minute passed. Janine continued to stare out of the window.

Brian noticed that Bruce's expression had changed. His look of sympathy had slowly become one of fascination. The fasciation now gradually

transformed into astonishment. His brother looked across to him, briefly, but quickly returned his attention to the girl. The other's look was intense, completely spellbound.

Brian looked back and forth between the two of them and suddenly started in surprise. He had caught, for a split second, a flash of yellow and orange in the corner of his vision. He flicked his eyes, to and fro, between them, again, and – for a fleeting moment – he saw it again. It was gone in an instant.

The coach suddenly slowed. The priest knew this action would usually be followed by a lurch as the vehicle negotiated a particularly bad pot hole. He took advantage by gently lifting himself from his seat and depositing himself next to his twin. The girl's gaze never shifted.

From this vantage point Brian could now see what absorbed his brother with such bafflement. Dappling and waving across the wall of the coach, behind her, was the reflection of flames. They lit her face, too, with a swirl of colours. The effect clearly emanated from something substantial, outside, that was alight. That, he told himself, was absurd. The pattern was constant, so they were not passing the source of the conflagration. Rather, it appeared to be keeping pace with them!

Brian looked through the window of the coach. There was nothing there that could possibly account for what they were seeing, there was just the greenery of trees, bushes and shrubs. He looked back at the girl. It was still there. Yellows, oranges and reds glimmering and wavering. Brian looked, alternately, through the window and at the girl. The source of the flames was invisible, but their effect was distinct and unmistakable!

The two brothers turned to look at each other. The look, now common to both their faces, was one of incredulity.

Brian, almost reading Bruce's thoughts, asked himself if this were something evil they were witnessing. Were these the fires of damnation? Instantly, they both thought the same thing: These were good flames. Their effect was not to inspire a feeling of panic, but a feeling of reassurance. Brian and Bruce's eyes met for a moment and they conferred, wordlessly, and agreed that this was something altogether wonderful.

Slowly, and with exquisite care, Brian extended his hand and very gently placed it on the girl's arm. She turned towards them. Her eyes didn't so much as waver. The girl's countenance did not change. She looked straight through them. It was as if she were in a trance.

Bruce and Brian held their breaths, both taken aback and completely dumbfounded by the astonishing event they were witnessing. The coach abruptly lurched, at which point the girl suddenly sprang back to attention. At that precise moment, the flames stopped. She looked at the brothers, quickly from one to the other, in a state of anxiety.

"I'm sorry!", she said, "I don't know what happened. I just...."

"It's okay," replied Bruce, "That's no problem. You....." Bruce faltered as he felt his brother urgently squeeze his leg. The brothers exchanged a fleeting glance and Bruce continued: "That's no problem, you were just deep in thought for a moment, that's all."

They both smiled, broadly, and – after a moment of indecision – Janine smiled back, a look of relief flooding across her face.

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 8

Hamish Pottle's mind lurched as he imagined Duncan McRae – the rough, abrasive, foul-tempered leader of the local Rangers – slung, lifelessly, over the back of the Constable's horse. He felt a twinge of guilt on realising that the image gave him considerable pleasure. The guilt, however, faded quickly and was replaced by anger and annoyance as he considered the McRae's most recent victims. The families of the two young Rafferty girls, cousins from nearby Crianlarich, would have every right to be overjoyed at the sight of the corpse. This was the man who had most likely participated in, and even more likely led, their rape and savage beating.

Hamish cleared his throat and swallowed: "You've encountered the McRae's on your travels, Sir?", he asked the Constable.

"I have," replied the Constable, glumly, "Which accounts for me having a dead one on my horse." The corners of his mouth twitched and the twinkle was back in his eyes.

"Yes. I see." Hamish said, somewhat distractedly, "You met more than the one?"

"I only have the one with me.", replied the Constable, an almost imperceptible smile insinuating itself on his lips.

Hamish could not suppress a little sigh. The constable stood silently in the door way, a hint of amusement in his aspect. He clearly understood what the Inn Keeper wanted to know, but seemed determined to extract some effort as the reward for the telling.

"Will I take a seat?", the Constable enquired, pointing to a vacant chair, opposite Alex Brennan

"Oh! Of course! My apologies!", cried Caitlan, springing to her feet. Picking up a cotton cover, she deftly placed it over the seat of the chair.

The constable picked up his bag from the ground, which had been sat out of sight beyond the door, and strode to the chair. Nodding graciously, he sat down, placing his bag beside the chair. There was a dull, but unmistakable, metallic noise as its contents made contact with the stone flags through the canvas.

"Would you like some tea or a wee dram?", asked Hamish.

"A mere splash of whiskey, just to wet my tongue, would be most welcome.", he responded.

Caitlan poured a little more than the requested amount into a glass and handed it to their new visitor. Holding it up to the light, for inspection, the Constable nodded approvingly, flicked up the glass and emptied the contents into his mouth. He made a satisfied noise and dropped the empty receptacle into the palm of Caitlan's, now upturned, hand.

Hamish pursed his lips, ready for another round of probing and interrogation. Noting his expression, the Constable gave a short, hollow laugh and held up a finger to stop him.

"I came across the McReas five miles back down the road.", the Constable explained, "I had a short discussion with them, during which I made my opinions plain and we appeared to part company on tense but reasonable terms."

He paused, surveying his listeners, each agog with curiosity.

"I rode off, about my business, when I heard a galloping horse, behind me. I turned my own horse around and found their leader approaching me, at speed, with his sword drawn. Clearly he had indulged in seconds thoughts over my parting remark and decided to take delayed offence."

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex sat motionless, captivated by the law man's account. The two kitchen maids, meanwhile, stood like statues – ladles frozen in mid-air - utterly transfixed.

"It was clear, despite me having furnished my warrant from the king, that he was hostile," the Constable continued, "I was compelled to explain to this 'gentleman'...", He pronounced the word with disdain, "The error of his ways!"

His audience were like statues, rigid in expectant silence.

"So, I spoke to him!", declared the Constable, looking stern, "I said 'bang!'"

A look of confusion spread across the faces of the people in the room.

"Or rather," explained the story teller, helpfully, "I had my companion say it for me!" At this juncture, the Constable picked up his bag, pulled open its covering flap, and revealed the dangerous end of a monstrous pistol.

Alex and Hamish leaned forward, at the same moment, in disbelief. Not only was the gauge of this device huge, but where one barrel would normally sit, there were two, one beside the other. The two men's mouths gaped open in awe.

"Judging by the size of it," quipped Caitlan, "It fires hens' eggs!"

Hamish's glance fell on the open bag. Below the covering flap of the pale red satchel were brass letters, rivetted through the fabric. They spelled out: "McGrath". Constable McGrath followed the Inn Keeper's gaze but made no comment.

Carefully tucking away his weapon, he pulled and looped the cord that held the flap down. He ignored the two heavy straps that were designed to more firmly and resolutely accomplish the same objective.

"A moment's delay in reaching it could make all the difference.", McGrath explained. Then, nodding towards Hamish's arms, decorated with a mariner's tattoos, he added: "You'll know so yourself."

"Aye, I do, indeed.", Hamish responded. Then, nodding towards the man's bag, he added: "We carried a line of guns, just like that one, sticking out of the sides of my last ship!"

The two men laughed heartily and Alex and Caitlan joined in. Hamish was taken aback by how the big man's whole presence changed when he laughed. Gone was the dour and gruff persona, replaced, instead, by the cheerful and amiable one. He had a deep, easy laugh that lifted the spirits and a smile that illuminated both his own face and those around him.

Hamish reached for the whiskey bottle and inclined it towards the Constable. McGrath held up his hands in a display of mock horror that would have been a credit to a puppet show and raised his eyes to Heaven in a sardonic protest of piety. Hamish smiled, amused and entertained.

The Constable held Hamish's eyes with a steady, unflustered gaze, and the Inn Keeper could feel the other's guard going back up into place.

"The McRaes," began Hamish, "Are not forgiving people. They tend to hold a grudge."

The point was not lost on McGrath.

"There are grudges in the Highlands that have lasted for centuries and ones that will, no doubt, last for a good few centuries more!", observed McGrath, jovially.

"Aye, true enough," replied Hamish, "But the McRaes tend to work to more pressing timescales."

McGrath cocked his brow, "I only have a middle-sized wall above my fireplace, back at home, but...", he arched his mouth in a frown and rocked his head from side to side in contemplation, "...I have, so far, just the one McRae. I could, no doubt, go for a brace or - if you would urge me the wisdom of it - I could put my mind to going for the full set!"

Hamish looked at the Constable in astonishment.

Caitlan looked at him as if he had lost his senses.

Alex looked at him with a troubled expression.

"Are you implying," began Constable McGrath, in injured tones, "That a Constable's Warrant of Office, signed by the King's own hand, is insufficient to guarantee his safety in these parts?"

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex glanced one to the other. They shared a look of awkward discomfort.

"A good job, indeed, in that case," retorted McGrath, "That I can call upon the support – not too far down the road - of 30 brave men in blue and grey, with muskets, sabres and the crown of King James on their belt buckles."

The expressions on the faces of Caitlan, Hamish and Alex changed in almost perfect synchronisation. First, they looked taken aback by the offhand, almost trite, disclosure of this information. Then, realising the confidential nature of it, they looked guarded and wary. Then, comprehending the burden placed upon them by being privy to it, they looked reproachful.

Constable McGrath held up his arms in self admonishment, "**Why** would I tell you something like **that**?"

Hamish, with clear hostility in his voice, snapped back his response: "Why **would** you tell us something like that?"

The maids, sensing the imperative for discretion, spontaneously lowered their heads and busied themselves fastidiously about their chores. Caitlan turned around to look at them and their stirring and mixing promptly picked up a notch.

"Maybe", McGrath replied, poising the supposition like a school teacher addressing their pupils, "Just maybe, I know that I can trust you."

Hamish snorted as if this were preposterous; "You don't know us!", he exclaimed.

McGrath leaned forward, secretively, "Maybe I **do** know you."

The three of them looked at each other, as if suddenly unsure of who each other might be

"Perhaps I have blackmail in mind?", McGrath asked, mischievously, arching an eyebrow at Alex Brennan.

Alex stiffened, taken by surprise, and simultaneously tried not to look guilty while feverishly racking his brains for anything incriminating. Caitlan and Hamish both looked at him, suspiciously.

The Constable shifted his gaze to Hamish, his eyebrow still raised.

Hamish jolted and, his mind racing to reassure himself that all the panels in the roof of the bar were firmly positioned, quickly adopted a countenance of pained innocence. Caitlan and Hamish both looked at him suspiciously.

The Constable slowly moved his scrutiny to Caitlan, who looked nonplussed and slightly offended. After quickly recovering her deportment, she fluffed her skirts in her lap and inclined her head haughtily. Hamish and Alex both looked at her, suspiciously.

The atmosphere in the room had become tense and uncomfortable, but – in a split second – McGrath dispersed it. His gruffness evaporated in an instant and, with a flash of his charming smile and a twinkle of his merry eyes, the whole room was awash with warmth and good humour.

“I cannot disclose my reasons for having such confidence in you,” the Constable declared, “For – as I travel North – I must take care. I may not always be among friends. A careless disclosure made in haste, today, might be one regretted at length, tomorrow.”

Such was the man’s aura that none of those gathered in the kitchen were of a mind to challenge him or to delve into his reasoning. At the back of the kitchen, the two maids made discrete eye contact with each other and imperceptibly nodded their approval of the bold new guest.

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex, quickly began to relax and, within no time, found themselves beaming at the man as – completely unexpectedly – he began to diverge into a series of amusing anecdotes about his time in the army. Not only did he always include all three of them in the conversation, but he routinely spoke to each of them in turn, directing his words first to one, then to the next, then to the other.

This time, when Caitlan offered him more whiskey, Constable McGrath accepted without hesitation. They all drank to each other’s health and prospects and – in a departure from the usual ways of the house – to the surprise of the two maids, Caitlan beckoned them across and gave them both a dram, too.

Trading stories of military action, the three men demonstrated blows that were delivered, sword thrusts that were made and shots that were fired, adopting poses to portray these conflicts. Caitlan, for her part, recounted a particularly bloody tale of skewering a wandering boar with a spear from atop the well.

McGrath took hold of Hamish by the hand and carefully positioned his arm to dramatically re-enact the parrying of a blow. Hamish, catching sight of the infected jet-black thumbnail on McGrath’s right hand, noisily drew in air through pursed lips.

“You look to be sporting the outcome of a more recent battle!”, interjected Hamish, pointing to the thumbnail.

“Aye!”, replied the Constable, “That’s the truth! I was kicked by my horse. It hurt like the Fires of Hell! I cursed and I swore with every foul word that I had ever known and then invented another six to go with them!”

They all laughed.

Holding up the thumb for inspection, McGrath said: "It takes every ounce of restraint I possess to stop myself from picking at it! It's a real annoyance. It will fall off, in its own time, when its good and ready, I'm sure."

The maids, having finished preparing food for the establishment, had withdrawn to other duties. One of them now returned, peeking round the door, and caught Hamish's eye: "The good gentleman's room is now fully prepared, if it pleases you," She said, motioning towards the Constable, "And I have furnished the bed with a feather mattress and with the duck down quilt."

"Well done," congratulated Hamish, "You can show Constable McGrath to his room and provide him with any amenities he may require."

The maid nodded and held open the door for McGrath to follow her.

"If it's all the same to you," began McGrath, turning to Hamish, "I'll be assured, without inspection, of the fine standards of your hospitality and, instead, I'll take a walk around outside and maybe limber up a little before the light fails."

McGrath adopted a stance portraying a physical workout.

"Whatever pleases you, Sir." Hamish replied.

"If you'd like to flex your muscles, Sir," Alex offered, "You can join me at the wood stack. There's a certain satisfaction from splitting logs with an axe that I, myself, find most rewarding."

McGrath nodded his approval and the two made their excuses and went out to the wood shed. Alex selected a sturdy axe apiece and they laid siege to the remaining pile of logs.

The two men laboured, side by side, pouring with sweat, until dusk came and then beyond. Only when they had reached the very last log and could scarcely see it in the gloom to be able to strike it, did they put down their axes. By the time the last log was broken up into suitable lengths, the sweat had soaked their shirts and was dripping liberally onto the logs and onto the ground. They stood side by side, proudly surveying their work, and then forcefully shook hands, in triumph, and pounded each other on the back.

After panting and gasping to recover their breath, McGrath jerked a thumb towards the stables: "Would you care to take a look at what a dead McRae looks like?"

Alex Brennan shook his head, eyes cast to the ground and seemed to disappear into his own thoughts for a moment. Raising his eyes, he locked them with that of the Constable, and replied: "I've seen enough dead men to last me a life time."

McGrath nodded, solemnly, "Quite so," he responded.

The two stood in a clumsy silence, each deep in their own thoughts, before the Constable gestured to the line of trees and said: "Come with me and we'll find a more suitable pastime."

The two strode off to the edge of the forest and, a few minutes later, set off back with a handful each of pine cones.

The two set to work laying a little campfire and then, rummaging in the shed, found some long, thin spokes of metal used for holding down straw while thatching roofs. These they pressed into service as spikes to hold their pine cones to roast them over the fire.

Alex knelt by the kindling and took out his tinder box. Extracting the flint and the striking rod, he conjured enough sparks to set fire to the dry leaves and grass. The flames quickly took hold and the fire began to crackle and roar.

The noise of the fire was distinct and unmistakable. The crackling and popping gradually growing in ferocity. The two men sat, cross legged, both transfixed by the flames and both plainly captivated by the sound. Alex felt an odd comradeship as he marvelled at the flames. Closing his eyes, Alex drew in the noise of the burning wood and allowed it to fill him with an overwhelming sense of peace and wellbeing. It was strangely familiar and reassuring. Alex opened his eyes and, feeling obscurely detached, watched as the other – eyes now closed – smiled serenely, wooed and captivated by the sound of the burning wood.

Absentmindedly, Alex toyed with the tinder box in his palm, stroking it, turning it and caressing it with his fingers.

"A treasured possession?", asked McGrath in a kindly tone.

"Yes. Very much so.", Alex admitted.

The two men sat in amiable, contented silence for a minute.

"Do you have any special and significant possession?", Alex enquired.

The Constable looked at Alex long and hard with a steady, thoughtful, contemplative regard. Alex had the distinct impression that he was being carefully assessed. Oddly, the sensation didn't cause him even the slightest pang of discomfort. After a long few moments, his instincts told him he had passed.

"Yes.", replied McGrath, shuffling closer to him and leaning over to speak into his ear.

As McGrath began to tell him, Alex' expression became puzzled, but he listened patiently. When he had finished, Alex, was unsure if it had just heard a verse of poetry or, perhaps, a riddle. Whatever it was, despite its meaning being slightly obscure, there was no doubt that its telling was profound.

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 9

The seven riders from Queen Annis' caravan carefully urged their horses forward, down the steep slope to the river, leaning back in their saddles to compensate for the incline. The horses picked their way gingerly, occasionally sliding a little, but made the descent without incident.

As they reached the river bank, Balgair motioned Gavin to come alongside him and then held up his hand for the others to stop. The horses came to a halt. Everybody waited, still and silent. The horses became slightly restless, longingly eyeing the water ahead of them, eager to drink.

Balgair scanned the opposite bank for signs of activity. After a minute, satisfied that they were alone, he gestured to the other riders to dismount. After a few moments he waved them to let their horses into the river to drink. The horses were sent forward and stepped into the shallows, lowering their heads and gratefully sucking in the cold, clear water.

The five riders moved out to stand next to their mounts, each vigilant and alert, their hands cautiously resting on their weapons slung from the saddles. Balgair and Gavin, still atop their horses, also kept a vigilant watch.

The men waited until their horses had quenched their thirsts and then led them back to dry land. Balgair and Gavin moved forward and their horses, having waited patiently, stepped into the river to drink.

The two riders stroked their horses' manes and patted them as they drank. The two animals muttered contentedly, wagging their ears and swooshing their tails to and fro.

Presently, Balgair signalled to the others to remain, while he and Gavin moved up the bank to the fording point that led out across the river. There, the two of them sat, nonchalantly, while their horses cropped the grass.

Satisfied that they would appear unhurried, to any onlookers, Balgair spurred his horse forward, across the shallow river bed, towards the middle section, where the deeper waters began. Gavin urged his horse to follow.

They had plainly been watched, for - at the other side of the river - a band of four riders promptly emerged from the undergrowth and began slowly walking their steeds out into the river. As they came, they talked animatedly and were obviously exchanging jovial banter. They were patently eager to project an air of unconcerned indifference.

The Grants continued their approach to a depth where the water came a third the way up the legs of their animals. Balgair and Gavin carried on out into the river until their own horses reached the same depth.

The talk amongst the Grants had died away and they sat, relaxed in their saddles, exuding an air of easy going detachment. One examined his fingernails, two were stretching as if to loosen tired limbs and the fourth had put his hand to his mouth to cover a yawn. They were all dressed in informal riding clothes, sporting capes, scarves, woollen tunics and had jiggy blankets over their laps, which draped down over their legs to fend off the chill.

Their attire was in stark contrast to that of Balgair and Gavin, who were – despite also being gussied up against the cool breeze – garbed in a noticeably more solemn and elegant manner.

The two outer riders, whom Balgair mentally nicknamed, Tom and Tim, had the hoods of their cloaks still raised, leaving their faces mostly in shadow. The two middle riders wore full sized claymores. They both had leather saddle bags, rather than woven, and both wore polished silver cloak pins rather than dull metal. Judging from this and from the stance of Tom and Tim as they addressed them, the two with the claymores seemed to be in charge. One was noticeably younger than the two men escorting them and the other noticeably older.

The two parties were around six paces apart. The distance was just close enough to permit something approaching normal speech, for as long as the wind didn't stir too much.

Balgair pulled aside his jiggy, in pretence of scratching his leg, making the move appear as casual and offhand as he could. For added effect, he also reached under his cloak so that it fell far enough open to expose part of the broad band of material that stretched over his shoulder.

On seeing the newly revealed expanses of formal McDonald tartan, the older of the Grants cupped his jaw in his hand and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, before declaring: "You're a long way from home, McDonald, and – if you're wearing your best for the Laird's Ball – you've missed it by over two weeks and I don't recall you having an invitation."

The other riders around him chuckled politely.

"My Laird McDonald," replied Balgair, "Would approve of me dressing appropriately, as a mark of respect, in case I might encounter the Laird Grant on my travels."

"Why would you think it likely you might stumble across His Lairdship? Did you think he might just have been wandering around, scampering and scuttling, like a wee rabbit?"

"The tradition of the Queen of the West reaffirming her boundaries is an ancient one. It dates back to Viking times," Gavin offered, "There are those who honour traditions. Those who honour the ways of their grandfathers and of their grandfathers before them. It is our traditions that define us, along with the heroes of old who made us."

The younger Grant stiffened and spoke curtly with a tone of accusation: "Do you have any particular hero in mind?!"

The older man stretched out a hand towards him, reproachfully, and replied: "We live in times of change. We need to do what is right for today."

"When the times demand heroes," Gavin countered, "If we are deserving, then fate will provide us with the man." Then, after a well-timed pause, he added: "Or the woman!"

The younger Grant shook his head, curtly, and made a quiet - but audible - derisory noise, which earned him a sharp glance of admonishment from his elder.

"Perhaps we ought to rely more on our own efforts and less on myths and legends.", the elder argued.

The younger man, evidently undeterred by his rebuke, retorted: "We don't need some pathetic wee lass with a head full of fairy tales!"

The older Grant whirled in his saddle and hissed with venom at the younger man: "That is his Queen you talk of and you will give her the respect she deserves!"

The younger Grant blinked in astonishment and, while his mouth moved to muster a reply, he was unable to find his voice.

"If my Laird Grant were here," began the older Grant, "He would wish us to speak of your Queen with proper esteem and would require us not to tarnish our Clan by showing disrespect."

The junior Grant shot the back of his elder's head a toxic look and sat simmering with wrath and indignation.

Balgair and Gavin met each other's eyes for a fleeting instant, but it was long enough to exchange their thoughts. There was something strange about the relationship between these two Grants. The older had authority over the younger, without doubt, but it was plainly not total and complete.

The concentration of the two leading Grants suddenly wavered and their gaze transferred from Balgair and Gavin to a point in the distance, behind them. From that direction - Balgair and Gavin both knew - would now be approaching the remaining riders of their advanced party. Their count now increased to six, they rode at a calculatedly slow, almost reluctant, pace.

The Grant elder looked to Balgair and, without disengaging his eyes, reached an arm to his rear, where his closed hand briefly sprang open, extending five fingers, then closed again. Dutifully, five horsemen from the Grant party, on the other bank, set off across the river towards them.

"A simple precaution.", the elder announced. Balgair inclined his head in a deep nod to show his acceptance.

"You don't have to look behind you," observed Balgair, "To know that they are coming,".

"No," replied the Grant elder, then added, with a flicker of a smile on his lips: "And nor, of course, do you, yours."

The move was, indeed, pre-planned, but Balgair was caught off guard by the other's unexpected insight, and he snorted a spontaneous and genuine laugh. The senior Grant, without even a second's hesitation, promptly joined in. Balgair's horse, surprised by the sudden noise, snickered and stomped its feet, moving an arm's length closer to the Grants. The younger of the two Grants reached, lightening quick, beneath his cloak and they heard the unmistakable sound of steel emerging from a scabbard. Tom and Tim reached more slowly for their weapons but were content to merely rest their hands on their hilts.

Without looking away and without the smile leaving his face, Grant Senior responded to his companion's motion with three crisp words, each spoken as if an entire sentence: "Put.... That.... Away....".

Adopting a perfectly synchronised pace, the newly arriving group of Grant horsemen reached the middle of the river at the exact same time as their opposite numbers from the McDonald / McRory camp. Two or three riders from each rank chose to wear the hoods of their cloaks over their heads. Balgair and Gavin, despite feeling their ears starting to succumb to the cold, left their cloaks down.

"There are different traditions, either side of this river," the older of the Grants began, "And different ways of thinking."

Balgair swayed his head in visible consideration of this statement but voiced no opinion.

"Caution is a wise strategy these days.", the senior Grant went on, "The King is appointing Bishops to oversee how people conduct themselves in their worship of God. If he takes this much interest in our religious practices, it's hard to gauge just how much concern he might feel obliged to take in a man's other loyalties."

"We both bend the knee to King James." Noted Balgair, helpfully.

"You do, McDonald?", he asked, pretending to be a little surprised.

Balgair looked thoughtful for a moment, then replied: "I have two knees!"

"King James would surely like to claim both of them, McDonald!"

"I am a loyal subject of King James, as are all of Clan McDonald, down to the last man.", retorted Balgair.

The older Grant pursed his lips and gave Balgair and Gavin a sour look before spreading his arms and holding up his palms in a gesture of exasperation.

"And yet..." , the Grant said, allowing the inescapable question to hang in the air.

"And yet," replied Balgair, "I freely honour The Queen of the West as my majesty from a line, unbroken, since the days of the Vikings."

"How loyal would I appear to King James if I were to pander to such folk lore," protested the Grant elder, "If we were to take part in a symbolic act – her crossing of the Spey – that flies in the face of his rule?"

"You are a loyal subject," replied Balgair, "Of a King of Scotland who chooses to reside in London."

The two Grant leaders shook their heads, sorrowfully, as if the disappointed parents of a wayward child.

"Whether he lives in England or in Scotland," the older Grant insisted, "He is our King and we are assured of his loyalty and his protection."

"His protection!" barked Balgair in sudden outrage. The abrupt noise startled several horses and several riders, on both sides, had to calm their worried mounts. His outburst appeared to have a similar effect on the two senior Grants!

The older Grant opened his mouth to speak, but Balgair cut him off: "Our King of Scotland," Balgair sneered, "Is the king whose forefathers – in their day - not only bent their knees to the invaders but threw themselves to the ground on their faces!"

The older Grant looked furious. The younger Grant looked slightly bewildered.

"The Vikings," Balgair goaded, "Must have mistaken them for some kind of floor rugs!"

The two Grants looked flabbergasted at his brazenness.

"Six hundred years ago, the Vikings swept down the coast and took Aberdeen, striking the town both from sea and land. Some of their forces, on their way to Aberdeen, surrounded your stronghouse and you were cut off. It was Kiffan who sent troops to your aid. Not one of your proud and noble line of worthy Scottish Kings."

The younger Grant, his eyes wide in disbelief, looked to his senior for guidance. The other merely snarled in annoyance and shot him a look of contempt.

"It was Kiffan, she who rose from nothing, who came to your aid!" Balgair spat the words maliciously, "It was she he who rode into battle with her army!" Balgair's raised voice rang out across the river and echoed back from the valley wall, beyond, "Not directing her troops from a safe distance but..." Balgair drew breath to hurl the next three words as individual declarations of pride: "in... their.... midst!"

The younger Grant was now staring in open incredulity at his elder, almost beseeching him to refute these words.

"Three hundred and fifty Brydda took on eight hundred Vikings.", Balgair continued, "They fell on them like howling wolves, screaming down from the hills in a Highland Charge that chilled their quarry's blood. They were so impressed, they wrote a song about her in Norse! 'Kiffan the Defiant', they called her!"

The elder Grant looked crestfallen and seemed to have lost six inches in height as he sat in his saddle.

"Gordon!", the younger Grant cried to the older, imploring his rebuttal.

Gordon Grant said not one word. He sat, instead, in silent fury, his jaw clenched so tight that Balgair feared his teeth might shatter at any moment.

"The Vikings," Balgair declared, "Were held up for half a day, never managing to truly vanquish the Brydda. Word eventually came to them, from their leaders, that they were to march their forces to support the attack on Aberdeen. The Grant stronghouse of Craobhan Àrda (*meaning 'High Trees'*) was left standing and the occupants, your ancestors, escaped a massacre.

The younger Grant gave his senior a desperate look, tinged with sullen despair. It was clear, to any bystander, that he had never been educated in the less glamorous heritage of his Clan.

"The Laird Grant declined to receive Kiffan and left her camped outside his walls. A vile snub, you might think, for his saviour!"

Everyone remained silent, on both sides, and the gushing and gurgling of the water, as it spilled over nearby rocks, suddenly sounded intrusively loud.

"Kiffan and the Laird Grant's son and heir, Corey, had grown up together, from children, when they had both been fostered out - for the benefit of their development - to the Laird Cameron of Tùr Òr (*meaning Golden Towers*)." Balgair explained, "The Laird Grant was spitefully vexed that his son still harboured romantic affection for Kiffan and he blamed her for his refusal to marry any of the fine matches who had been presented to him over the years."

Balgair's audience remained in rapt silence.

"The Laird Grant's son had been grievously wounded during the Viking attack." Balgair resumed, "And by the time he had recovered enough to open his eyes, Kiffan and her army were preparing to leave to return to Fort William. He sent a servant to the garden to pick a rose and insisted on being carried outside, on a stretcher, to give it to Kiffan, personally. He told her that the rose was to remember him by. Roses had been special to her when they had been at Castle Gàrradh."

The older Grant shuffled uncomfortably on his horse. The younger Grant sat spellbound, hanging on Balgair's every word.

"The Norsemen, on their way back from their victory at Aberdeen, were laden with the spoils of war." Balgair told them, "After negotiations, they consented to spare Clan Grant and agreed peace terms, which included regular payments of tribute."

Gordon Grant now sat, hunched and despondent, like a man awaiting his own execution. His disposition starkly conveyed that he knew, full well, that there were even worse disclosures to come. The younger Grant looked at him with his eyes narrowed in an expression of wary suspicion.

"The Vikings know how to hold a grudge." Gavin announced, taking over the history lesson from Balgair, "They had turned North toward Inverness, but, when they reached the crossroads of the wagon trails – from North to South and East to West - they stopped. The Brydda had set off West the previous evening. Having suffered heavy casualties, Kiffan's warriors were sure to be making slow progress."

Gordon Grant held his head in his hands.

"The Vikings turned West to pursue the Brydda," Gavin declared, ominously, "The Grants, far more familiar with the territory, would have been well acquainted with far quicker routes over and around the hills to reach Kiffan and warn her....."

The younger Grant, picking up inflections in Gavin's tones, now looked anxious, his face drained of colour.

"The Laird Grant was still consumed by ill will towards Kiffan," Gavin told them, "He sent out riders in the direction of Fort William, for all to see, with instructions to ride fast and hard. Once out of sight, however, they obeyed their other orders, which were to stop and make camp. They were commanded to stay there overnight and then to turn around and return to Craobhan Àrda the next day."

The younger Grant sat immobile. Numbled by disbelief.

"No warning was ever sent to the Brydda," Gavin declared, "And the Vikings caught them unprepared. They killed most of the surviving Brydda in the ensuing battle. They then proceeded to kill every last man of the wounded. They captured Kiffan and took her back North to the Viking Chieftain. He accused her of practising Dark Magic and sentenced her to death."

The older Grant looked to the younger with a face harrowed by guilt and self-loathing. The younger shook his head in disgust and turned away.

"Kiffan, Queen of the West, was presented to King Urokmort to be slain by his own hand. Kiffan's wrists were bound behind her back, then she was forced to the ground and dragged to kneel over the execution stump."

The younger grant looked expectantly at the story teller, his face filled with concentration.

"Legend has it," Gavin told them, "That King Urokmort asked her if she had any special possession, anything she treasured that she would like buried with her. Her voice steady and without wavering, she replied to him..."

Gavin's listeners waited, in awe, for him to continue, but the voice that came was not his own.

"I have the petal of a rose," Queen Annis exclaimed, loudly, while swiftly dropping her hood and urging her horse forward from the back line of riders. As she moved, she shook free her long blonde hair, which lifted on the breeze and appeared to dance around her head like a golden fire.

The assembled Grants gasped and jolted in surprise at the voice of a woman suddenly ringing out from among the opposite ranks, "I keep it in a glass thimble!" said the Queen of the West, clearly and firmly, "I keep the thimble in a pouch. I keep the pouch in a bag. I keep the bag in a box. It is my most precious thing because it is the symbol of my one true love."

There was absolute silence. Nobody moved. It was as if time had stood still and frozen them in place.

After a pause, Annis resumed: "King Urokmort told her that it was a tradition that, as a Queen, Kiffan could beg of him a kindness before he carried out the sentence. She asked that, from that day forward, no Viking be allowed to enter or lay siege to or slay any occupant of Craobhan Àrda, the stronghouse of Clan Grant."

"It is known!" cried Tom, the rider at the far end of the Grants, "It is known that they never did! You could never have known this! There is no way you could possibly know unless you are speaking a true account of history!"

Slowly and purposefully, Tom pulled down his hood and tucked it behind his neck. The five riders to the rear of the Grants immediately dropped their heads in deference. Tim and the two leading Grants also bowed to him. In response, this man, suddenly identifiable as the Laird Grant, inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"Our feud with the Queen of the West is not one in which we can have any pride," The Laird confessed, looking contrite, "And the telling of its origins - in the stark and cruel terms you have used - is a sobering admonishment of my ancestors."

The Laird Grant manoeuvred his horse so that he faced Queen Annis and addressed her directly: "I came here, today, prepared to spill blood.", he said, raising a hand to Balgair and Gavin, patently appealing for their restraint before slowly and cautiously taking out his dirk, "But I swear upon this iron," He said, kissing the weapon at its junction between handle and blade, "That we knew not that the safety of Craobhan Àrda, from attack by the Vikings, was the gift of Kiffan the Defiant."

Annis bowed to the Laird with a shallow, courteous inclination of her head. The Laird, in response, bowed deeply and all of the Grants in his party promptly did the same.

The Laird placed his hand over his heart and then moved his steed to the front of his group, closest to his people on the far bank.

"If King James is to be displeased with me and feel that he has basis to question my allegiance," the Laird Grant shouted, "Then let him have cause and reason that is bold, brazen and brash and not some skulking suspicion arising from the scampering and scuttling of wee rabbits!"

The party of Grants all laughed. Their laughter, unprompted and unfeigned, was evidently sponsored - in large part - by a sense of relief. Annis, Balgair, Gavin and their party laughed, too.

The Laird Grant spurred his horse forward and moved part way back across the river before stopping and shouting to his troops in the forest at the edge of the river: "Soldiers of Clan Grant, escort the Queen of the West across the Spey and guard her, each and every one of you, with your life!"

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 10

The wheels of the coach suddenly clattered loudly as they reached the driveway up to Brech Woorlach Hall and Janine woke with a start. The approach to the Hall was cobbled – or perhaps, more accurately “tiled” – with tens of thousands of little square stones in every shade of the rainbow.

Janine put her head out of the coach window and gasped at the sight that greeted her. A huge formal residence, built of gleaming white stone, jutted skywards. It was constructed with two main floors and was profound in its tallness and elegance. The clusters of tall chimneys – regularly spaced across the roof – seemed to be reaching for the clouds. Along the bottom of this impressive building she could see there was a basement running its entire length and attic rooms, across the top, similarly running from one end to the other.

Her face was creased with concern as she racked her mind to explain why this impressive and imposing place was both strangely new and disconcerting and yet hauntingly familiar.

Janine withdrew her head and looked to her fellow travellers, both of whom sat with smiling faces that radiated an aura of pride and self-congratulation. Grateful for her earlier rescue from the roadside, she obligingly assumed a manner of reverential awe.

“This is like a palace!”, Janine gasped, “Its huge!”

This seemed to please them greatly and they beamed with satisfaction.

“This is the seat of the Earl of Bo’ness,” Bruce explained, casting his arm towards the carriage window, “And we were privileged to grow up, here, in the care of our Uncle.”

“Our father was taken prisoner by the Spanish, when we were young, and died in captivity.”, Brian offered.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”, Janine told them, sincerely. The two nodded solemnly in acknowledgement.

“Our father was an adventurer!”, Bruce announced.

“Our father,” replied Brian, tersely, “Was unable to contain his dreams or keep his big ideas under control.”

Bruce glanced coldly at his brother.

“Our father had embarked on an expedition to explore new territories, for the crown, when his vessel was taken by a Spanish Man of War.” Bruce explained, proudly, “This incident occurred at an awkward moment in history....”

Bruce looked to his brother for support, but Brian was looking upwards, making a fine pretence of being completely fascinated by the swirling patterns in the stained wood. Bruce shrugged, regarding his brother contemptuously.

"Negotiations with the Spanish were extremely protracted," Bruce clarified, "But were...."

"Completely and utterly fruitless!", Brian interrupted.

Bruce clenched his fists and his teeth. Brian smirked, nose still pointing aloft.

"I am sure that your mother must have been distraught!", Janine told them.

Bruce looked to his twin and said, pointedly: "She was beside herself with grief."

Brian tore his attention away from the woodwork and looked genuinely sorrowful. He nodded his agreement and added: "She was, indeed."

The two exchanged a brief, conciliatory look that extinguished their hostility with a suddenness equivalent to the pricking of a balloon.

"You must have felt like princes, growing up here!", Janine exclaimed, trying to soothe the atmosphere still further.

"We were very lucky, indeed!", Bruce agreed.

"We were extremely fortunate!", said Brian.

"How were you ever able to explore this huge palace of a house?"

"It was a challenge, for sure, but we had all the time in the world – or so it seemed – with Springs, Summers and Autumns that seemed to go on forever in our little lives, bereft of responsibility or accountability.", Bruce confessed.

"Our mother, aunt, uncle and all the servants were glad for the peace and quiet whenever we were wandering and exploring.", Brian explained, "We were...", He paused, groping for the right words, "...a handful for all concerned!". They both laughed.

"Our Governess was exceptional!", Bruce enthused, "And always said 'Children come this way but only the once, so we should litter their pathways with valuable experiences'"

At the word "Governess", Janine's eyes popped wider and the two brothers didn't fail to pick up on this tiny prompt. Bruce looked duly embarrassed and Brian made an apologetic little smile as his shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

At this moment, the coach pulled to a halt and the two male occupants demurred to Janine to alight first. One of the servants, dressed in stunning red, yellow and gold livery, opened the door for her, placing a set of steps on the ground and bowed deeply and formally. She had been a servant – she was a servant – and knew, immediately, that these servants were something special. These servants were used to excellence. Service, for this class of servant, was an intensely honourable and distinguished calling worthy of their greatest possible efforts.

Very conscious of her slightly shabby appearance, Janine stepped down, accepting the servant's offer of a white gloved hand to maintain her balance. To this man, her clothing was of no concern and had no relevance. Only how well his impeccable behaviour brought a good refection on this household was important.

Janine gave the servant an almost imperceptible nod. She knew, from experience, that this was the thing to do. This being the most recognition that a lady of good breeding would indulge on a servant. As the twins disembarked, she turned them and said, in lowered tones: "I feel shamefully under dressed."

"No, my lady," said Brian, courteously, "You look perfectly wonderful. Your clothes inherit your refinement. You make the clothes. The clothes do not make you."

Janine felt her cheeks flush a little pink, but suddenly realised that she was standing tall and elegantly and was secretly taken aback. She was a servant girl. There was nothing about her that contained any style or class or grace. She was, nonetheless, completely unashamed and was oddly disturbed by her own confidence in herself.

"Michael had not even noticed your attire," said Bruce, casting a hand towards the servant who had helped her down.

"Not in the slightest!", confirmed Michael, shaking his head gravely and looking at the ground.

Janine looked at Michael's lowered head and felt overwhelmed with gratitude for his good heart and kindly manner. She was, however – for these purposes, it would appear – a lady and she should take such matters entirely for granted.

"Michael," said a female voice extremely close by. She suddenly realised that it was her own and that she had spoken, rather than simply thought what was in her head! Michael looked up, surprised to be addressed directly. "You," she continued, "Have the character of a gentleman and you bring great credit to this house."

"Your Ladyship!", replied the servant, nearly bursting with irrepressible delight.

"Michael, have Millet come up to the guest dressing room and bring Lady Janine some appropriate garments.", said Bruce.

"Yes, Sir. At one, Sir.", replied Michael.

Janine felt herself finch, inwardly, at the use of the title "Lady" and, though becoming momentarily flustered in her mind, she managed to recover herself sufficiently to appear unruffled.

"And also," Bruce instructed further, "Have a word with Garrett and tell him that I speak for the Duke when I say that he should give favourable consideration to a slight increment in your salary."

"Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir! Thank you, indeed!", the servant gushed.

"It would be a dereliction of my duty if I were to fail to take account of such a recognition by Lady Janine!", Bruce confided to Michael, who – in response – bowed reverently.

Bruce reached out his arm to Janine in invitation to walk and, as she took it, he drew her a little closer and whispered: "You now have a friend for life, there."

"He is a good man, who has risen high in the ranks at this house, but without losing his good nature or genuine sense of humanity.", Janine responded.

"You are a good judge of servants.", Bruce replied.

"Yes, of course I am, but I would be and with very good reason, I am sure you realise."

"We are all servants of God, Brian would say!", quipped Bruce.

Janine smile and floated, gracefully, across the paving and up the steps into the hall without faltering or hesitating in her instinctively refined demeanour. None of the servants, witnessing her arrival, had the slightest glimmer of doubt that she was a lady.

She was introduced to the Butler and the Matron Housekeeper, in the grand entrance, with its marble columns and gleaming marble floors. It was apparent that they had both formally summoned on her arrival. Janine had conducted herself amiably and graciously. The reaction of the two on first sight of her, however, was most puzzling. It was as if they had seen a ghost. The Butler had stared, open mouthed for a second, before regaining his composure. The Matron Housekeeper had gasped out loud and thrown her hand over her mouth to quell herself.

As they walked up the stairs, one of the servants hurried past them carrying a small trunk against his chest. Brian, a few steps behind, slowed to fall in beside them and kept pace with their ascent.

"Your bag is in the trunk.", Brian explained.

Janine felt instantly grateful for not having to endure the shame of arriving with such a grubby and pitiful thing on full display. Then she checked

herself. She was a servant girl who had run away from her employer. She was a lowly individual of no consequence. Yet, here she was, striding around in a huge mansion in the company of two men who were at perfect ease with this luxurious and lavish lifestyle.

She stopped abruptly, mid stride, and her two companions came to a rapid halt one step later. They look surprised. Janine glanced quickly over her shoulder, checking that nobody was around, and asked: "Do you have a plan or a reason for this deception?"

The twins looked hurt and replied, almost perfectly together: "It's not a deception!"

"We didn't want to bring you here and announce openly, to one and all, that you are a girl of humble situation, running from her previous position and fleeing the clutches of thieves and bandits.", protested Bruce.

"We cannot be sure that your assailants are not still on the lookout for you!", Brian warned.

"We thought," Bruce confided, "That this would be a safer refuge for you if nobody knew your identity. You could be totally anonymous and still be 'Janine' as long as they would not think to connect you with the girl they accosted."

Janine looked back and forth between them, her expression sceptical and dubious, before – much to their relief – broke into a smile.

"You were there for me when I was in distress and you are most kind to take me and to give me sanctuary.", she told them, "I scarcely dare think what might have become of me without your intervention."

They resumed their walk along the corridor, their new fellowship restored, and Janine felt comfortable and at ease with them, again. Bruce and Brian chatted to her, animatedly, about childhood memories of the rooms they passed and of the significance of this or that painting, alcove or suit of armour.

A door opened, some way ahead of them to the right, and a servant came out, backwards, alternately bowing and throwing his hands up in consternation. A woman's voice, raised in anger, could be heard but the words did not reach them clearly enough to make out.

Suddenly, two small rolls of bread shot out of the door in an arc towards the flustered servant. One caught him on the ear, the other straight in the forehead.

Janine and her two companions slowed their gait, looked at each other in blank amazement.

"My Lady! My Lady!", cried the servant, now cowering from what appeared to be the threat of further missiles. "It is the fashion! It is the way in the best social circle of Edinburgh and London!"

The voice from within the room could now be made out and the owner was evidently extremely annoyed!

"Don't serve me stale bread and tell me that it is fashion!", she shouted.

"My Lady!", implored the servant, "It is not stale. It is hard."

"Stale bread *is* hard!", came the reply.

Hearing their approach, the servant turned and, seeing the twin brothers, threw up their hand beseechingly.

Bruce gestured back with a wave of his hand and the servant clasped his hands together, as if offering a prayer, to signify desperate gratitude.

"Aunt Ailsa," Bruce called, his voice sweet and endearing.

In response, there was a dramatic gasp from the within the room. Janine quickly stepped into an alcove, feeling like a trespasser on this private scene. In the reflection of brightly polished metal plate, hung on the wall, she saw a woman, dressed in a beautiful peach coloured dress appear in the doorway.

Janine's heart missed a beat and she leaned forward to stare more closely into the reflection in the plate. She was unable to contain the bizarre and troubling notion that she *knew* this woman.

Aunt Ailsa stood expectantly, eagerly scanning left and right to locate the speaker of the greeting, and brought her hand to her mouth to smother a gasp of delight at seeing her nephews. The peach fabric swirled as she stepped quickly and gracefully, moving like a dancer, to embrace Bruce.

Janine's heart lurched, again, at this woman's oddly familiar personal air and bearing. She had a powerful urge to bob her head out from her retreat to look closer, but – by sheer act of will – managed to contain it.

Janine could hear the Aunt uttering words of endearment and whispering fondly as she hugged Bruce close. She then pushed him a step to the side and pulled Brian into her arms. She gushed with words of gentle affection and whispered this and that in his ear before, eventually, releasing him.

The two brothers turned to introduce their guest but, on seeing Janine stood discretely aside, quickly changed their minds. After a minute or two of exchanging further pleasantries the brothers came to collect her from her hiding place and ushered her towards her accommodation.

They took her to what they called the 'Pale Blue Rooms' which turned out to be a set of private chambers decorated in colours appropriate to their description. She took stock of her surroundings and, mentally retracing their steps, concluded that they were now at the rear of the building. Her dressing room window looked out over a long, immaculately kept lawn that rose up a shallow hill to a small thicket of trees.

As she stood and looked, her head began to swim and she felt as if she were about to lose her balance. She felt Bruce quickly take her arm to steady her and she was glad to be able to lean against him for support.

"I'm sorry," she said, slightly breathlessly, "You must think me a dullard! I suddenly felt a little sick. I don't understand it. I am normally quite robust!"

The two brothers exchanged a look that had become familiar to her and she knew that they were taking her measure, as a person, again. The reason – she decided – was their vague bemusement with her choice of words and the manner of her speaking. She had, herself, attended several ladies of noble birth and was conversant with their behaviour and mannerisms. She was alarmed to realise that she had subconsciously adopted their style of speech and pose. The transition had been accomplished seamlessly, effortlessly and – still more strangely – without a moment's thought.

She looked back to the lawn, stretching into the distance, and a shiver ran through her and she experienced a fleeting moment of panic. She caught her breath in a sob. Her senses were playing tricks with her! She had felt unmistakable nostalgia. This that could not be! Deny it as she might, she felt a mysterious certainty that she had stood at this very window and seen this view before.

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 11

The Inn Keeper, Hamish Pottle, stood behind the bar, casting a leisurely eye around the interior. Try as he might, he could not stop himself from looking up at the door to the Inn at least twice every minute. He had been doing this for the past ten minutes and felt slightly worried that the urge to do so was so strong. As an ocean-going sailor of forty years' experience, however, he knew to never ignore his instincts.

There was a sudden yelp and Hamish quickly looked up. Maisie, the serving girl, was pulling herself from the grip of an over eager drinker, in the corner. After a moment came the sharp thwack of hand meeting flesh as she slapped him for his trouble. The offender made a feeble attempt to climb to his feet, but, being a little too worse for drink to accomplish this feat, he dropped back into his seat and cursed her in coarse Gaelic. Maisie gave him a withering look.

The recipient of Maisie's slap appeared to be reaching to his side, under the table, and Hamish, fearing him to be reaching for a dirk, shouted to him in an authoritative tone: "If you're in a mood for a wench, there are places you can go for that, but don't go delaying my girl. She has other customers, do you ken?"

There was a merry chortle from the dozen other customers, sat at the nearby tables, and the man in the corner growled some offensive remarks, deliberately not loud enough for Hamish to discern, and went back to quaffing his ale.

There was a creaking sound in the doorway of the inn as the floorboards responded to weight being put on them. Hamish looked up. Though not visible to him, he knew that somebody was stood at the other side of the door. The door began to move, swinging very slowly ajar. Hamish felt his heartbeat speed up. There was the noise of what seemed like a second person shuffling behind the first. Hamish looked to the shelf by the fireplace where a strategically placed mirror allowed him a view of the doorway from an angle.

Hamish could see two men, neither of whom he recognised, peering into the bar room. The one in front wore a brimmed hat with some heather in its band and had a bag slung over his shoulder. The second, standing immediately behind him, wore a cap tilted off one side of his head and was craning his neck to look over the other man's shoulder.

Finally, the door swung open and the two men entered. Hamish pretended not to notice them and bent his head to conduct some absorbing task under the bar. The first man spoke to Maisie, ordering some ale, then – as she turned – he caught her elbow and leaned close to ask her something. Whatever the question, Maisie shrugged and shook her head. The man said something else to her and she shook her head again, this time more insistently.

The two men walked to the table by the fireplace, exuding menace, and the two occupants, already sat there, looked up uneasily. The newcomers, having come in from the relative chill of the outside, were drawn by the welcoming heat of the peat fire burning in the hearth. The man in the hat spoke gruffly to the two occupants of the table, then placed his bag on the floor and pushed it under the table with his toe. Whilst Hamish caught only the tone, rather than the content of what was said, it was distinctly intimidating. The men at the table got up and reluctantly moved elsewhere.

Maisie arrived with the men's ale and placed it on the table between them. The man in the hat leaned close to her and said something into her ear. She shook her head. He reached and grabbed her arm and Maisie flinched, looking down at her arm, her face contorting in pain. She tried to pull herself away, but the man's grip was too strong.

Hamish reached swiftly to a hidey hole in the wall behind the bar. Gripping the handle of a little sgian-dubh knife, he flicked it through the air, embedding it with a dull thud in the wooden post, a palm's width from the aggressor's head.

The man stopped and turned, with unrestrained animosity blazing in his eyes. Maisie, taking prompt advantage of the distraction, wrenched her arm free and shot away from him.

"I may have to teach you a lesson!", the man snarled.

Hamish Pottle knew the make of these men, instinctively, from the first second he laid eyes on them. Having survived the bloody brutality and barbaric violence of a life at sea, he knew the folly of squaring up to foes such as these using any kind of civilised code. No amount of aggressive or threatening posturing would work with these two. There would be no testing and pushing each other, like decent people would, by ramping up the menace until violence became an option. These men were savage animals who thrived on violence.

"Am I frightened of you?" Asked the Inn Keeper in a measured, even tone, drilling him with his eyes, "Because if you think I am, then the next mistake you make could be your last!"

The man was taken off guard by such a breathtakingly bold challenge and his gaze became furtive, his eyes darting left and right like a snake, working out his next move.

"We have a simple misunderstanding," the thug cooed, "And have managed to set off on the wrong foot!"

His companion, in the cap, was distinctly unimpressed by the change of direction and was unable to keep this from his face, but shrugged his shoulders, begrudgingly.

"We are searching for a friend, a former compatriot from our army days," the unpleasant intruder continued, "And the memories of war, recalling events, have taken their toll on our.... disposition."

"Is that so?", Hamish said, in a flat tone, ludicrously aware that he couldn't trust a single word that came out of this man's mouth.

Hamish recalled their hesitant entry into the bar and a question flashed into his mind: Who was it they thought they might find within that would inspire such wariness in two brutes like these? The answer came to him in a second: The Constable! A hefty, powerful, athletic man who carried a twin artillery piece that masqueraded as a hand weapon! Hamish locked out the smile in head from his face.

The Constable had left that morning, at first light, proposing to "go about the King's business" but promising, faithfully, to be back late afternoon for Caitlan's rightly famous pot roast.

Hamish felt the tension in the room drain rapidly away and the customers - sensing it, too - resumed their talk, card games and laughter. The bad man in the hat looked at the Inn Keeper expectantly and Hamish looked him in the eye, unblinking.

"Would you have seen a stranger to these parts, with a costly looking riding coat and high boots?", asked the man in the hat, from his seat, "He's a big man, broad and tall.", So saying, he set his hands in the air, this way and that, to show the size of the person he sought.

Hamish pretended to think for a few moments, looking upwards with his brows knotted in contemplation, before shaking his head and throwing up his palms in apology, "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Are you sure?", the man asked, giving his question a palpable tinge of threat.

The Inn Keeper looked first at one, then at the other, and back again.

"As sure as I need to be for the likes of you.", Hamish replied.

The man in the cap stood up from the table, his fists clenched, and turned to his companion. Hamish couldn't see what look passed between them, but he seemed to feel encouraged.

"I don't think I like your tone," the man in the cap said, and then added, scornfully, "Good man."

In his peripheral vision, Hamish noticed the other man, still seated, reach for something out of his bag under the table.

"You're welcome to ignore my tone, if you choose," replied Hamish, "But I would encourage you not to press your luck."

The expression on both men's faces told Hamish that they weren't used to people defying them. The stance of the man in the cap stiffened and he took a step backwards before kicking the chair in annoyance. Hamish heard the

splintering of wood but decided to ignore it. Then, loosening his neckerchief, as if in preparation for a fight, the man in the snarled: "I'd like it best if I didn't hear your voice again, old man!"

Hamish discerned his seated partner move something heavy into his lap. Moments later Hamish heard the feint but distinctive metallic click of a gun being cocked. Ignoring the man who had spoken, Hamish locked gaze with the one sat down. The man's lip curled in a nasty sneer and he made a guttural noise of scorn.

"You'd best settle for hearing from me," Hamish cautioned them, reaching under the bar and picking up a loaded pistol, "Than hearing from Ruby..." Hamish placed the pistol on the counter, then - reaching and retrieving its twin - he added: "Or from Rose." and deftly arranged the second firearm side by side with the first, before adding: "They make a fearful sound when they're angry."

Both men looked from Hamish down to the pistols. Their eyes flicked expertly from one to the other, noting that both had their sparking hammers cocked back and deciding, correctly, that the covers over the powder pans would be drawn back.

The bar fell dramatically silent as the customers quickly either moved seat or shuffled down the benches to the opposite side of the bar from the troublemakers.

The seated man smiled broadly and laughed. "You'd need to be quick with those things, old man."

The man who was standing lifted both arms, his palms turned up to the ceiling, then let them drop limply back down to slap against his legs. This display of exasperation was accompanied by a long, weary sigh. All the while his eyes remained locked on the worn and weathered sailor's hands that Hamish had folded, one over the other, on the counter in front of him.

The man who was seated loudly banged his hand on the table, replicating the other's frustration, and then carefully and noisily gouged the surface of the table by dragging his ring across it. Hamish's eyes were drawn to the deep groove in the wood and his lips curled in annoyance.

This deliberate distraction was the fleeting moment the man in the cap needed to make his move. As Hamish's eyes returned to the first man, he saw his arm coming up from behind his back and the flash of metal as a throwing axe leapt from his hand, spinning towards Hamish's chest.

Hamish squeezed the trigger of the pistol he had named Rose. The sparking hammer arced down, striking across the abrasion plate and sending a sputter of tiny white-hot metal splinters into the powder pan. The powder ignited in a brief flash and the pistol kicked as the charge in the muzzle propelled the lead ball towards its target.

The face of the man in the cap changed from triumph to disbelief and then to horror, as he realised - far too late - that the hands on the counter top

were not real but imitation! Hamish had once accepted them as part payment of a drinking debt from a member of a travelling theatre show.

The flight of the axe took less than three seconds, but Hamish saw it coming lazily, tumbling unhurriedly through the air as if it were moving through treacle. He had experience this sensation before, during pitched battles on the decks of ships, where time suddenly and inexplicably slowed down to a fraction of its normal pace. Hamish recognised it and welcomed it like a long-lost friend, immersing himself into it as he stepped casually aside to dodge the axe. The whirling projectile crashed into the wooden shelves behind the bar sending up a multi-coloured shower of glass and liquor before embedding itself in the wall.

The heavy ball hit the man just to the left of his nose, underneath his eye. His head recoiled under the impact as the deadly metal narrowly skimmed underneath his eye socket as it passed through his brain and exited out the back of his skull. Its energy still potent, it came to rest deep in a wooden post behind him.

His body flailed its arm in a reflex spasm of death and whirled to the ground in a heap, blood seeping from the acorn sized hole in the front of his skull and brains slopping out through the apple sized aperture at the back.

By this juncture, the man at the table had brought his hidden pistol from under the table and was in the process of raising it to fire. Hamish was already squeezing Ruby's trigger, having had the advantage of pre-aiming both guns, reasonably accurately, while his hands had been covered by a towel. There was a bright flash as the striking arm threw burning sparks into the powder pan, then a soft "whoomph" as the ignition was passed into the pistol's body. The main charge promptly erupted forcing the lead ball out in a billow of smoke towards its target.

The man began to lurch to the side, vainly seeking the shelter of the wooden post beside him. He had nowhere near the three seconds available that this action demanded. Hamish could see the blurred trail of the ball through the air and knew, by every instinct he could muster, that this should be impossible. Nonetheless, he was able to calmly plot the path of the deadly sphere and predict the point of impact. He could be certain that the shot would hit the man in the heart.

The pistol ball struck a billowing fold in the villain's coat, created as the material lagged behind the momentum of his frantic sideways motion, desperately trying to evade it. The Inn Keeper stared, both fascinated and appalled, as the fabric first compressed against the man's chest, then began to rip and tatter under the impact. At a dawdling pace, a hole began to appear at the centre of several concentric rings of shock that made the air pulse outwards like the ripples on water as a stone drops into it. The fabric shredded to pieces as it caved into the wound that was opening in the man's chest.

It seemed, for all the world, as if he had been struck by an invisible hammer. Blood, muscle and flesh exploded outwards, spraying in a perfect circle, before the centre hung – suspended in the air for a moment – then retreated into the cavity, like a tide turning, to follow the wake of the ball as it exited through the man's back.

His lifeless body tumbled to the ground like a rag doll thrown by a petulant child. It crashed backwards, thudding onto the wooden floorboards with a wet splash as the gaping wound in back, the size of a man's fist, spilled out tattered muscle and heart tissue along with strewn white fragments of shattered shoulder blade and ribs. His chest spurted a fountain of crimson blood. His weapon, which he had not had time to fire, spun on the ground beside him like a demented water beetle, mocking his demise. His head came to rest in a seeping pool of blood, the staring, lifeless eyes wide open in startled surprise, still registering the shock of his final moments.

The air was thick with blueish, acrid smoke from Hamish's still smoking spark-lock pistols. The diligent and scrupulous care that Hamish took in cleaning his guns was matched only by the blatant disregard he paid to the two corpses on the floor.

"Now that was a fearful sound!", he declared, appreciatively.

The fifteen remaining customers in the bar looked at the dead bodies with little concern. They exchanged remarks and opinions, in hushed voices, ranging from the dismissive and the scornful to the outright contemptuous. There was little doubt that the passing of these two ruffians would not be mourned.

Hamish called to the serving girl, who was peeping round the edge of the door to the kitchen, and she came back into the room.

"I have a special cleaning job for you!", he told her, "Your admirer and his friend have caused a bit of a mess." With a graceful flick of his hand, Hamish threw her a coin in a high arc and she caught it, snatching it out of the air. Her look of approval, when she appraised the coin in her hand, confirmed him as a generous employer.

Alex Brennan hurried in, carrying his boots, one in each hand and said: "I heard shots. Is everything okay?". Seeing the calm and unruffled customers, who had – by this time – returned their attention solely to their ale, he added: "In the hurry, I didn't manage to get my boots on!"

"Tell me, young Alex," enquired the Inn Keeper, in oddly jovial tones, "How are you with a spade?"

Alex looked baffled and looked around for anything that might require the assistance of a digging tool, his eyes eventually arriving at the two bodies on the floor.

Hamish shrugged and offered: "They wouldn't settle their ale account when I asked them." and then winked.

Alex and Hamish rigged up a makeshift stretcher out of some heavy canvass and leather reins and carried the two corpses, one at a time out to the woods, a little distance from the back of the inn and set to work digging their final resting places.

After an hour of excavation, Alex and Hamish stopped shovelling soil and both gasped loudly. Sweat was streaming down their faces and necks, darkening their shirts and making them stick to their backs. Folding his hands on the handle of the spade, Alex rested his chin on them and watched Hamish Pottle dig another scoop of soil from the pile and deliver it into the grave.

"They were big guys," Alex complained, "But it's taking ages to fill in over the top of them!" He paused and then quipped: "You haven't pulled them out while my back was turned, have you?"

Hamish laughed and mopped his brow, "I still say we should have buried them one on top of the other instead of side by side."

"They very likely had no respect for anybody while they were alive," Alex surmised, "But – putting that to one aside - let's spoil them with kindness of showing them respect now that they'll be no more trouble to anyone."

Hamish panted and caught his breath before replying: "They are going to be feeding the worms. That's probably the best work they have done in a long time!".

"Aye," Alex agreed, "When I was fighting with the Dutch against the Spanish, there were a good few mercenaries on hand. They were never much welcomed by the regular troops. With them having no belief, loyalty or patriotism to motivate them to join the fight - just a love of money - they tended to draw a good deal of contempt. I must confess that they were good fighters, though, so when battle was raging, and each man had to depend on the other, people quickly lost interest in what drove them!"

"Mercenaries are mercenaries, the whole world over.", Hamish announced.

The two paused, again, and both looked around, checking in all directions to make sure they were alone in the woods and not being observed.

"If it's not the McRaes behind these two turning up,", Alex declared, "Then I would be very much surprised!"

"Aye," Hamish agreed, "It was clear from their description that they were looking to find Constable McGrath. They claimed he was a former army comrade, but I didn't believe that for a moment."

"The question is," Alex suggested, "How long will it take the McRaes to miss these two?"

"The question is," Hamish countered, "Will they miss these two ogres because they have already met up with them or will they miss them because they are yet to arrive?"

"More important still," Alex offered, "Is why didn't McGrath return, last night, and did he know about these two?"

"There is certainly no love lost between the Constable and the McRaes," Hamish mused, "Killing their leader certainly assured that! Their need for vengeance, however, didn't overwhelm their judgement. They knew that killing a Constable of His Royal Highness King James, if it were attributed to them, would bring down the wrath of Hell on them!"

The two men continued their chore for almost ten minutes before either one spoke again. It was Hamish, who broke the silence, looking troubled: "Did McGrath say anything to you, last night? Anything about what he was thinking or intending to do"

"No," replied Alex, "We just talked about general things. There was nothing in particular that came up in conversation."

Hamish & Alex continued shifting soil from the mound, which was now appreciably smaller, down into the hole from which it came. The hole seemed to fill slowly and both men were visibly anxious to complete the job. Neither of them wanted to be observed, in the act, by the wrong people.

When, at last, they had finished and were stamping down the soil and strewing it with leaves, twigs and decaying mulch, Hamish pressed his previous question, again: "McGrath didn't say anything to you at all that might have meant anything?"

"No," Alex replied, shrugging his shoulders, "We just talked about old times and our experiences in the army and about life and fate and such things."

Hamish looked thoughtful, his brows creased, "Nothing of any importance?"

"No," Alex repeated, recalling the strange little poem or riddle McGrath had recited, but sure that it was of no significance, "We roasted pine cones, split them, ate the nuts and drank too much whiskey."

"I was a Merchantman, on the seas, for many a year," Hamish began, "And, when new crew were taken on – which was a constant thing, due to illness, death and people quitting that kind of life – there would be that odd time when you would look at a somebody and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that they were a significant individual who would have an impact on your life."

Alex nodded, sagely, "It was the same in the infantry.", he replied.

"This man, McGrath," Hamish remarked, "And – if I may say so – your good self, as well, are two fine examples of such people."

Alex inclined his head and lifted his hand in a brief salute to his temple.

"McGrath," Hamish continued, "Was professing a hearty desire to be tasting my wife's pot roast, yesterday, and – although I am not claiming that such a thing would drag a man back from the ends of the Earth – its strange that, rather than being late, he simply didn't return at all."

Alex, giving a final, conclusive stamp on the soil, turned back to Hamish and nodded his head in agreement, "It's mighty strange, indeed."

"Yet," persisted Hamish, like a dog gnawing at a bone, "He never said anything to you out of the ordinary?"

"No," Alex confirmed, turning back to the grave and loosening the lacing of his britches, "I'm afraid he didn't."

"What are you doing?", asked Hamish, in puzzlement, hearing the other unbuckle his belt and then seeing him ease down his britches a few inches."

"What am I doing?", Alex asked, as way of reply, "I have an obligation to discharge, here!"

Hamish first heard the flow of liquid and then caught a glimpse of it as the steaming flow of hot urine was delivered from Alex' bladder onto the grave.

"On behalf of all the people they wronged," Alex announced, "And all the people they bullied, assaulted or killed...." Alex swung his hips, left to right, propelling the sparkling yellow flow in a snaking whiplash, "I need to give them the send-off they deserve!"

Hamish let out a laugh that set a dozen birds to flight from the tress and slapped his thigh, "I can only hope that some of that finds its way onto their faces and, better still, into their eyes and mouths!"

The two men, tired and weary, trudged the half mile back to the Inn and went around to the horse trough at the front. Here, they took turns at working the handle of the pump while the other washed. Hamish called to one of the maids to fetch them both clean shirts and they sat down on the 'gentry steps', outside the entrance to the inn. These were a set of wooden beams stacked to form a short rise of stairs for people to board coaches who were either unable or - for those of a more refined upbringing - unwilling, to clamber up into coaches by means of their own narrow, awkward steps.

When the maid returned with the shirts, she approached them uneasily and offered them tentatively, almost apologetically. Hamish's face dropped at the sight of them, close up. The maid looked anguished. Hamish knew that his wife had sent her with these particular shirts. Alex put his on and flexed his arms as if performing chest expanding exercises and remarked: "The owner of these must be a strapping and manly individual! Were they left by guest?"

The expression on Hamish's face was desolate as he replied: "They were left by my son."

"A fine strong man, to be sure!", Alex declared, cheerfully, attempting to lift the other's mood.

"He's dead.", Hamish added, dismally.

"Oh!", Alex said, flatly, feeling clumsy and stupid, "I'm genuinely sad to hear that."

Hamish didn't reply. He was there in body, only. His mind – as confirmed by his far-off, vacant stare – was elsewhere. Alex feared he was reliving some traumatic event from the past and decided not to intrude upon it with any more talk.

After a couple of minutes, Hamish suddenly turned back to him, looking like a man back in the present.

"I'll not speak of it, if it grieves you.", said Alex.

"It's nothing to trouble yourself about.", Hamish responded.

Alex could not prevent a wounded expression from reaching his face and, seeing it, Hamish relented.

"I take your concern kindly," Hamish assured him, "But his passing has left me numb and empty rather than cross or upset."

Alex paused a reverential moment then asked: "Was he lost at sea?"

"Aye," Hamish replied, "He was."

The far off look returned to the Inn Keeper's eyes, for a short while, before he added: "My son was a farmer. I persuaded him, after much arguing, not to take to the waves, as I had."

Alex gave him a puzzled look and had opened his mouth to ask a question when Hamish cut him off: "He was lost in a sea of corn. Taken from us by a pistol shot from a Campbell who was disputing a land boundary."

Alex held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness and Hamish, seeing the pained look in his eye, hugged him, briefly resting his chin on his shoulder and slapping him on his back.

"He would have been about your age, now.", Hamish confided, narrowly avoiding a sob in his voice as he choked back his emotions.

Hamish turned to Alex but said nothing further. A tear escaped the brim of the old man's eye and rolled down his cheek. As if in answer, a tear rolled down Alex' own cheek. The old sailor reached out and patted the young man's arm. The young man returned the gesture and the two men sat in silence, side by side on the wooden slabs, for several minutes. The silence was devoid of any hint of embarrassment or discomfort. It was an easy silence, between friends. A silence that shunned anything so basic and primitive as words to share its intimacy.

After a little while, a group of birds began singing in the trees. It was almost as if they had held back, in reverence, but now found their song too joyous to restrain. The men looked up to the trees at the same time and shared a smile that neither had to see to know was there.

"Its not so much what we do that spurs regret," Hamish announced, "But what we hold back from doing. That's what torments us. An action can be condemned, in hindsight, and argued to be right or wrong, wise or foolish. When we fail to act, we expose ourselves to a grief that can consume our very soul. I have a demon to lay to rest, along with these two men."

Hamish stood up, quickly and unexpectedly, catching Alex by surprise. Alex stood, too, feeling it the appropriate thing to do.

"He said nothing. Nothing of any significance.", Hamish said, making it more of an accusation than a question.

Alex looked sheepish. Hamish tilted his head to one side. Alex let out a long sigh of resignation. He knew exactly who "he" was and didn't need any reminding.

"We talked about possessions, at one point. About things we value.", Alex confessed, "I have a flint box that belonged to my Grandfather."

Hamish looked at him eagerly, like a dog by a long soundless rabbit hole that just heard movements from its occupant. Alex looked pained, almost apologetic, as he went on: "He recited a verse or spoke a ditty or something...", Alex screwed up his features in contemplation, "It was strange..."

Hamish stood, patiently, as if waiting for a possessive gun dog to reluctantly drop a recovered pheasant

"He said 'I have the petal of a rose. I keep it in a thimble of glass. I keep the thimble in...', Alex broke off seeing the shocked and astounded expression on Hamish's face.

The Inn Keeper looked horrified! His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open in dumbfounded amazement. Alex thought that he couldn't have looked more astonished if he had just announced that he were the Messiah and that this was the Second Coming.

"Brydda!", Hamish gasped, slapping his hand to his own mouth, "The words of Queen Kiffan.", he said with reverence and awe.

Alex stood, baffled and speechless.

"Horses! Get to the horses!", Hamish cried, "We need to go to Coilltean Dorcha and take a look around. The McRaes of the Watch use it as their base when they are in these parts."

Coilltean Dorcha (or 'Dark Woods' in English) was a forbidding place, no doubt deliberately chosen for its gloomy and inhospitable setting. It was one of Hamish's least favourite places and the inhabitants were, appropriately, his least favourite people.

Alex hurried round to the stables with Hamish, who was bellowing for the stable lad to saddle up their horses. The stable lad, who looked as if he had just woken from a nap, sprang into the air like a startled cat and reached the saddles in half the strides a person should take. His hands a blur of activity, the boy had grabbed a saddle, thrown it up onto the first horse's back and had begun attending to the straps, before Alex could even get his own saddle off the shelf. In awe of the young lad's dexterity, Alex positioned his saddle and moved to place the first strap underneath the beast. In the blink of an eye, the boy was there, catching the strap and passing through the buckle of its partner. With the economy of motion of a professional, he hauled the straps tight. The horse promptly looked down, as if to examine his handiwork, at the point they reached perfect torsion. The horse seemed pleased.

Alex nodded towards Constable McGrath's second horse and said: "If he were going, not meaning to come back, he would have taken his other horse."

"Yes," agreed Hamish, "It's a fine animal just to abandon."

The two riders mounted up and the boy halved an apple and give a piece to each animal. As they moved off, the boy appeared to inspect his own work and the hint of a momentary, pouting frown that flickered on his lips appeared – perversely – to indicate satisfaction.

Hamish rode to the side of the inn and bade Alex to follow him inside. Hamish grimly loaded Ruby and Rose into a bag and handed Alex his own weapon from the cupboard behind the bar. He then took a knife and ran down the inside corner of the cupboard and then levered out a panel. Handing Alex the knife, to put in his sporran, Hamish eased the panel forward and it swung open to reveal two muskets. Hamish took the muskets out and handed one to Alex.

Alex had not held a musket since he had been in Austria, six weeks ago, and felt uneasy at handling one again, but took it, nonetheless. Hamish took out powder horns and two bags of shot balls.

"These are lead," Hamish explained, handing Alex the heavier bag, "And these are iron.", he said tossing the other bag up and down in his palm a couple of times.

The Inn Keeper didn't insult Alex' knowledge and understanding by explaining that the iron balls flew a greater distance with less charge or that they were less prone to drop below their target.

Without a further word, the two men loaded their weapons, made them safe, then went back outside and got onto their horses.

"You didn't ask me who the Brydda were.", Hamish said, conversationally.

"No.", replied Alex, flatly.

The two men moved out onto the road, where Hamish put his heels into his horse and set off up the long hill at a pace. Alex prompted his mare to keep up. When they reached the summit, Hamish slackened off the speed.

"You don't think McGrath has gone back to his troops and been delayed for one reason or another?", Alex asked.

"No, I don't," Hamish confirmed, "Because he would have sent a messenger. I'm sure of it."

"Well, we received no message.", Alex agreed.

"We received a message," Hamish replied, "But it wasn't via a messenger. He left a message with you. A message and a warning."

It took just over half an hour to reach the turning leading into the woods that gave Coilltean Dorcha its name. The two men exchanged looks of unease as they encouraged their mounts down the path. The air in this higher ground was markedly colder and, up ahead of them, they could see snow in the trees. As they reached the snow, they could feel a modest breeze behind them and, in the distance, they could see a thin haze where the snow was still lightly falling.

"The snow is still falling over there, in the distance, but it's not fallen here for some while." Alex noted, pointing first ahead and then down to the ground beside them, "If we're going to be going close to their hide out, in the snow, then we're going to leave tracks all over the place for them to see!"

Hamish grunted his dismay and said: "That's a problem we will have to tackle when we get to it." Then he pulled his horse up to a stop and raised his hand for Alex to do the same. "This place," he said, waving an arm towards the partial clearing a little way in front, "Would be ideal for an ambush!"

The two riders coaxed their steeds to walk dead slow, looking in all directions for any possible trap, then stopping them every few strides to listen. Hamish gestured to Alex to take out his pistol and he did the same. Brandishing their weapons, they dismounted and crept forward cautiously. The snow made everything ominously quiet, soaking up all noise and rendering the perfect stillness threatening and uncomfortable.

Hamish leaned in close to Alex, bringing his mouth a handspan from his ear, and whispered: "Look... signs of a struggle... over there by the bushes."

They edged their way to the spot, treading stealthily, their pistols at the ready. The bushes had a couple of broken branches, stretched back and splintered, accompanied by a cluster of snapped twigs. On closer inspection, the foliage was bent, as if somebody had fallen, or been thrown, into it. On the ground, the thin scatter of snow clearly displayed the boot marks of at least three, maybe even four, different people.

Suddenly, Hamish grabbed Alex firmly by the arm, preventing him from advancing. His grip was harsh and Alex almost rebuked him until he saw him pointing, urgently, to something on the ground.

Hamish dropped to his haunches, staring intently at something, and Alex heard a sharp intake of breath followed by a low Gaelic curse. Alex crouched beside him and had to stifle an involuntary gasp.

There, amidst a swathe of pristine snow, standing out starkly in dazzling contrast - like a charcoal smudge on a pure white canvas - was a lone black thumbnail.

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 12

Annis steered her horse off the shoreline of the river and up the bank to the higher ground. The edge of the water had become rockier and the margin of sand sufficient for a horse had petered out.

The Grant army – for any army it was, of over 300 men – were fanned out along the meadows and woodlands a good way back from the bank. The regular soldiers were positioned in the forward ranks, being more impressive with their better garb, their more prolific armour and much superior weaponry. Those men who were called to arms had taken position behind them and were more often carrying pitchforks, clubs and scythes rather than swords and shields.

The look that Balgair and Gavin had given her, seeing the assembled troops, had been unambiguous. They had both been surprised and dismayed that Clan Grant had assembled such a large fighting force in evident preparation for serious conflict.

The atmosphere of the Grants was one of cheerful good will. There had been no need for bloodshed and a feud of six centuries, fanned by simmering resentment, had been miraculously resolved. Their hostility to constant judgement for an event in their past had slowly festered, generation by generation, leaving them with excruciating bitterness.

History had judged the Grants as traitors who had betrayed their rescuers. In fairness, the culprits who actually carried out this deed had been dead and buried for an age, but the past could not be undone and had, ever since, hung around their necks like a millstone.

Annis rode up to the high end of the fields and across a ridge and down to a stream that fed into the Spey. She pulled her horse and turned to Gavin who promptly nodded to her and said: "This is a mile."

The Laird Grant rode up and drew his horse parallel to them. He was without his close guards and his two leaders had stopped a conspicuously restrained distance from them.

"A long, long time has passed," the Grant remarked, "Since last you could have been here in safety and without fear of attack."

"This is true." The Queen of the West agreed.

"I know that you have a far greater force in reserve than you have brought with you, today, and I know that they include a substantial number of mounted troops."

The Queen maintained her face expressionless.

"Your apparent display of weakness," the Grant continued, "Is actually a powerful, yet profound, demonstration of your true strength."

"I would not insult you," Annis confided, "By not presuming that you had monitored our approach for some time." She smiled sweetly.

The Laird smiled back.

"I came to cross the river," she confessed, "Believing, beyond any shadow of doubt, that you would rather flee as fast as the wind, rather than capture me and hold me prisoner, especially since - with such a small escort - I was so obviously coming in peace."

"You're right that I would be reluctant to have another shame to live down!", he blurted, bitterly.

"The Vikings used to bury an axe to put a conflict behind them. Maybe we should do them same?", she enquired.

Balgair suddenly sat bolt upright on his horse and turned to them with utter horror written across his face. He stared, back and forth between the two, his mouth sagging open, with an expression of shock and alarm.

Annis and the Grant shared a worried look.

Balgair sprang from his saddle and hurled himself to the ground in front of the Grant, his sword thwacking against the soil. The Grant's two leaders jerked in alarm and Annis saw them fight and, thankfully, overcome the powerful urge to draw their weapons.

"The Lady Elise!", Balgair cried.

The Grant crooked his head to the side enquiringly while Annis anxiously looked around for the arrival of a newcomer, having no idea who he meant.

"The Lady Elise Grant," Balgair said, bowing his head low, his voice trembling, "She was slain by Clan McCrory, my Laird."

The Grant looked down at him, dumbfounded, as if he had just claimed that flapping his arms could make him fly.

"There was a truce," Balgair told him, "But, in violation of it, a McCrory party had crossed the river into the Dappled Woods. It is written. It is known."

The Grant looked at Balgair incredulously as his confession continued.

"They came across someone on horseback, they took them to be a messenger, for they were dressed in such a manner. The rider spurred their horse as the McCrory party approached and one of them threw an axe. It hit the rider in the neck, at the base of their skull and killed....", He made a choking noise of grief, "and killed her outright."

Annis watched the Grant's face and, instead of anger or outrage, it took on a look of tender indulgence, like a parent hearing a child recount a nightmare or having had a painful stomach ache.

Balgair reached for his sword but withdrew only a short measure of it before grasping the blade, inoffensively, between thumb and forefinger to release it the rest of the way. Having extracted the whole of it in this calculatedly unthreatening manner, he stood and offered it by its hilt to the Grant. Having done so, Balgair removed his helmet and knelt upright on his knees with his head bowed, deliberately and ceremoniously exposing his neck.

The Grant shook his head and gave a long, anguished sigh and said: "This was over a hundred years ago."

"We wronged you," Balgair declared, emphatically "Most grievously and mischievously and we did not set ourselves to account. We let our misdeed fade, to be forgotten, while – year on year - rebuking you for yours!"

"And?", asked the Laird, gently.

"And we must absolve our wrong with blood."

All at once, Annis felt sure that she had full stock of this Laird Grant, as she watched the scene unfold. He reluctantly took the offered sword, but let it fall point first to skewer the ground, then dismounted his horse and lifted Balgair to his feet. The Grant turned to his two senior companions, a little way off, and – while she could not see his expression – she saw the other two Grants shake their heads solemnly in response.

"You do your Clan great honour and bring great credit to the Laird McDonald by your honesty and integrity." The Grant professed, "To be frank, it refreshes my faith in humankind to see such a noble action, but your people are in no way tarnished by her death."

Balgair looked at the Laird Grant, plainly puzzled. The Grant took the sword from the ground, raised Balgair's hand to receive it and wrapped the McDonald cavalryman's fingers around its handle to make him grip it.

"It cleanses my wounds," The Grant admitted, "And salves my soul to think that anybody else should be so tormented by a wrong committed in the past. Your wrong, however, is but like a drop of water compared to the ocean of my own."

The Grant stood, for a long moment, looking up into the clouds. It was not clear if he sought inspiration or consolation. Eventually, he abruptly turned back to Balgair with an urgent question on his face: "The Clan McCrory turned up at the Battle of Kirriemuir and, again, at the Battle of Dunkeld. Your assistance was important in turning things in our favour. That was an extremely charitable act, was it not?"

The Grant waited, but Balgair did not answer. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, apologetically. The Grant's look and tone remained sympathetic and conciliatory.

"I'm sure that if somebody cannot admit their wrong to the person they wronged," The Grant declared, "Then making amends to them must go a long way towards easing their troubled conscience. I regret that, in our case, we chose to be hostile and resentful, instead, spurring a hatred that smouldered in our soul. A hatred that proved too much for my Grandmother."

The Grant wrung his hands, as if subconsciously trying to wash off the events of the past or, at least, their stain.

"When that band of McCrory men killed my Grandmother, mistaking her for a messenger," The Grant told them, "For that is how she was dressed, they did her a kindness, for she had taken poison and their slaying her prevented her from suffering a slow and painful death."

Annis, Balgair and Gavin all looked astonished.

"My Grandmother was a deeply religious woman. She carried a messenger's bag and wore a messenger's clothing because, in her mind, she was conveying a message from Clan Grant to God. A message of shame and regret. She stowed her crucifix, her rosary and her bible in her satchel, along with consecrated bread from the Holy Communion she had just celebrated and then drank poison before setting off for the woods."

The Grant's face looked as if it were carved from stone.

"My father followed her, staying carefully hidden. She had forbidden him from intervening and had made him swear to it by an oath. He saw her slain and told me that he wanted to burst from his hiding place and hug the McCrory who threw the axe. He would have done so, he said, if he had not feared being killed or taken hostage himself."

None of them spoke as the Grant fell silent, his lips contorting as he mulled over his dark recollections, his mind captured by the pull of their morbid spell.

At last, he returned to the present, looking up as if waking from a dream.

"My Grandmother wanted to present herself to the Queen of the West and give her life as penance for our betrayal. My father had become Laird when her husband died, and he would not allow it. He wouldn't even hear of it and flew into a rage. He regarded the descendants of the Brydda as his enemy. I'm sure that that was a far easier way to deal with the past than by accepting and admitting it."

The Grant filled his lungs and let out the air as a long, long sigh.

"If my Grandmother had known that Queen Kiffan had bestowed protection upon us from the worst elements of the Vikings' wrath, I am certain – completely and utterly certain – that she would have gone on her mission, anyway. She would have found the Queen of the West – the holder of that title in her day – and she would have carried out her plan to give her life."

The Grant shook his head, slowly and mournfully, rubbing his scalp in irritation and pressing his lips into a thin line. He looked back to the other two closest riders and gritted his teeth.

"I have struggled with this whole miserable business but I have shield my son from and part of it," He said, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder towards the younger of the two riders behind them.

Queen Annis and her two consorts shared a glance of dawning comprehension at this unexpected insight.

"Your revelations, Your Majesty, ", said the Grant, bowing to Annis, "Came as a shock to me, but have been a massive and devastating blow to my son, who had not even the slightest inkling of these matters."

Annis bit back her urge to apologise, regarding it as being inappropriate.

The Grant turned to his two senior Clansmen – his son and his close advisor – and gestured to them with a flick of the wrist, a twirl of his hand, then a flat, forward motion with his palm. A few moments later, an approximation of the signal was passed on to the assembled troops, a little way beyond. Before long, a series of short notes were blown, several times over, by a piper. In response, the whole cordon of troops turned, about face, and moved off about twenty paces before coming to a staggered stop.

His senior clansmen had remained where they were and the armed close escort, a few paces behind them, had not moved, either. The Grant gestured to them, sternly, and they moved off with obvious reluctance.

"Your Majesty," began the Grant, "The blood that ran through Kiffan the Defiant runs through you. The blood that ran through your forebear, a hundred years ago, runs through you. The blood of all my people before me runs through me."

With this, he withdrew his sword and kissed it at its cross-piece.

"I must stand and give account for our wrong as my grandmother would have done had she known what I know, now.", he said, "We have lived, if unknowingly, under your protection. This being so, we must pay back for that historic betrayal – over which we have had no control for the six hundred years that have gone by – but which smudges our honour more greatly, today, than ever in the past."

In the same gesture of supplication that Balgair had used to him, the Grant bowed his head and offered the sword to Annis, then fell to his knees, his body upright and neck exposed.

"My Queen." the Grant said, with sombre tone.

Annis stiffened, visibly, for she knew the huge implication of this address. She knew, without a doubt that if he declared her his Queen and, as a result, the formal boundary of her sovereignty were to become extended more than these nominal five paces beyond the River Spey to the East, there would be immediate conflict with the Clans that bordered them. She knew, with dread and horror, that even this would not be the end of it. She knew that this would draw the King's army to intervene, for such a challenge as this could not go unanswered. She knew, still worse, that it would not be the Blues-and-Greys of Scotland that King James, in London, would march to bring them a war, but the Red Coats of the English army.