

# THE FIRE TREE

## 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 soldiers' 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.