

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....."