

# 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. Numbed 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!"