

# 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.