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Prologue

Badcall Bay in the Northwest Highlands

A fine summer's eve, 1250

“Spawn of Satan!”

Magnus MacBride, proud Highland chieftain, drew rein on the heathery ridge just above the sheltered cove of Badcall Bay and stared through smoke-tinged clouds of choking haze at the six many-oared Viking longships beating swiftly away from the coast and towards the open sea. His men thundered up beside him, each one jerking his steed to a sudden, jarring halt. They were fierce fighters, well-armed and battle-proven. But just now they could do no more than rattle their swords and shout their outrage.

Not that Magnus heard them above the roar of his own hot blood pounding in his ears. The terrible hammering of his heart that raced in time with the flashing oars of the longships as they sped across the waves, almost flying and leaving great plumes of spray in their wake. Magnus glared after them, shock and dread slamming into him like a hundred hard-hitting fists. White-hot fury scalded him, squeezing his chest and making it impossible to breathe.

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The hot, ash-filled air also made inhaling difficult, but that unpleasantness was the least of his concern. Now, this moment, his entire world contracted to hold only those six fleeing longships.

Nothing else existed.

Even at this distance, he recognized the garishly colored sea-dragon painted on the square sail of the largest Norse vessel.

The coiled, fire-spewing monster was the emblem of Sigurd Sword Breaker, the worst of the heathen Norsemen who terrorized this coast. His hasty departure and blood-thirsty reputation left no doubt that he was responsible for the thick columns of smoke rising from the fishermen's cottages lining the foreshore beneath the ridge.

The most-times peaceful hamlet was a raging inferno.

Black, acrid smoke that stank of more than burning roof thatch came to Magnus and his men on the wind, stinging their eyes and scalding their lungs.

The smoke also obliterated their reason for being there.

Knowing it as well, the horn-blowers and drum-beaters at the rear of Magnus's party fell silent. Even his piper quit his strutting and stood stunned, the rousing skirls of his blowpipes dying away to a pitiful moan. Brought along to herald Magnus's arrival at Badcall village – a journey made to collect Liana Beaton, his soon-to-be bride – these men, too, swiped at streaming eyes and gaped at the hellish scene.

And it was hell.

Badcall Bay was now a place of the dead.

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No screams or cries rose above the wicked crackle and roar of the flames.

Whoever might remain in the little fishing community at the foot of the steep and rocky cliffs lived no more. And if anyone did yet draw breath, God's mercy on them, for they'd met a terrible and undeserved fate.

Bile rose in Magnus's throat and he welcomed its bitterness, wishing he could take on the agonies suffered by the hapless fisherfolk of Badcall Bay. He couldn't, regrettably. But he was sure that giant, unseen hands had clamped tight iron bands around his chest. His pain was that great, especially when Liana's innocent face flashed before him.

A maid still, for they'd only shared chaste kisses, her wonder that he'd defied station and tradition in desiring her for his wife had driven him to prove to her that he loved her above all else. He'd vowed to protect her always, keeping her safe from all ills and ensuring that her family and village would prosper. And – the memory speared him – he'd sworn to fill her days with happiness and her nights with boundless passion. Together, they'd raise strong sons and beautiful daughters, showing the naesayers that no other bride would have better suited him.

How she'd smiled when he'd made those promises.

Now, as he remembered, instead of seeing her eyes alight with pleasure, he saw them wide with horror.

Unspeakable terror that – he was certain - would never have visited this quiet place if not for him.

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Viking sea-raiders cared little for heaps of fish nets and strings of dried herring.

But they will have known – and rightly – that any Highland chieftain worth the title would shower his bride-to-be and her family with riches.

Those coffers of silver and coin will have been the spoils that attracted the Norsemen.

“Calum!” Magnus swung down from his saddle and signaled to one of the horn blowers, an older man who had once been a renowned Viking-fighter but now handled horses better than he wielded a sword. “Take young Ewan” – Magnus jerked a glance at Calum’s grandson – “and see the garrons away from this smoke. The rest of us will go down to the village and put out the fires. We’ll find you when we’re done.”

He didn’t add that they’d be burying the burned and the slain.

It wasn’t necessary to put words to such a ghastly task.

Calum nodded, grimly.

He knew better than most what awaited them along the shoreline.

“Ewan and I can tether the horses and come back.” The older man’s gaze flicked to the cliff edge where a steep track began its zig-zagging descent to the little bay. When he looked back at Magnus, he straightened his broad-set shoulders and spat on the ground. “You’ll be needing all hands when you get down there.”

“Aye.” Magnus gripped Calum’s arm, firmly. He hoped his old friend – a man who was much like a father to him - would leave it at that.

He was also thinking fast.

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The cliff path was too treacherous for a man of Calum's years. Especially one with a knee that was wont to give out on him, however much the doughty warrior chose to make light of his occasional stumbles. And Ewan had yet to bloody his sword. Magnus didn't want the devastation below to be the lad's first taste of carnage.

"I'd rather you and Ewan guard the horses." Magnus seized the first excuse that came to mind. "Sword Breaker and his men likely slaughtered the village cattle and took the meat onto their longships." That was true enough. "They may have left someone behind to search for other beasts and then hasten them away to a hidden landing beach to be fetched later."

Magnus doubted it. But he was grateful to see Calum bobbing his bearded head. "If such men should appear, you and Ewan can dispatch them."

"Aye, right you are." The old man's chest swelled. "We'd make short work of the ravaging bastards." He patted his sword, looking fierce. "They'd ne'er see the blow that felled them. We'd be on them that quickly."

"Good then, see you to it." Magnus stepped around him, making for the cliff edge where the others were already pounding down the track.

Calum maneuvered in front of him, blocking the way. "She may no' be down there, laddie," he warned, voicing Magnus's worst dread.

Liana in the hands of Sigurd Sword Breaker would be a fate worse than death. The Viking sea-raider was known for committing atrocities on those he sought to ransom.

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And if any attempts at rescue were made....

Magnus blotted the thought from his mind, unable to bear connecting the woman he loved with the Norseman's blackest villainies.

But if Sword Breaker had her, he'd upend the world to free her.

Calum leaned close then, his gaze direct. "You'll do well to brace yourself. I fought Sword Breaker's father, Thorkel Raven-Feeder. I know what they do—"

"I'll find Liana, where'er she is." Magnus clapped the old man's shoulder, silencing him. Then he turned and raced after his men, tearing down the steep, dizzying path as quickly as his legs would carry him.

The scene at the bottom was worse than he'd imagined.

He glanced wildly about, staring at the chaos. Beneath his feet, the ground tilted dangerously, almost bringing him to his knees.

"Liana!" He shouted her name, knowing she wouldn't answer him.

Fire-blackened – or butchered – bodies were everywhere, littering the crescent-shaped strand in glaring testimony to how savagely they'd died. No mercy had been shown. Each slashing wound displayed how ferociously the Norsemen had wielded their spears and axes.

They'd also been free with their torches. Every cot-house, byre, and fishing shed stood ablaze. The smoke was denser here, great billowing clouds that filled the cove with an ominous, suffocating stench. Magnus's men ran about, shouting and battling the flames. Many had stripped naked and were using their plaids to beat at the fires.

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Magnus ran, too, ripping off his own plaid and swatting at the leaping flames as he dashed from one sprawled and broken body to the next, searching for his bride.

He was almost to her father's cottage – now a soaring wall of fire – when one of his men pounded up to him, red-faced and panting.

“Magnus!” The man clutched at him, breathing hard. “We’ve found one still alive! It’s Liana’s grandmother and-”

“Liana?” Magnus’s hope flared. He stared at his kinsman, willing the answer he wanted to hear. “What of her? Has anyone seen-”

“She’s with the old woman.” The man’s tone made the world go black. “They’re there” – he pointed to a rocky outcrop at the edge of the cove – “together, both of them.

The grandmother doesn’t have much longer. She’s been grievously set upon. Liana-...your bride... I’m sorry, Magnus. She is-”

“Dead.” Magnus’s heart stopped on the word. He couldn’t breathe or move. He went rigid, his entire length freezing to icy-hard stone even as agony hollowed him, leaving him emptied of all but searing denial.

He saw Liana now, her lifeless body there on the sand, beside the rocks. Several of his men knelt around her, their heads respectfully bent. One of them cradled the old woman, leaning down to catch whatever last words came from her blood-drained lips.

A great cry burned in Magnus’s throat, but he couldn’t tell if he was yelling or if the terrible, ear-splitting sound was the thunder of his blood.

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Then, somehow, he was at Liana's side. He flung himself to his knees, pulling her into his arms, holding her limp form against him. She only looked asleep for her body wasn't broken and mangled like the others. Her fair hair was unsullied and shone bright as always, spilling around her shoulders. But her eyes were closed, her lashes still against the whiteness of her cheeks.

"No-o-o!" He tightened his arms around her, burying his face in her hair, still so cool and silken. Just as her skin was yet smooth and warm, almost alive.

He heard footsteps then and looked up to see one of his men approaching, pity in his eyes. The man set a hand on Magnus's shoulder, gripping hard. Magnus glared up him, grief and rage turning him feral.

"She isn't dead, see you?" He raised a fist, shaking it at the heavens. "She's only stunned, I say you. She'll waken soon and—"

He broke off, staring at the blood on his hand. Bright red and fresh, it colored his fingers and the whole of his palm, hideous rivulets trickling down his arm.

Liana's blood.

"Nae!" He held her from him, his heart splitting when her head lolled to the side. He stared at her, looking closely, seeing what he'd missed before.

There was a large crimson stain at her middle, dark, glistening-wet, and deadly.

It was then that the madness seized him.

He threw back his head and roared, allowing the pain to rush in. Blackness filled him and his vision blurred to a burning, red haze. But he kept his hands steady as he

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lowered her onto the plaid that someone had spread out for her beside the old woman who – he saw at once – had also taken her last agonizing breath.

Soon, he would see them buried. He'd put them, and all the others, to peace as best as possible in such a fouled and heinous place.

But for now, he gave in to his rage and leapt to his feet, a beast unchained. He ran to the water's edge where he whipped out his sword and plunged it deep into the wet sand beneath the cold and swirling surf.

He clenched his hands, glaring through the smoke to the now-empty horizon.

“Sword Breaker, hear me!” he bellowed, yelling with all his lung power. “There is no rock large enough to hide you! No shadows black enough to keep you and yours safe from me, Magnus MacBride!”

He strode into the water, shouting the same words again and again as he glared out to sea. He shook his fists at the rolling waves, ranting until several of his men came for him. They took him by the arms, dragging him back to shore.

Back to a life that was forever changed.

The Magnus MacBride who stood on the strand, his heart turned to stone and his blood boiling with rage, was a different man than the one who'd wakened that morn, eager and joyful to ride out and fetch his bride.

From this day on, he would live only for vengeance.

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Chapter One

Ye Olde Pagan Times

New Hope, Pennsylvania

The Present

Margo Menlove was born loving Scotland.

She lived, breathed, and dreamed in plaid. At the ripe age of sixteen, she'd singlehandedly convinced nearly all the girls in her high school – and even a few of the female teachers - that there's no man sexier than a Highlander. In those heady days, she'd even founded the now-defunct Bucks County Kilt Appreciation Society.

Now, more than ten years later, locals in her hometown of New Hope, Pennsylvania, considered her an authority on all things Scottish.

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And although she was officially employed as a Luna Harmonist at the town's premier New Age shop, Ye Olde Pagan Times, advising clients according to the natural cycle and rhythm of the moon, many customers sought her assistance when they wished to plan a trip to Scotland.

Sometimes when one of those Glasgow-bound travelers consulted her, she'd surprise herself with how well she knew the land of her dreams.

She really was an expert.

She knew each clan's history and could recognize their tartan at a hundred paces.

She prided herself on being able to recite all the must-see hot spots in the Highlands in a single breath. Her heart squeezed each time she heard bagpipes. She could dance a mean Highland fling before she'd learned to walk. Unlike most non-Scots, she even loved haggis.

And although she didn't wish to test her theory, she was pretty sure that if someone cut her, she'd bleed tartan.

She loved Scotland that much.

Her only problem was that she'd never set foot on Scotland.

And just now – she tried not to glare – a problem of a very different sort was breezing through the door of Ye Olde Pagan Times.

Dina Greed.

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Margo's greatest rival in all things Scottish. So petite that Margo secretly thought of her as Minnie Mouse, she was dressed – as nearly always – in a mini tartan skirt and incredibly high-heeled black boots that added a few inches to her diminutive but shapely form. The deeply-cut V neckline of her clinging blue cashmere top drew attention to her annoyingly full breasts. And her cloud of dark, curling hair shone bright in the late autumn sunlight slanting in through the shop windows. She was also wearing a very smug smile and that could only mean trouble.

Sure of it, Margo shifted on her stool behind her Luna Harmony station and reached to rearrange the little blue and silver jars and bottles of organic beauty products that shop owner, Patience Peasgood, urged her to sell to those seeking celestial answers.

With names like Foaming Sea bath crystals or Sea of Serenity night cream, all inspired by lunar seas, the cosmetics made people smile.

Even if most Ye Olde Pagan Times regulars found the prices too steep.

Margo secretly agreed.

No one loved a bargain more than her.

But just now she was grateful so many of the Lunarian Organic products cluttered her counter. If she appeared busy, fussing with their display, Dina Greed might not sail over to needle her.

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At the moment, the pint-sized brunette – who never failed to make Margo feel like a clunky blond amazon - was browsing around the aisles, her chin tilted as she peered at sparkling glass bowls filled with pink and clear quartz crystals. She also examined the scented oils and reed diffusers, and then drifted away to study the large selection of herbal teas and cures. Margo eyed her progress from beneath her lashes, willing her to leave the shop.

Instead, she stopped before a display of white pillar candles arranged in trays of small, river-polished pebbles, then moved on to the bookshelves set against the shop's back wall where she stood watching Patience Peasgood carefully unpack a box of newly-delivered books on medieval magic and Celtic and Norse mythology.

Neither woman looked in Margo's direction.

Yet – the fine hairs lifted on her nape - she was certain someone was watching her.

Margo shivered. She wondered if it was her – Dina Greed did ride her last nerve – or if a shadow had passed over the sun. Either way, the whole atmosphere in the shop suddenly felt a shade darker.

It was a creepy, unsettling kind of dark.

“She's going to Scotland, you know.”

“Gah!” Margo knocked over a bottle of Sea of Nectar body lotion. Whipping around on her stool, she came face to face with Marta Lopez, the Puerto Rican fortune

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teller who became Ye Olde Pagan Times' Madame Zelda of Bulgaria each morning when she stepped through the shop door.

“Geesh.” Margo pressed a hand to her breast as she stared at her friend. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not nice to sneak up on people?”

Instead of backing away, Marta stepped closer, lowering her voice. “I thought you’d want to know before she ruins your day. That’s why she’s here.” She flashed a narrow-eyed glance at Dina Greed’s back. “She wants to make you jealous.”

She is! The two words screamed through Margo’s Scotland-loving soul, turning her heart pea-green and making her pulse race with annoyance.

“How do you know?” Margo tucked her chin-length hair behind an ear, hoping Marta wouldn’t notice the flush she could feel flaming up her neck. “Are you sure? Or” – she could only hope – “is it just gossip?”

Dina Greed had been making noise about going to Scotland forever.

So far she’d never gotten any closer than Braveheart.

But the way Marta was shaking her head told Margo that this time her rival’s plans were real.

“You should know I only ever speak the truth.” Marta smoothed the shimmering purple-and-gold folds of her caftan. “One of my cousins” – she straightened, assuming an air of importance – “works at First Class Luggage and Travel Shoppe. She told me Dina was in there two days ago, buying up a storm and bragging that she was about to leave on a three week trip to the Highlands.

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“She even has a passport.” Marta imparted this bit of info with authority. “My cousin saw it when Dina insisted on making sure it fit easily into the tartan-covered passport holder she bought.”

Margo’s heart sank. “She bought a tartan-covered passport holder?”

“Not just that.” Marta’s eyes snapped. “She walked out with an entire set of matching tartan luggage. It’s a new line First Class just started carrying. I think my cousin said it’s called Highland Mist.”

Highland mist.

The two words, usually the stuff of Margo’s sweetest dreams, now just made her feel sick inside. As long as she could remember, Dina Greed had deliberately targeted and snatched every one of Margo’s boyfriends.

Three years ago, she’d also somehow sweet talked the manager of a really lovely apartment complex Margo wanted to move to, into giving her the last available apartment, even though Margo had already made a deposit.

Now she was also going to see Scotland.

It was beyond bearing.

“So it is true.” Margo looked at her friend, feeling bleak. She also felt the beginnings of a throbbing headache. “Minnie Mouse wins again.”

Marta shot Dina a malice-laden glance. “Maybe she’ll fall off a cliff or disappear into a peat bog.”

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“With her luck” – Margo knew this to be true – “some hunky Highlander would rescue her.”

“Leave it me.” Marta winked. “I have lots of cousins and one of them practices voodoo.

I’ll just put a bug in her and have her-”

“Margo!” Dina Greed was coming up to the Luna Harmony station, her dark eyes sparkling. “I was hoping you’d be here today. I need your advice about-”

“Scotland?” Margo could’ve bit her tongue, but the word just slipped out.

“You’ve heard?” Dina’s brows winged upward in her pretty, heart-shaped face. “It’s true. I’m really going. In fact, I’m leaving” – she smiled sweetly – “in three days. But that’s not why I’m here.”

She set her tasseled sporran-cum-handbag on the counter and unsnapped the clasp, withdrawing several typed sheets of paper. “This is my itinerary, if you’d like to see it. I’m doing a self-drive tour and will be concentrating on all the places connected to Robert the Bruce.” She twinkled at Margo, well aware that the medieval hero king was one of Margo’s greatest heroes.

“I’ve been planning this trip for years, as you know.” She clutched the itinerary as if it were made of gold and diamonds. “I don’t need your help with Scotland.”

Margo forced a tight smile. “I didn’t think so.”

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Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Marta swishing away, making for the backroom where she did her tarot readings. Margo hoped she'd also use the privacy to call her voo-doo expert cousin.

She looked back at her rival, wishing she had the nerve to throttle her.

“So what can I do for you?” She hated having to be nice. “Are you looking for some good cosmetics for your trip?” She tapped the Ocean of Storms shower gel. “All the Lunarian products come in travel sizes.”

“No thanks, but that’s close.” Dina held out a hand, wriggling her fingers. “I’m on my way to have these nails removed” – she glanced down at the diva-length red talons, clearly fake – “and someone mentioned you might have a tip for keeping my real nails from breaking.

“They aren’t very strong and” – she gave Margo another sugar-infused smile – “I’ll be exploring so many castle ruins and what-not, you know? I’d hate to damage them when I’m off in the wilds of nowhere.”

“Oh, that’s easy.” Margo felt a spurt of triumph. “Just be sure you always file them on a Saturday,” she lied, knowing that was the worst possible day for nail care. “If you do that, they’ll stay hard, resistant to breakage, and never give you any problems.”

She smiled.

Friday after sunset was when the moon’s magic worked on nails.

“My fingernails thank you.” Dina tucked her itinerary into her furry sporran purse. “I really must go. It’s been lovely seeing you. But” – she was already halfway across the

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shop – “I need to pack. I’ll stop by when I’m back and tell you about my trip.”

“I’m sure you will,” Margo muttered when the shop bell jangled as Dina swept out the door.

Free at last, she released a long breath. It was good that her nemesis left when she did as she might have exploded otherwise. She could only maintain her always-be-gracious-to-customers demeanor so long. Dina had pushed her close to her limits. A white-hot volcano of anger, envy, and frustration was seething inside her.

On the trail of Robert the Bruce.

Highland Mist luggage.

Margo frowned. She wouldn’t be surprised if the other woman wore plaid underwear. She had left her mean-spirited residue in the most-times tranquil shop.

Sensitive to such things, Margo shivered and rubbed her arms. They were covered with gooseflesh. And the odd dimness she’d noticed earlier had returned. Only now, the little shop wasn’t just full of shadows, it’d turned icy cold.

Of course – she saw now – that rain was beginning to beat against the windows and the afternoon sky had gone ominously dark. Autumn in Bucks County was known for the night drawing in rather early.

Still....

This wasn’t that kind of chill.

Margo sat frozen on her stool. She wanted to call out to Patience or even Marta, sequestered in her backroom, but her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth. When

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she tried to glance over to the bookshelves, seeking the reassurance of Patience's efficient, middle-aged presence, she found she couldn't turn her head.

She did feel her palms and her brow dampening.

And her ill ease only increased when the door jangled again and she caught the backs of Patience and Marta as they dashed out into the rain. The door swung shut behind them, leaving her alone.

She'd forgotten it was Marta's half-day.

And Patience had told her that morning that she'd be leaving early to join friends for high tea at the Cabbage Rose Gift Emporium and Tea Room out near Valley Forge.

Margo had agreed to close the shop on her own.

It was an unavoidable situation.

But she regretted it all the same.

Especially when – oh, no! - she saw the shadow by the bookshelves.

Tall, blacker-than-black, and definitely sinister, the darkness hovered near where Patience had stood earlier, sorting the new books. And – Margo stared, her stomach clenching – whatever it was, oozed an ancient malevolence.

It wasn't a ghost.

She knew that unquestionably.

This was more a portent of doom.

Then there was a loud rumbling noise outside and – as a quick glance at the windows revealed – a large cement mixer that had been stopped in front of the shop

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lumbered noisily down the road, allowing the gray afternoon light to pour back into the shop.

The shadow vanished at once.

And Margo had never felt more foolish.

She wiped the back of her hand across her brow and took a few deep, calming breaths. She shouldn't have allowed Dina Greed and her upcoming Scotland trip get to her so much that she mistook a shadow cast by a construction truck for a gloom-bearing hell demon.

She didn't even believe in demons.

Ghosts, you bet. She'd seen a few of them and had no doubts whatsoever.

She was a believer.

But demons....

They belonged in the same pot as vampires and werewolves. They just weren't her cuppa. And she was very happy to keep it that way.

She was also in dire need of tea.

Knowing a good steaming cup of Earl Grey Cream would soothe her nerves, she pushed to her feet and started for Marta's tarot reading room, a corner of which served as Ye Olde Pagan Times' makeshift kitchen.

She was almost there when she heard a thump near the bookshelves.

"Oh, God!" She jerked to a halt, her hand still reaching for the backroom door.

The floor tilted crazily and she was sure she could feel a thousand hidden eyes glaring

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at her from behind the bundles of dried herbs and glass witch balls that hung from the ceiling.

Very slowly, she turned. She half expected to see the shadow again.

There was nothing.

No ghosts, demons, or other beasties crept along the bookshelf aisles.

But a book had fallen, lying open and face down on the polished hardwood floor.

Margo went to retrieve it, glad to know the source of the noise and intending to return the book to the shelf. It was from Patience's new shipment and the title jumped at her.

Myths and Legends of the Viking Age.

For some inexplicable reason just seeing the words, red and gold lettering on a brownish background, sent a jolt through her. It was so strong, and forbidding, that she almost walked away, leaving the book where it was on the floor.

Stubbornness made her snatch it up, the painful shock that sped through her fingers and up her arm as soon as she touched the book, underscoring why she really needed to heed her instincts.

But she'd had enough – enough of everything – and wasn't going to let a book get the better of her. So she ignored the burning tingles racing along her skin and peered down. She immediately wished she hadn't for it'd opened to a two-page color illustration of a Viking warship off the coast of Scotland.

She could have groaned.

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She didn't care about the fierce-looking Norse dragon ship.

But the oh-so-romantic landscape was a kick to the shins.

Beautiful as a master painting, the illustration showed a rocky shoreline with steep, jagged cliffs soaring up around a crescent-shaped cove. The sky above boiled with dark clouds and looked as wild and turbulent as the churning sea. Margo's heart responded, beating hard and slow. It was such places that called to her soul. In fact, she often dreamt of just such a Highland coast.

She brought the book nearer to her face and strained her eyes to see because the light in the shop seemed to be fading again.

Now, looking more closely, she saw a man on the golden-sanded strand. He stood at the water's edge, his long dark hair tossed by the wind. Clearly a Highland warrior, he could've been ripped from her hottest fantasies. Big, strapping, and with a plaid slung boldly over one shoulder, he'd been painted raising a sword high over his head and yelling. He was staring out to sea, glaring at the departing Vikings, and his outrage was so well-drawn and palpable she could almost hear his shouts.

Margo shivered, feeling chilled again.

She glanced at the windows, but this time there weren't any big trucks blocking the afternoon light.

Everything was at it should be.

Except when she looked back at the illustration, the man had moved and was now actually in the water, with the foamy surf splashing about his legs.

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“What?” Her eyes rounded. Waves of disbelief shot through her entire body.

Worse, she could hear the rush of the wind and the crash of the sea. She also felt the scorching heat of flames all around her, the air even smelling of burnt ash and terrible things.

Somehow – in the space of an eye blink – the illustration had come alive. Leaping flames were everywhere, raging up behind the enraged Highlander and even consuming the pages, the heat scalding her fingers.

“That’s it!” Margo flung the book aside.

She pressed both hands to her cheeks and stood, breathing hard. She would not accept the crazy spiral of madness whirling inside her.

It didn’t matter how many demon-shadows lurked in the aisles between the bookshelves or how often a painted Highlander chose to stride into the surf in his own illustration. She especially didn’t want to consider how drawn she’d felt to the hot-eyed chieftain. She’d not just felt the fires burning around him, she’d also experienced a flare of pure molten heat all through her body.

And she was having none of such nonsense.

She knew what ailed her.

She had a vivid imagination. And, today, she’d also had a lethal dose of Dina Greed-itis.

But she was okay now.

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The rain was lessening and already she could hear the muffled voices of people passing along the sidewalk, and the swish of car wheels on the road's wet pavement. It was a perfectly ordinary October afternoon and even the shop seemed warm and welcoming again.

Feeling better, she gave herself a shake and went to fetch the Viking book. It'd landed near a tiered display of tinkling table-top fountains. And when she picked it up this time, nothing happened.

No tingly thunderbolts burst into her fingers.

The light didn't dim and the floor stayed steady beneath her feet.

Even so, before she returned the book to the shelf, she thumbed through its pages.

It wouldn't hurt to take one last peek at the illustration. She wasn't surprised when she didn't find it. In fact, there wasn't anything even similar to what she'd seen.

Margo let her fingers slide down the book's spine. Its glossy-smooth cover felt so normal. Cool and smooth to the touch.

She really had imagined everything.

Too bad she was sure that the fearsome Highland warrior and the wild and rugged seaward coast where he'd stood would haunt her forever.

And wasn't that the story of her life?

She might know Scotland better than anyone on the planet. And her heart was certainly in the Highlands. But she only ever went there in her dreams.

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Now they'd never be enough again.

She wanted that Highlander on the shore.

A man the illustration's caption had called Magnus MacBride, Viking Slayer.

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