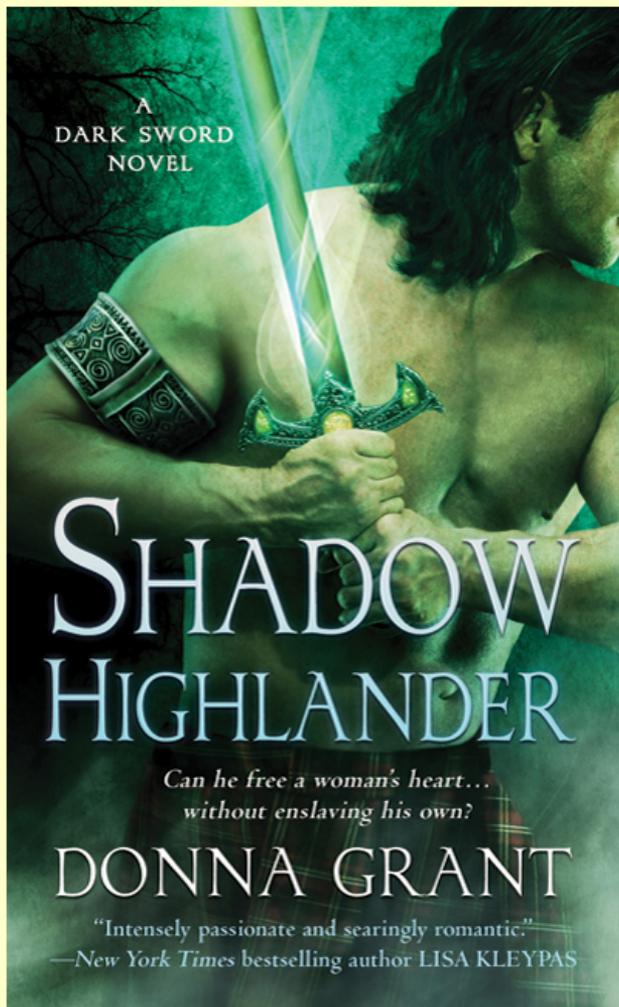


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SHADOW HIGHLANDER

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ONE

*Loch Awe, Southwestern Scotland
Summer 1603*

If there was one thing Galen Shaw knew, it was magic. And there was only one reason for that magic.

Druids.

He grinned and glanced at his companion, Logan Hamilton, as Galen realized they were close to the Druids. Very close.

Right now, he and Logan appeared to be nothing more than travelers, when in fact they were Warriors, immortals with primeval gods locked inside them.

It all began centuries earlier when Rome invaded Britain. The Celts, unable to defeat the Romans, had turned to the Druids for help. In answer, the Druids called up ancient gods locked deep in the pits of Hell—gods so vicious, so depraved, the Devil himself imprisoned them.

Once loose, those gods chose the strongest warrior from each clan and became one with that warrior. Melded with the gods, the warriors, now immortal, had powers that made them unstoppable. Ruthless. Bloodthirsty.

The Romans knew they were defeated. But after Rome was gone, the Druids had been incapable of coaxing the gods from the men no matter how much magic

they utilized. All the Druids could do was bind the gods, preventing them from ruling the warriors.

The gods, however, weren't deterred. Their infinite power allowed them to pass from generation to generation, always choosing the strongest, the bravest of warriors. Waiting for a time they could once more roam the earth as conquerors.

So it remained until an evil Druid, a *drough*, named Deirdre began to unbind the gods, turning men into Warriors. Now Galen and Logan, as well as other Warriors, were waging war against Deirdre and her bid to rule the world.

The Warriors of MacLeod Castle had been lucky so far. They had executed Deirdre, or at least they thought that they had killed her. Her black magic had been stronger than any of them realized, however. She lived, and because of that, Galen now searched for a cluster of Druids who might hold the key to uncovering an ancient relic that could be used against Deirdre.

"The magic grows stronger," Logan said as he jogged ahead of Galen to crest the top of a hill.

Galen scrubbed a hand down his face and sighed. They had been traveling for days, and thanks to their unnatural speed, they had covered twice as much distance as a mortal man. Yet it didn't deter the unease that pricked at Galen's soul.

He couldn't help but think something significant, something crucial was about to happen. Whether it was to him or Logan or to their effort to impede Deirdre, Galen didn't know.

And that's what bothered him the most.

Logan paused as he reached the top and whistled long and low, the sound filled with delight and wonder.

Galen lengthened his stride and hurried to Logan's

side. He halted beside Logan and stared at the rugged, untamed beauty before him.

“It’s no wonder they call it Loch Awe,” he murmured.

He had seen many places in Scotland, but Galen had never viewed the spectacular vista of Loch Awe until now. Its grandeur made him feel . . . inconsequential.

His gaze took in the mountainsides with their vivid green mixing with the brown of the earth. Bright green grass blended beautifully with the dark green treetops that covered the steep slopes leading down to the long, narrow sapphire waters of the loch.

Galen sighed, his eyes soaking up the dramatic splendor. The water was smooth as glass in places and rippled with the breeze in others. From their vantage point, they could see the loch in its entirety as it stretched out before them.

The woods along the slopes were thick, perfect hiding places for Druids trying to stay alive and out of Deirdre’s clutches. Dotted the smooth water were various small islands, even one with a castle.

As much as Galen knew they needed to find the Druids, he couldn’t seem to move. The majesty of the loch left him spellbound, captivated. Fascinated.

“It’s breathtaking,” Logan murmured. “Everything is so still, so serene. Completely opposite of the cliffs and crashing waves of MacLeod Castle.”

Galen pulled his gaze away from the loch and turned his head to Logan. Logan was always smiling, always jesting, so it was unusual to see him so serious. Galen could only nod in response.

“Galen,” Logan whispered, his voice deepening in caution.

At once Galen stiffened. “Aye, I feel it. Again.”

It had been several days after they’d departed MacLeod

Castle that Galen and Logan experienced the tingling awareness that they were being watched. But it wasn't just any feeling. Magic was involved.

And they were feeling it yet again. It was different magic than that of the Druids they sought, but magic just the same.

"Deirdre, do you think?" A muscle in Logan's jaw jumped as he said the hated name.

Galen turned and looked behind them. He took in every detail, searching for anything or anyone that might involve magic. There was nothing but empty land, with only a peregrine falcon flying above them.

He watched the bird of prey for a moment with its distinctive slate and white-barred belly before he turned back to the loch. "I still cannot find the source, but if there is a chance it's Deirdre, we need to be careful."

"We're near the Druids. Their magic is everywhere. I would hate to be the ones responsible for leading Deirdre to more of them."

As part of their power, Warriors were able to feel the magic of Druids. The stronger the magic, the stronger the Druid.

The group Galen and Logan searched for had been hiding for decades, if not longer. Deirdre, though a Druid herself, took little care to worry about continuing the magic of the land. She much preferred to find and kill other Druids. After she took their magic, of course.

"If we go by what Isla told us, Deirdre is alive but without a form. She will be working on discovering a way to restore her body and her magic."

Logan absently scratched his jaw, his lips twisted with frustration. "Which means she'll be looking for a Druid. I understand. We cannot tarry. It's just that I hate being watched, especially by something I cannot discern or fight."

Galen understood all too well. It was in their core to want to fight, to yearn to see the blood of their enemy, thanks to the god inside them. Some Warriors controlled their bloodthirsty nature better than others.

As far as he knew, Galen was the only Warrior who wanted to suppress his god and forget he had any power. No Warrior would understand, but then again, none of them had their god's power give them as much pain as his did.

Never being able to touch someone without seeing their thoughts was a miserable fate. He didn't want to know what was in the mind of his friends.

Yet his power went beyond even that. He had controlled someone's mind before. And it had cost him part of his soul in doing it.

He pushed aside the frustration over his power and focused on his mission. Galen pulled out the map drawn by Ramsey, another Warrior, and compared it to the loch. Galen looked to the spot where Isla had told them they would find the Druids.

Logan glanced at the map. "Do you think we'll discover the Druids where Isla said?"

Galen shrugged. Isla was a Druid who had been used by Deirdre and forced to become a *drough* to save her family. Isla was now being sheltered at MacLeod Castle and had, in fact, told them about the artifact. Because she had become a *drough* against her will, the evil hadn't been able to take control of her, making Isla the most powerful *mie*, or pure Druid, they knew.

"I think the Druids will be close to where Isla told us. Actually finding them, however, will be the tricky part." Galen rolled up the map and used it to point to the far side of the water. "The place is over there. We'll have to walk around the loch."

A strand of Logan's golden brown hair fell into his

eyes. He brushed it out of his face and shrugged, his hazel eyes dancing with excitement and mischievousness. "Sure you doona want to go for a swim?"

Galen chuckled and shook his head as he tucked the map in the waist of his kilt. He had known Logan for years, and in those years, they had done much together.

"Come on, old man," Logan teased. "I doona think the current will be too swift for you. You're only two hundred and fifty. You can make it across."

Logan was the youngest of the Warriors at one hundred and fifteen. The only one younger than Logan was the lone female Warrior, Larena, who happened to be the wife of Fallon MacLeod, their leader.

"Keep it up, *lad*, and I'll make you regret your words," Galen said with a grin.

Logan had been a Godsend to the Warriors. It was easy to become despondent and dreary when you had lost everything and eternity stretched out before you, but Logan always knew how to lighten people's moods with a jest, a tease, or a grin. His smiles were infectious, and his banter notorious.

Galen was pleased Logan was with him on this trip. Logan pretended he was lighthearted and indifferent about his past, but Galen knew firsthand Logan was not a Warrior you wanted against you. Because deep down, Logan hid a streak of hostility and bitterness that burned within him.

Logan's mouth tilted in a lopsided smile as he glanced back at the loch. "I tell you, Galen, I could use a hot meal. Eating at the castle has spoiled me."

"You?" Galen shook his head sadly. He missed not just the delicious meals, but the companionship he had found at MacLeod Castle. "I was getting my own loaf of bread that I didn't have to share with any of you. I've had none for days. I'm eager to return."

"Then let's find those Druids."

Once again Galen felt the tickle on the back of his neck, as though they were being spied upon. "Time to get moving."

"Aye," Logan said, and fell into step beside him as they began their trek around the outer edge of the mountains rimming the loch. "We'd get there faster if we swam."

"Maybe."

"I could move the water for you so you wouldna have to get wet."

Galen looked at Logan and saw his cocky grin. Because of their gods, each of them had a unique power. Logan could command oceans. Any body of liquid, big or small, was his to control.

Enhanced strength, speed, and senses completed the package for all Warriors.

In some ways it was a heady experience to be a Warrior, but knowing the evil that resided inside them, knowing how easily they could kill while surviving forever, made life hell.

"Nay," Galen said. "We'd cause too much of a distraction if you moved the water. Besides, we run faster than horses. We'll be on the other side of the loch in no time."

Logan grunted and rubbed the back of his neck. "I want to know who is watching us."

"I suspect we'll find out soon enough. With the Druids nearby, it could be them."

"Nearly all the way from MacLeod Castle? I doubt it."

Galen's gaze traced the hilly landscape, selecting the best route to take. "Whoever it is, they cannot hide from us forever. We'll find who's been spying, and then we'll discover why."

"I want that privilege," Logan said between clenched teeth.

A tingle of worry began in Galen's mind. Logan didn't become heated unless Deirdre attacked them. To see the

anger sizzle around him like a thick cloud was unusual. And disturbing.

There was no point in asking Logan about it, though. There was only one other person he could talk to about Logan and that was Hayden. Hayden and Logan had bonded as soon as they'd met, forging a friendship that went as deep as brotherhood.

Maybe Hayden knew something Galen didn't. After all, Galen had assumed Hayden would be the one accompanying him since he had a hatred for *droughs*. And with Isla being a *drough*, although against her will, it would keep Isla alive that much longer if Hayden wasn't around waiting to kill her.

Thinking about the black-headed Druid made Galen wonder what had happened since they had departed MacLeod Castle.

It seemed Logan's mind was also on Hayden because he asked, "What you saw in Isla's mind when you touched her, was it as bad as Hayden said?"

"Worse." So much worse than anyone could have imagined. It had shocked even Galen, and he had seen many things since his god had been unleashed. "I saw horrors while in Deirdre's dungeons, but what Deirdre did to Isla was unthinkable."

Logan fell silent for several moments. "You haven't asked why I came instead of Hayden."

"I expected Hayden to accompany me, but I am happy to have you with me on this journey."

Logan continued to face forward so that Galen could see only his profile. "Hayden would have run from Isla. I forced him to confront her."

"Why? You know how much he hates *droughs*. He's as likely to kill her as look at her."

"You saw him when he brought her broken body into the castle. You saw how protective he was."

“And then we discovered she was *drough*.”

Logan leaped over a fallen tree and shrugged. “From the moment Isla asked him to kill her and he didn’t, I knew that he had to stay at the castle. Isla needs him. And he needs her.”

Galen couldn’t fault Logan’s thinking, and Logan knew Hayden better than anyone. “Then maybe you should have remained behind to remind him of those things.”

There was a pregnant pause before Logan said, “I needed to get away.”

Galen was so taken aback by Logan’s words that for a moment he could only stare at his friend. Questions swam in Galen’s mind, but one look at Logan’s closed, hard expression and Galen knew he would get nothing more out of him for the moment.

As much as Galen wanted to know what motivated Logan, he knew better than to ask. If he did, Logan would feel free to pry into his own secrets. And Galen had many.

One of which could isolate him from other Warriors forever.

He had spent most of his life as a Warrior apart from others. There was much he had given up once he had realized the full extent of his powers to read other’s minds.

Without even intending to do so, he had found a home—and a family—at MacLeod Castle. He didn’t want *anything* to jeopardize that.



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