



Loving the Highlander (Pine Creek Highlanders Series Book 2)

By Janet Chapman

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A tempestuous passion begins with a battle of wills...

When Sadie Quill comes upon an unbelievably gorgeous man lying naked beside a lake, she can't resist taking his photo -- and is quickly trapped in a passionate confrontation with the fierce stranger. Discovering the identity of this irresistible warrior will complicate Sadie's search for a legendary gold mine. For he is Morgan MacKeage, a medieval highlander in modern-day Maine, a man with the fury of the untamed wilderness pounding in his veins -- and the power to unlock Sadie's fragile heart.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

A native of rural central Maine, Janet Chapman lives there in a cozy log cabin on a lake with her husband. Three cats and a stray young bull moose keep them company. The author of the hugely popular Highlander time-travel series, she also writes contemporary romances.

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Chapter One

Present day, deep in the Maine woods

The old wizard sat in reflective silence on the tall granite cliff, oblivious to the awakening forest around him, the roaring waterfall that shot from the precipice, and the churning pool of frothing water a good hundred feet beneath where he sat. Daar scratched his beard with the butt of his cane and sighed, his troubling thoughts completely focused on the lone fisherman below. He had done a terrible disservice to that young man six years ago. Aye, he was solely responsible for turning Morgan MacKeage's life into the mess it was now.

Daar had cast a spell that had brought Morgan's laird and brother, Greylen MacKeage, forward to the twenty-first century. It had been the wizard's greatest blunder to date. Oh, Greylen had made the journey safely enough, but so had six of his enemies, two of his men, and his younger brother, Morgan. Even their disgruntled war horses had managed to get sucked into the spell, catapulting them all on an unimaginable journey forward through time.

Daar blamed the mishap on his advanced age. He was old and tired, a bit forgetful on occasion, and that was the reason his magic sometimes went awry.

Morgan MacKeage should have been eight hundred years dead, having had the joy of a couple of wives and a dozen or so kids. Instead, the Highland warrior fishing below was now thirty-two, still unwed, and lonely. It seemed nearly a sin to Daar that his wizard's ineptness had caused such a fine, strong, intelligent warrior to be cast adrift without direction or purpose.

Daar hunched his shoulders under the weight of his guilt. Aye, that young man's malaise was all his fault, and it was past time he fixed things.

A woman might help.

Then again, a woman might only add to the young warrior's troubles.

Daar had discovered that twenty-first-century females were a decidedly peculiar breed. They were brash, outspoken, opinionated, and stubborn. But mostly they were simply too damned independent. They dared to live alone, they worked to support themselves, and they quite often owned property and held positions of power in business and government.

How was a man born in a time when women were chattel supposed to deal with such independent women?

How was a virile twelfth-century warrior supposed to embrace his new life in such an outrageous time?

The MacKeages had lived in this modern world for six years. Six years of adapting, evolving, and finally accepting, and still Morgan MacKeage stood alone. Morgan's brother, Greylen, was happily settled with a wife, a daughter, and twins on the way. Callum was courting a woman in town, and Ian was secretly seeing a widow two nights a week. Even their sole surviving enemy, Michael MacBain, had fathered a son and was getting on with his life.

Only Morgan remained detached, not only from the company of females but also from the passions of life itself. He hunted, fished, and walked the woods incessantly, as if searching for something to settle the ache in his gut.

"Give a care, old man, lest you fall and become feed for the fish."

Daar nearly did fall at the sound of Morgan's familiar voice behind him. He stood and faced the young warrior and gave him a fierce scowl.

"You're a pagan, Morgan MacKeage, for scaring ten years off an old priest's life."

Morgan lifted a brow. "When I next see a priest, I'll be sure to confess my sin."

Daar attempted to straighten his shoulders and puff his chest at the insult but gave up as soon as he realized it made little difference. "You're seeing a priest now."

Morgan lifted his other brow. "What church ordains a *druidh* into its ranks?"

"I was a priest long before I became a wizard," Daar shot back, pointing at the warrior. "And one is not contradictory to the other. Both roads lead in the same direction."

Morgan merely chuckled as he turned and started up the path that led to Daar's cabin. "Come on, old man, if you want breakfast," he said without looking back.

Eyeing the string of trout swinging from Morgan's belt, Daar decided he'd school the warrior on his manners later. After all, this argument had been repeated often over the last two years, since Daar had been forced to reveal his wizard's identity in order to save Greylen MacKeage's wife from kidnappers.

And what thanks had he got? None. Not even an "I'm sorry" that his precious old staff had been cut in half and thrown into a high mountain pond. It was that same pond, by the way, that was the source of the waterfall shooting out the side of the cliff from an underground stream, creating the crystal-clear pool that had produced the tasty trout he was about to have for breakfast.

"Does that puny new cane have any real power yet, *druidh*?" Morgan asked as he settled into a comfortable, unhurried pace toward Daar's cabin.

Daar snorted. "As if I'd tell you," he muttered, eyeing the leather-sheathed sword tied to Morgan's backpack. The sword was more than three feet long, extending from Morgan's waist to a foot above his head, the hilt cocked to the side for easy access. That sword was as large as Greylen's sword and just as capable of destroying Daar's new cane.

Morgan stopped and turned to help Daar over a fallen log in the path. "Can it even toast bread yet?" he asked.

"It's powerful enough to gather stars in your head if I smack you with it."

Apparently not worried by the threat, Morgan turned his attention to something he pulled from his pocket. "What do you know of these?" he asked, holding up a three-foot-long orange ribbon of plastic.

Daar squinted at the ribbon. "What is it?"

"I don't know." Morgan leaned his fishing pole against his chest and used both hands to stretch the ribbon to its full length to show off the writing on it. "I found this one and several like it tied to trees all over the valley. And each one has numbers written on it."

Daar dismissed the ribbon with a negligent wave, eyeing the trout instead. His stomach rumbled, loudly announcing his hunger. "It's probably surveyors marking ownership lines," he said. He started toward home again. He was hungry, dammit, and had no patience for puzzles right now. "That's what they do in these modern times to mark their lands," Daar continued. "A man's word that he owns up to a river or to the crest of a mountain is no longer enough."

Daar stopped when he realized Morgan was not following. "Hell, boy. Your own land has lines drawn on a map and marked in the woods. They're even written in the deed you got when your brother purchased TarStone Mountain. It's what makes things legal today."

"They're not borders," Morgan said, stuffing the ribbon back in his pocket as he moved to follow Daar. "They don't run in any line I can discern."

ard"Then maybe they're logging markers," Daar offered next, mentally planning what he would fix with the trout. He started scanning the forest floor as they walked, looking for edible mushrooms. "Maybe they're doing a cutting in the valley," he absently continued. "Those numbers could be directions for the cutters."

"No. I found some of the ribbons on MacKeage land," Morgan countered, moving ahead to block his path, forcing them to a halt yet again. "And we are not cutting trees in this valley. The loggers we've hired are working east of here."

Daar looked up into Morgan's intense green eyes. "What is it you're wanting that's so important you're letting a fine brace of trout grow old?"

"I want you to use your magic and tell me what's happening in my woods."

Daar lifted his cane and used it to scratch his beard. "Ah. So it's okay to cast spells when it's convenient for you but not me? Is that how it works now?"

Morgan's eyes darkened. "There are rumors of a park being built in this valley, and I want to know if they're getting ahead of themselves and presuming to start work."

"And if they are, what does it matter?"

"I don't want the park to be here. A quarter of this valley is MacKeage land, and I'm against selling any of it."

"Why?"

"It's ours."

Daar lost hope that he was going to get breakfast anytime soon, unless they simply built a fire here and roasted the trout on spits. He sat down on a stump, cupped his hands over the top burl of his cane, and stared up at the young warrior.

"What's a few thousand acres to you, when your clan already owns four hundred thousand?"

"They can build their park someplace else, as long as it's not near this gorge."

Daar finally got his mind off his belly and focused on the man standing in front of him. Was that a faint spark he saw in those usually indifferent spruce-green eyes? Had something in this forest finally captured the attention of Morgan MacKeage?

"What's so special about this particular gorge?"

Morgan unhooked the trout from his belt. "These," he said, holding them up. He waved his fishing pole to encompass the forest. "This entire ridge. The stream that mysteriously appears from nowhere out the side of the mountain, cutting this gorge down to the valley. These trees. Have you even noticed their size, old man? Or their health? And these fish," he said again, shaking them slightly. "They're brook trout the size of salmon."

Daar frowned as he slowly looked around the forest. Aye, the trees did seem rather overlarge when compared with the others of the area. "They are big," he admitted. "I never noticed that before."

"That's because they were just like the rest only two years ago."

That number pricked at the wizard's memory.

"It's when your staff was thrown into the pond," Morgan continued at Daar's look of confusion. "It's the mist," he added, waving his fishing pole again. "See? It boils up from the falls and covers this gorge."

Daar nearly fell off the stump he was sitting on. The mist from the stream that ran from the mountain pond where his old staff lay?

Well, hell. Daar knew the water was special in that pond, since it held his magical staff, but he had never stopped to consider consequences such as this. Huge fish? Towering trees? A veritable rain forest where none should exist.

"It's magic," Morgan said in a whispered, almost reverent voice. "This entire gorge is the result of what happened two years ago. And I don't want it to become part of a park. Hundreds of people will come hiking through here and discover the magic."

Daar stood up. "And neither do I," he quickly agreed. "We must do something about this."

"You've got to talk to Grey," Morgan said. "And make him understand that our land must not become part of this park."

"Me?"

"He'll listen to you."

"He will not. He's mad at me right now. His wife just had some test for her pregnancy, and the blasted doctor told Grey that Grace was carrying twin daughters, not sons."

Morgan looked startled. "They can tell if an unborn child is a boy or a girl?"

Daar shrugged. "It seems they can now." He started walking back the way they had come, totally resigned now to missing his breakfast. He chose a path that would lead them above the falls to a ridge that overlooked the valley below. "Come on. Let's go see just how strong my staff has grown."

Morgan quickly fell into step beside him. "Will it tell me what the plastic ribbons are for?" he asked.

"Nay. It's not a crystal ball. It's only a conductor of energy."

As they walked along the path, Daar fingered the smooth, delicate cane he had been training since his had been lost. It sported only a couple of burls so far, which indicated that its power was not yet strong. His old staff, the one Grey had severed with his sword and thrown into the pond, had been riddled with burls, carrying the strength of fourteen hundred years of concentrated energy.

"Then what's the point?" Morgan asked. "If it can't do anything yet, why are we climbing the ridge?"

"Hush. I'm trying to remember the words," Daar instructed as they walked along. It was not that easy, reciting spells by rote. The last time he had tested the new cane for something more intricate than lighting a fire, it had rained dung beetles for more than an hour. He could only thank God that it had been dark outside at the time.

Surprisingly, Morgan obeyed his request, and they quickly reached the top of Fireline Ridge. Two miles behind them was the pond where his old staff lay on the bottom, and in front of them was the deep gorge that fingered its way to the vast valley below.

Daar was stunned. From this vantage point the stream's path was blatantly obvious. Large, lush hemlock and spruce and pine trees, draped in a mantle of mist, towered up from the forest floor in a carpet of vivid evergreen splendor.

The cane in his hand suddenly began to hum with delicate power. A warm, familiar energy coursed up his arm, and Daar closed his eyes to savor the distinct feel of his long-lost staff.

"What is it, old man? What's happening?" Morgan asked, taking a step back, eyeing the humming cane as it twisted and grew in length and thickness.

"Here. Touch this," Daar said, holding out his staff. "Feel it, Morgan. 'Tis the energy of life."

"I'm not touching that accursed thing."

"It won't bite," Daar snapped, poking the warrior in the belly.

Morgan instinctively grabbed the cane to protect himself, his eyes widening as the warm cherrywood sent its vibrations up his arm and into his body.

"There. That's what it's about, warrior. That's the life force. Have you forgotten what passion feels like?"

Morgan let go and stepped back, rubbing his hand on his shirt as he did. "I've forgotten nothing, old man. Now, point that thing at the valley and say your words. Tell me what's happening down there."

Daar pointed his staff toward the valley below and began to chant his ancient language. The burls on his cane warmed. The breeze kicked into a wind, sending the mist into swirling puffs of chaos around them. Birds and squirrels scurried for cover, and the distant roar of the falls turned to a whisper.

Daar opened one eye to peek at Morgan. The man had his hands balled into fists, his eyes scrunched closed, and his head pulled into his shoulders, his jaw clenched with enough force to break his teeth. And the poor warrior appeared to be holding his breath.

"It would go much better if you helped," Daar said. "Grab hold of the staff with me, Morgan, and concentrate. Feel the energy first, then see it in your mind's eye."

Morgan MacKeage slowly laid his hand over the second burl on the cane, his grip tight enough almost to splinter the wood. Together they waved the staff, which had nearly doubled in length, over the valley.

"Now. Tell me what you see, warrior. Tell me, and I will interpret it for you."

"Light. I see blinding light, yet it does not hurt my eyes."

"What color is the light?"

"Can you not see it yourself, *drùidh*? It's white. I can feel the heat, but I don't feel burned. And yellow. I see yellow sparks."

"And what is the yellow light doing?"

"It's dancing through the white light in dizzying

circles, as if searching for something."

"What else do you see?"

"There is green also, chasing the yellow light."

Daar swept the staff into an arc farther afield, then stopped, bracing himself for the jolt of energy he knew was coming. The light intensified, swirling the colors into a blinding rainbow. The staff jerked, tugging at their hands as the new energy hit with the force of a tornado.

The warrior was not prepared. He staggered back against the assault but did not let go of his powerful grip.

"Holy hell. What's happening, *drùidh*? There's a great blackness swirling through the light now, driving against the yellow sparks. The yellow light is disappearing."

"And the green, warrior? What is the green doing?"

"Chasing the blackness. But when it reaches it, nothing is there."

Daar released his grip on the staff and stepped back. The wind stilled, and the mist immediately returned, as did the roar of the falls.

Morgan turned to face him, still clutching the once again normal-sized cane in his hand. Pale and shaken, Morgan threw the now silent piece of wood to the ground.

"Few mortal men have experienced what you just did, warrior. What think you of my gift?"

"It told me nothing, old man. I saw only colors."

"It told you everything, Morgan. You just had a glimpse of the energies roaming this valley. The emotions."

"Emotions?"

"Aye. Did the green light not feel familiar to you? Was it not the same shade of green in the MacKeage plaid you wear?"

"If the green light represents me, then who is the yellow?"

Daar grinned. "Someone you have yet to meet."

"The ribbon planter? Is that the yellow light?"

Daar widened his grin. "Possibly."

Morgan frowned at his answer. "And the black?"

"Ah, the black. That is another life force. Something visiting your valley."

"Something? Or someone?"

Daar shrugged and bent to pick up his cane. "Evil usually takes a human form when it wishes to plague humans."

"So the black represents evil, then? And it's coming?"

"Nay, warrior. It's already here. And so is something good. Don't forget the yellow light, Morgan. That covered your valley as well."

"But I couldn't catch it, either."

"Because you became more busy chasing the black."

Morgan's sigh blew over Daar with enough force to make him take a step back. Morgan MacKeage looked ready to explode in a fit of frustration. Good. There was certainly no lack of passion now.

Daar held up his hand to stop Morgan's outburst. "Talk to your brother," he quickly suggested. "Ask Greylen's permission to claim this valley as your own. Then build your home here. He'll not deny your request."

That suggestion took the bluster from the warrior's expression. "A home? You think I should build a house here?"

"This is a good place to raise a family," Daar said, then added speculatively, "I'm guessing you've got two months at least, judging by the strength of the lights we saw, before you must truly become involved in this mystery. You should be able to have a house up in that time. And then your claim will be unmistakable. It will put an end to the threat of a park in this gorge."

Morgan's face reddened. "I'm not having a family," he muttered. "So I don't need a house."

Well now, Daar thought. He wasn't having children, huh? That was news. Very disturbing news, considering the strength of the passion Daar had seen in the lights just now.

Not that he intended to tell Morgan that. No, some things were better left discovered on their own.

Such as the gender of unborn children, to name one.

"But why?" Daar asked. "Every warrior wants sons."

Morgan rubbed the back of his neck with one large hand. "I'm not a warrior anymore, *drùidh*, thanks to you. I'm just a man who shouldn't even exist now. I'm nothing."

"That's not true. You are alive, Morgan MacKeage, whether you wish to be or not. You are a landowner and a member of this community now. You run a ski resort with your clan."

Morgan actually laughed at that. "I sit people's asses onto a ski lift by day and spend every winter driving a machine up and down the mountain, grooming perfectly good snow. You call that noble work?"

"And fishing and hunting is?"

Morgan actually growled. "I feed you, old man."

His growl was suddenly answered by another, coming from the mist just below them. Morgan pivoted and drew his sword in one smooth motion.

"You'll not harm Faol," Daar said, moving to place his hand over the hilt of the sword. "He's my pet."

"A wolf?" Morgan asked, recognizing the Gaelic name for the beast. He tried to peer through the rising mist, then looked briefly at Daar. "You have a wolf for a pet?"

"Aye, it seems I do now. He arrived on my doorstep just last week."

"There are no wolves in this land."

Daar shrugged. "Maybe they're just wise enough not to be seen."

Faol finally showed himself, stepping silently out of the mist, his head low and his hackles raised. Morgan grabbed Daar by the shoulder and quickly pushed the wizard behind him. Morgan raised his sword again.

The wolf growled.

Daar snorted. "Two warriors, each protecting me from the other. Now, cease," he said, stepping back between them. He faced Morgan. "Faol can help you."

"Help me what?"

"Your valley, remember? The lights? The blackness? Faol can help you discover what's happening."

Morgan looked incredulous. "He's a wolf."

"Aye, warrior, he is that. But, like you, he's without direction. He's wanting a good fight to stir his blood."

Morgan looked over Daar's head at Faol, then back at the wizard, his eyes narrowed in speculation. "Is he one of your spells, *druïdh*? Have you conjured the wolf to plague me?"

Daar raised his hand to his heart but cocked his head to keep one guarded eye on the heavens. "May God strike me dead if I'm lying. Faol is as real as the hair on my face. He just showed up at my cabin eight days ago."

Morgan still looked skeptical. He slowly lowered his sword until the tip touched the ground. With his free hand he ripped one of the trout from his belt and tossed it to the wolf.

Faol stepped forward until he was standing over the fish and growled again.

Morgan snorted. "Some pet."

Alarmed that Morgan was giving away their breakfast, Daar moved to gather wood for a fire. By God, they would eat now before he fainted. He quickly set several branches into a pile, touched his cane to it, and muttered under his breath.

The wood immediately caught fire.

"I'll be more civilized if you toss one of those trout to me," he said then. "Ignore the beast, and whittle some spits to roast our breakfast on. A man could starve to death in your company."

It took Morgan another good minute to move. Finally, satisfied that Faol was more intent on guarding his trout than on eating the two of them, Morgan sheathed his sword and drew out his dagger. He stripped a maple sapling of its leaves and fashioned two intricate circular spits, skewered the three remaining fish, and walked over to the now crackling fire. Not once throughout his chore did Morgan take his attention off the wolf.

"Will you lend me your dagger, please?" Daar asked, once the trout were roasting.

Morgan studied the hand held out to him. "What for?" he asked, darting another brief look at Faol.

"I've a chore that needs doing while breakfast cooks."

Obviously reluctant to give up his weapon, considering he was within lunging distance of a wolf, the Highlander hesitated.

"He's more intent on eating the trout than us," Daar assured him, still holding out his hand. He grinned at the warrior. "Or is it me you're afraid of arming?"

He was answered by a green-eyed glare strong enough to turn a man into stone. Daar had a moment's concern that true passion in this warrior might very well turn out to be a dangerous thing for anyone on the receiving end of it.

Morgan finally handed his dagger to Daar, then quickly drew his sword and laid it across his knees. Faol lifted his head at the motion.

"Have you noticed his eyes?" Daar asked, using the dagger to point at Faol. "And the way he cants his head slightly to the right? Does he not seem familiar to you?"

Morgan's and Faol's gazes locked, each seemingly determined to outstare the other.

"No," Morgan said, not breaking eye contact. "He's just a wolf."

Daar sighed and set the sharp blade of the dagger to the small burl in the middle of his cane. Morgan had been only a lad of nine when Duncan MacKeage had died. And nine-year-olds had no time for noticing things like the color of their fathers' eyes.

"What are you doing?" Morgan asked, his attention suddenly drawn from the wolf when he realized that Daar was using the dagger on his cane.

"I'm thinking you should have some help as you set out on this path you seem determined to travel," Daar said, prying at the stubborn knot. The cane hissed in protest and started to vibrate.

"I want nothing to do with your magic," Morgan said, quickly moving back to tend the trout. "Keep your precious cane intact. You need its powers more than I do."

Daar ignored Morgan. His snarling cane was trying to scorch his hand as it twisted and sputtered to avoid the blade of the dagger.

Faol whined and stood up, leaving his trout and backing away toward the woods. Morgan also stood, his sword at the ready in his hand. He, too, began moving toward the safety of the forest.

With the deep roar of a wounded animal, the burl suddenly popped free of the cane and rolled across the forest floor, igniting a path of snapping red flames. Faol yelped and disappeared into the woods. Morgan grabbed Daar around the waist, lifted him off his tree stump, and pulled him into the forest. They stood together behind a giant spruce and watched as the angry knot of wood rolled around in frantic circles, spitting and hissing a rainbow of sparks.

"Are you insane, old man?" Morgan whispered. "You shouldn't piss off the magic."

Daar wiggled himself free of Morgan's grip and walked back to the stump. He picked up his now maimed staff and stroked it gently. "Give me that cord from around your neck," he told Morgan as he soothed his trembling cane.

"Why?"

Daar looked up. "Because it's time you let go of that pagan charm. It's been a worthless crutch and does nothing for you."

Morgan grasped the stone at his neck. "It's been with me for years."

"Old Dorna was not a true witch, Morgan. See her here today, alive and practicing her black magic? The old hag is eight hundred years dead. She preyed on simple-minded men and desperate women for her living. The stone is useless."

"I am not simple-minded."

"Nay. But neither are you quite ready to let go of your old beliefs. Have you learned nothing in six years? This thing called science has disproved what Dorna practiced and what you call magic."

"Then how does science explain you?"

"It can't. Nor will it ever. Some things must simply be accepted on faith."

The Highlander did not care for that explanation, if Daar read his expression correctly. Morgan gripped his amulet protectively, then finally tore the cord from around his neck. "Here," he said, handing it to Daar.

The wizard let the smooth stone slide free and fall to the ground. "Hand me that burl, would you?" he asked, using his cane to point at the now silent knot of cherrywood.

Morgan paled. "You pick it up," he whispered.

The burl was sitting against a rock, softly humming. With a sigh of impatience, Daar pushed himself off the stump and picked up the burl. He closed one eye and squinted the other to thread the rawhide cord through the burl.

"There's no hole," Morgan said, coming up behind him. "You can't push a soft rope through solid wood."

The rawhide smoothly slipped through the swirling cherrywood. Daar quickly knotted the cord and turned to Morgan.

The warrior stepped back, holding up his hand. "Keep that thing away from me."

"It won't bite," Daar snapped. "Now, lean over so I can put this around your neck."

"I said I don't want your magic."

"And I'm thinking the time will come when you will need it," Daar countered. "If not for yourself, think of the valley. And the yellow light. Remember? The blackness was consuming it."

Daar pointed at Morgan. "And although you may have survived your journey six years ago, there's no saying you'll survive this one. You are a fierce warrior, Morgan MacKeage. But hear me well. You are not invincible. The blackness is a powerful life force void of goodness, compassion, or conscience. It will devour anything that gets in its way -- you, the yellow light, and eventually this whole valley if it manages to get past you. This small piece of my cane will be your greatest weapon against it."

It took the warrior some time to digest Daar's words. Finally, Morgan leaned forward and bowed his head, allowing the wizard to place the cord around his neck. Daar then centered the burl over Morgan's chest as he straightened.

"If you want this to work, you're going to have to give it your faith," Daar told him, stepping back to admire his gift. "And your intelligence. This burl is not strong by itself. You must discover the best way to add to its strength."

Standing as still as the mountains themselves and holding his breath again, Morgan scowled at him. "How --" He swallowed hard. "How do I do that?"

Daar waved his question away. "You'll figure it out when the time is right."

He handed Morgan back his dagger. As if afraid any quick movements would fry him on the spot, the warrior carefully held out his hand and took his weapon, then slowly placed it back in his belt.

"Oh, one more thing, Morgan. You're not to whisper even a hint of what's happened here today. Especially not to your brother. Not one word about the unusual state of this gorge, your vision, or my special gift to you," Daar said, pointing at the burl. "I don't want Greylen knowing that any part of my old staff still exists, and I surely don't want him knowing that my new one is gaining strength."

The first hint that Morgan was beginning to relax appeared when one corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. "You have no worry I'll tell anyone about this, old man."

f0 Daar's nose suddenly twitched. What was burning? He looked around. The small fires the sparking burl had started were gone. The campfire, however, was burning brightly.

"Dammit! The fish!"

The burl around his neck suddenly forgotten, Morgan rushed to the fire and pulled the trout free of the flame. He held them up and turned to Daar, grinning.

"No worry. They're only charred on the outside a bit."

Morgan kicked at the fire with his foot, dousing the flame to leave only the smoldering coals, then placed the trout above the coals to finish cooking more slowly. Daar joined him, and together they sat once again facing the fire.

Morgan looked off into the forest, in the direction Faol had run. "Do you think he'll return?" he asked.

"Aye. I doubt he went far. He's probably watching us now."

Morgan hesitantly lifted his hand to the rawhide cord at his neck and slowly closed his fist over the burl. His

eyes widened.

"It's warm."

Daar nodded. "Aye. It was angry for being ripped from the collective energy of the staff," he explained. "But now it is content. It feels your strength, warrior. It will work hard to protect you."

Faol silently returned to the edge of the clearing, lying down beside his trout. Morgan did not unsheathe his sword this time or pull his dagger from his belt. Instead, both warrior and wolf turned their attention to the burl hanging around Morgan's neck. Faol watched as Morgan fingered it briefly before he tucked it out of sight beneath his shirt.

Daar smiled. It was good, all that had happened today. Morgan had found his passion for life again in a mystery that promised a battle worth fighting.

Faol had found a new purpose as well.

And Daar's guilt was somewhat assuaged.

After ten long minutes of waiting, the trout was finally ready to eat. Daar watched as the Scot expertly pulled their breakfast from the spits, and the wizard was reminded of a similar moment nearly eight hundred years ago. There had been another campfire then, with old Laird MacKeage teaching his two young sons how to cook their catch.

What would Duncan MacKeage think of his sons today, of their predicament and their incredible journey? Would he be proud of how they had comported themselves through it all and how they were coping with their new lives now?

Or did Duncan already know?

Daar looked over at Faol. The animal rested much as Morgan did, relaxed but ready to spring into action if need be. For the tenth time in the last eight days, Daar wondered what power had lured a wolf in from the wild to walk among humans. And for the tenth time, he decided he didn't really care enough to inquire.

Daar finally took his first bite of the delicious trout the warrior handed him, and not a moment too soon. His stomach rumbled with thanks. He leaned back against one of the magically tall pine trees and watched Morgan MacKeage eat his breakfast.

Should he mention the fact that there was a woman involved in this valley mystery? And that she had shiny yellow hair that sparkled with the sensuous promise of passion?

Nay, probably not.

Better to leave some things a surprise.

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