

*Chapter 1*

*Moranna's Island Home*





he skylarks rose high in the sky, the buzzards circled their newly formed nests.

“Aaaah, yes,” Moranna sighed. She so loved her beautiful island home. Riding bareback to

the top of the island, on this clear fresh spring day, she could see the neighbouring islands unfold: Bute, Arran and Jura beyond. All set against each other, separated by slithering glints of sea. At the top of Cumbrae, Moranna reigned wild and free. She was majesty. But truly she belonged to Ballochmartin Farm. Her father was the farmer there, and so were his father and grandparents before him. Ballochmartin was known to have the best farming land on Cumbrae, and a quaint stone chapel, built where it was believed that Celtic saints in times gone by had worked and prayed. It was 1259, and Moranna was eleven years old.

On bright spring days like this, she'd often ride to the top of the island cantering amongst the yellow gorse and the springy heather. She enjoyed the wild, carefree feeling, before slowly taking her pony back down, being careful not to tread on any hidden rabbit holes. On the way home, she'd often spy on the Viking encampment. She'd done this since she was a little girl. Between the wooded pine trees, she would dismount, and holding on to her pony's reins, she would peer through the trees to see the smoke coming out of the longhouses, she'd hear the children laughing and playing, and the sound of chisels and

hammers, as the craftsmen made their furniture and frames.

They were always busy doing something, she thought. They were always a bit mysterious too. Never mixing with the local people, only visible on occasions, like at the local markets in Largs, or when they were out fishing, and landing their catches into baskets on the jetties and piers. The locals recognised many of their faces, but rarely did they talk to one another.

Moranna's father always spoke highly of them. The Vikings, he said, had traded peacefully with the Scottish people for more than two hundred years now, and he always said they had brought prosperity to the island. Moving a bit closer Moranna could see one of the boys working outside. It looked like he was stretching out sheepskins on the ground with large stones, before hanging them to dry on wooden frames. As he turned towards her, she recognised him as Sten. She had known him to see as a younger Viking boy. She remembered seeing him fishing on calm summer days in the bay with a group of friends, fellow Scandinavians. She had also seen him sometimes down in the town on market day. She had heard his friends calling him Sten. He was growing up she thought. He surely must be at least fourteen by now. As she watched him carefully stretching and smoothing out the sheepskins, she smiled to herself as she slipped away with her pony back to the safety of the farmhouse.



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