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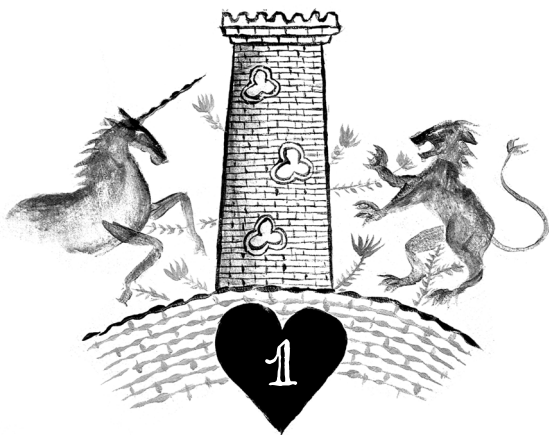
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To Andy, Fara and Innes



It was early evening, mid-September when the boat came to the bay.

The craft cut effortlessly through the storm-crested waves, their tips crowned orange by the evening sun.

Down below on the shore the men gathered like swarming ants, whilst we girls watched from outside our stone cottages, readily distracted from plucking the last rabble of summer puffins. Artair was down there too, part of the huddle of island men who had mustered in the shallows ready to take the measure of the sailor.

But although they all wore the same black shirts and tam-o'-shanters, Artair stood out like a beacon to me, for not only would he one day be chief of these islands, but

by the next full moon I would be his wife.

The women had all but stopped plucking by now, abandoning half-bald birds to stand out on the ridge where they cooed at the spectacle of dazzling crimson sails, puffed up tight as pillows with Atlantic squall. An older woman shouted above the wind that the boat was far too small for a seafaring vessel, yet there it was, buoying along keenly, its narrow bow cleaving apart the steely waters like a sharp blade through cooked flesh.

At the helm, a solitary figure made to drop anchor.

‘Look, *Iseabail!*’ said my younger sister Eilidh, securing her puffin with a stone and rushing to join the others. ‘A sailor has captained his craft alone, right through that terrible storm.’

‘I wonder where he has come from,’ I said, transfixed by the sight of the stranger, dressed in a pale flotilla of clothes. He alighted alone from his craft to be greeted by our men. There was sight of no other aboard.

‘Let’s go down and see,’ said Eilidh, wiping her hands on her apron.

‘We mustn’t,’ I protested, trying to hide my excitement at the sight of the man who had single-handedly made it to our barren glut of rocks. Fifty miles west of the Outer Hebrides, one hundred from the Scottish mainland, a trip from even our closest neighbours took several days of hard sail and oar. Few would risk their lives in the summer months to come here, only the reckless once the autumn storms had begun.

‘What harm to us all can one man be?’ protested my sister, making to join the other women.

But I held on to her arm tightly. At seventeen, I was two years older than her. It was expected of me.

‘He might bring disease,’ I said, trying to dissuade her although the man looked healthy enough. He was now on the shore, shaking the hands of the elders, the sheep-dogs circling him joyously. Meanwhile all the other women and girls had abandoned their posts and were starting to make their way down the slope from the stone cottages, though none dared venture as far as the shore.

‘What’s going on, Iseabail?’ said Mammy, coming out through the open blackhouse door, a cloud of fishy stew in her wake.

‘A stranger, Mammy,’ I said, without letting the thrill seep into my voice.

‘Came in a boat all by himself,’ added Eilidh, struggling to free herself from my grip.

‘Let the men deal with him,’ snapped Mammy, holding open the door. ‘And both of you come inside!’

Eilidh was furious. She twisted free before pushing under the thatch into the windowless cottage. ‘You’re such a goody-goody!’ she spat at me.

‘You were right to stop her,’ said Mammy as we too went inside. ‘We will know soon enough what all that is about.’

A short while later, there was a rap at the door and I knew from the rhythm just who it would be.

Mammy pulled back the door. ‘Ah, Artair,’ she said cagily. ‘What news do you bring?’

‘We need to borrow Iseabail,’ he said, a quickness of breath disguising his apprehension of my mother. He shot me a glance over the top of Mammy’s head, enough to cause my tummy to ripple.

I dipped my head, knowing that my cheeks had coloured up.

‘What on earth for?’ asked Mammy sharply, blocking Eilidh from escaping through the open door with her elbow.

‘The man . . . the sailor . . . he brings a letter, but none of us have enough words to read it,’ said Artair unsteadily.

‘Well, we want nothing to do with him or his letter!’ said Mammy. ‘Tell the men that they’ll have to do without her. Can’t this stranger read it out for them?’ And with this she slammed the door shut, plunging us three McCleod women back into dimness.

I sat by the hearth, the flames illuminating my face. ‘I don’t mind going,’ I said piously, hiding my exhilaration at the prospect of reading the letter. As always, I hungered for news of the outside world – and for any opportunity to breach the fraternity of the men’s council. ‘I’m sure it won’t take long . . . as long as it’s written in Gaelic.’

It wasn’t the first time I’d been called upon for such a duty. Since Father had died, I was the one the men

sought out to read any communication from the outside world – although the men who bore these messages had never been strangers before.

‘If she’s going, so am I!’ said Eilidh indignantly.

‘Neither of you are going!’ said Mammy. ‘That sailor is probably riddled with all manner of nasty things.’ She returned to her stew, poking the fire so sharply that a crest of sparks shot up. ‘God knows why you taught Iseabail to read, Dougal,’ she muttered under her breath, like Father was still around, standing by her side at the hearth. ‘And you were daft enough to make no secret of it!’

‘That’s the only reason Artair wants to marry Iseabail,’ said Eilidh, folding her arms over her bosom in a sulk. ‘Because she can read. But I bet he thinks I’m far prettier.’

I didn’t take the bait, instead finding comfort by stroking the scar on my left wrist. It marked where Eilidh had stabbed me with a sharp piece of animal bone, the day that Artair asked Mammy for my hand in marriage. Artair was the finest young man that our island had to offer and Eilidh, despite only being fifteen, had fancied that he might ask her instead.

The morning after I accepted his proposal, Artair followed island tradition by balancing on the Maiden’s Rock, a precarious cliff ledge dangling high over the crashing waves of the Atlantic, to prove he would make a worthy husband. To prove his love for me – and only me.

‘Father tried to teach you to read,’ I said calmly. Eilidh was such a jealous girl that I had to let most of what flew out of her mouth wash over me. ‘But you were too impatient to sit, remember?’

‘Sitting is boring,’ she replied, twirling a coil of luxuriant dark hair around her finger. But it sounded so ridiculous that we both burst into fits of laughter. I was glad our arguments, although often heated, were always short-lived.

‘Well, don’t worry, you’ll have a second chance,’ I said, as our giggles faded. ‘I intend to make sure everyone is taught their letters when Artair becomes chief. We’ve already discussed it – it will be a good thing for the island.’

‘Over my dead body,’ said Mammy, turning to wield the poker. ‘I had to swallow my tongue every night when your father got those infernal books out! But you . . . you couldn’t get enough of them!’

‘Pity we don’t still have them,’ I mumbled. For after Father was swept out to sea, grief had driven Mammy into snapping all the writing slates, throwing every single one of his books on to the pyre.

‘I heard that,’ Mammy battered on. ‘Now not another word on the matter – or I’ll slap the beaks off the both of you, so I will.’

Eilidh and I stole a glance at one another through the peaty smoke. Both of us were trying our best not to break out in giggles again.

But then there was another knock at the door. Different this time, more authoritative.

Innes Ferguson, Artair's father and chief of the islands of St Kilda, stood at the door.

'Iseabail,' he said calmly, looking past my mother like she didn't exist. 'You will come with me now.'

The sailor had been led up to the chief's cottage and was now being offered gannet soup to be taken on the bench outside of my future father-in-law's house. But Innes stopped me several yards short of where the men crowded there – a blatant reminder that I was not their equal. Instead he signalled for Artair to bring the letter whilst I took a seat on a nearby rock. Mammy, who had insisted on accompanying me, stood just off to the side, still holding Eilidh's arm tightly.

'The sailor says he's just the messenger,' said Innes. The chief's voice was calm but flecked with trepidation as he watched his son retreat, leaving us four alone. 'Says he was sent to deliver this to the chief of these islands. But claims he can't read a word himself. Speaks Gaelic in a funny way too.'

'Is it an English accent he has . . . or maybe Irish?' I enquired, accepting the scroll of parchment from the chief's hands. 'Scandinavian?'

'Never you mind,' said Innes, which meant that he couldn't work out where the man might be from. 'Just tell me what it says . . . and be quick about it!'

The seal on the parchment had been broken, its red

wax counter now separated clumsily in two halves with the opening flapping in the wind.

I pressed it back together. ‘It’s a lion,’ I observed as the head and body were once more united. ‘What country is that from?’

But the chief was impatient. ‘Get on with it, girl!’ He glowered.

‘Please, Iseabail.’ Mammy bent to whisper in my ear, mortified at my boldness. ‘Just do as the chief asks.’

I unrolled the scroll of parchment, hands shaking as the beauty of the manuscript unfolded on to my lap; I had never seen anything like it before. Unable to contain herself any more, Eilidh peered over my shoulder, a gasp escaping her plump lips.

My eyes darted greedily up and down the parchment as I held it open against the wind, wondering where to begin. It was written in Gaelic – the main body etched out beautifully in black calligraphy, the first character of each paragraph enlarged and woven into twisted Celtic bands. But I was distracted by the decorated margins which snaked with vines and serpent-like creatures, inked solid with colours that I didn’t even have a name for.

I tried to settle my gaze, but the writing was so full of flicks and wisps that it was several moments before I could decipher anything it said.

‘At least tell me who it is from?’ said Innes, prodding me in the back sharply.

‘Let’s see,’ I said, though for a minute I’d completely

forgotten he was standing there. Forgotten that all three of them were standing behind me, waiting for me to say something. My eyes scrolled down to the signature at the bottom.

‘Plaustrell,’ I said finally, looking up at the chief’s anxious face. ‘This letter is from a man named Alexander Plaustrell.’

Innes’s frown deepened at the mention of the strange name. ‘What does it say? What does this Plaustrell person want?’

The light was fading as the sun slid behind the sea stacks, dipping the islands into blue-blackness – but I held the letter up to the dying light and read the first paragraphs aloud.

The letter, addressed boldly to the chief of our islands, began with asking a favour; that favour was for the loan of a girl.

Innes Ferguson looked perplexed at the request. ‘Why would I give up one of my girls to this . . . what does he say he is again? A merchant?’

‘That’s what he claims here,’ I said, pointing to the relevant part of the text I’d already read out. ‘A merchant of great wealth. Says he lives in a grand house situated in the borderlands between England and Scotland.’ I read out more, my voice faltering as I saw the look on Mammy’s face.

‘And now he wants a girl from here to look after his daughter!’ exclaimed Mammy, repeating back what I

had just read. ‘Just because his wife died of the plague? Well, of all the things!’

‘He says that he is looking for a special girl – one from a remote place, untouched by the evils of the outside world,’ I progressed.

The phrase that the merchant had used was *caileag ghealchridheach* – a girl that is pure of heart.

‘Does this man explain himself further?’ Innes responded, standing on his toes to look down to the beach, checking the movements of the sailor.

He did. For the letter went on to say that in return for her services, the chosen girl was promised a luxurious life, full of comfort.

‘Anything else?’ said Innes, still obviously dissatisfied with what the merchant was offering up in return for a precious girl of childbearing age.

‘Yes . . . here it is,’ I said, following the lines I had not yet read with my finger. *‘A boat will be dispatched to your shores in mid-winter, loaded with grain, candles and timber. A token of my gratitude.’*

A look of contemplation passed over Innes’s face. Last winter had been unforgiving and we’d lost several islanders to cold and starvation. Since then, there had been rumblings of dissent, families with talk of moving to the Hebrides for a less brutal life, where men didn’t risk their necks gathering seabirds from the treacherous cliffs, where women’s new-born children would not perish from the eight-day sickness. A boat of supplies in mid-winter

would save lives . . . and strengthen Innes's power.

'Surely this is some kind of trick?' I said, turning nervously to look back up at Innes. 'Whoever heard of a boat making it through here in winter?'

Then again, I thought, whoever heard of a man sailing a ship here on his own?

But Innes just stabbed a broad finger back at the writing. 'That's not for you to decide,' he said roughly, but now he was looking directly at Eilidh. 'Now, what else does it say?'

My finger wound nervously to the last paragraph. '*The chosen girl would be given the choice to return to the islands, if she so wished.*'

But as I spoke these words with some relief, my eyes skipped down to the last line and I froze. What was written there was about to change everything.

The others, assuming that I had finished the letter, stood behind the rock where I sat, brewing it over.

'I'll go,' said Eilidh defiantly, stepping forward and spinning round to face Innes. 'I *want* to go!'

Mother pressed a hand to her own mouth. 'Eilidh, no!' she said between her fingers. 'The chief will not be sending anyone.'

But one look at Innes and we all knew that this was not the case.

'Of course it has to be me,' continued Eilidh, her brown eyes flashing rebelliously. 'Fionna McQueen's father is too powerful, he'll not let her go. Then there's

the McKinnon twins – one isn't right in the head, the other too sickly to make the journey.'

'Stop it!' cried Mammy, her voice catching in her throat. But Eilidh was on fire now, her dark chestnut mane whipping in the wind.

'And Iseabail is engaged to Artair. It *has* to be me.'

'That is for the men to decide,' snapped Innes, though he had obviously been thinking the exact same thing as Eilidh. 'Though it would be easier if the chosen girl went willingly.'

Mammy looked at him aghast. She loved both her daughters, but losing her youngest would probably kill her. 'You are to consider this offer?' she cried, incredulous. 'And these supplies, getting through here in the winter – why, it's ludicrous!'

But Innes remained tight-lipped. Mammy looked desperately to me for help. And I gave it to her.

'Don't worry, Mammy, it can't be Eilidh,' I breathed, my voice barely breaking above the noise of the wind.

But Mammy's relief was short-lived.

'Because it says here . . .' I went on, lowering the scroll because my hands were shaking. 'It says that the young lady chosen must be able to read and write.'