

## **Lady of Mallaig Castle - Diane Lacombe**

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### Chapter one

#### **Exile**

It had rained during most of our journey from the valley of the Dee to the West coast of the islands, toward Mallaig. Everything gave off a heavy, damp odour: our clothes, the canvas and the oakwood of the carriage, the horses' smooth coats, our headdresses and our trunks. The constant drumming of the rain on the dripping cloth cover deepened the gloom that weighed over us since we had left. It was as if the foggy and gray weather insisted on matching the grief in which my heart was slowly sinking. Each stone the horses trod on carried me further away from my family and the castle which had stood on the shores of the river Dee since, it seemed to me, the dawn of time. "What is so dramatic about leaving one's parents at close to twenty years of age?" I pondered.

For five days I went, five days of uninterrupted travelling on muddy mountain roads, troubled and distressed, with my two servants and a four-men escort as sole support, toward my destiny. That of the third daughter of Nathaniel Kieth, prosperous ship-owner from Aberdeen, given in marriage to the second son of Baltair of Mallaig, chief of the MacNeil clan. I could not resign myself to the total and final wrench of leaving my home. If this marriage seemed very much like a disaster to my loyal spirit and unexperienced heart, I had to admit that it was strategically vital for the opposing clans it was meant to unite.

Indeed, the long-standing quarrel between our fathers and grand-fathers, over the use of similar coats of arms, was, in this year of grace 1424, brought before the courts and settled in favour of the MacNeils. In order for the Keiths to keep the hawk with the three gold stripes on their coat of arms, the two families had to be brought together by a marriage. Moreover, the forests of the Grampians, which had been given to the MacNeils by the king, represented an invaluable source of timber for my father. Since the MacNeils only cared about the woods to go hunting, the potential revenues from timber constituted a powerful argument for the two families to come to an agreement. The MacNeil's only heir was a bachelor and I was the last daughter to be married from my family. And so, I was sacrificed for the sake of this alliance. Such was the arrangement my father and his rival from Mallaig had come to in the Spring. For nothing was more convenient for these two proud men than to mask their differences behind their children's union. However, the final agreement did not go unopposed, either by myself or by the one to whom I was intended, as I later learned.

Being independent by nature, I had never shown an interest in marriage; furthermore, it was extremely difficult for me to contemplate marrying a man I did not know and about whom I was told next to nothing, except that he belonged to a clan from the Highlands, a country known to be wild and harsh. Nothing had prepared me to fit into its society. Being the youngest, I had been pampered, always the centre of attention, until I was sent to complete my education in France, at my uncle's, John Carmichael, Bishop of Orléans. I had been studying at a convent school for four years when the diplomatic situation with France deteriorated and my father called me back to Scotland, to Crathes, where I spent, in the castle of my childhood, what was to be my last year as a maiden.

For my father, the grounds for this marriage had to do with much more than heraldic imperatives. My family needed the wood from the forests belonging to the MacNeil clan in order to build new ships; the marriage would ensure a steady supply of wood for his business. Thus, the clauses of the contract were clear: since the MacNeil clan brought more to the alliance than the Keith clan, it was Lord MacNeil who would gain a daughter and not Lord Keith who gained a son.

What stressful period I had just spent at Crathes, between my parents, my two brothers, my two sisters and their husbands! Not a week went by without my trying to affect the decision that hung over me like a sword of Damocles. But to no avail: all I managed to do was to irritate my father by opposing his plan. This was so vexing to him that he had refused to even hear a word of my arguments. My mother did not support me either: even though she was usually on my side, she never opposed her Lord in matters of the clan. And this marriage was indeed a "matter of the clan" and had little to do with my happiness, or what I imagined it to be. I had thus rebelled and fought all alone, and in vain, all through autumn. Finally, not only did I fail to change my father's mind, but I so antagonized him that, just before Christmas, he sent me to meet my fate by myself, accompanied only by a small retinue. Neither he, nor my mother, nor my brothers, Daren and Robert, were going to attend my wedding. And certainly not my two pregnant sisters. I felt that this disavowal was the last nail in the coffin of my exile.

Nellie, my old nurse, and Vivian, my young maid, were quietly singing a gavotte to themselves in the back of the carriage. Not knowing whether I was in the mood to join them, they occasionally ventured into these musical interludes to sooth their boredom and bitterness. Leaving their castle did not make them any happier than I was, and only their deep affection for me had convinced them to remain in my service. What was to become of us in our new home, a land that was known for its boorish and ruthless customs? This question assailed me every time I looked in their direction. Their loyalty at this momentous turning point weighed heavily upon me and I did not dare confide in them for fear of adding to their misery.

The carriage came to a halt and a few minutes passed before lieutenant Lennox advised us that we were stopping for the night. We had been shrouded in the rain's own darkness, so that we had not even noticed that daylight was fading. Night would fall in an hour, and we would have to set up camp for the third time since our departure. We had been able to spend two nights in an inn before starting on the road to the Grampians, a mountain range that crossed Scotland. "Tomorrow, we shall sleep at Mallaig castle, my future dwelling. Tomorrow, I will see my husband's face", I said to myself, with an obvious lack of enthusiasm or even simple curiosity.

I quickly got out of the carriage, happy to stretch my legs. It had finally stopped raining. Clumps of heather were growing here and there, providing patches of hard, dry land. I felt a desperate urge to tear down the road that led back to the valley of the Dee. "What's the use? Will I even be able to go back one day?" I thought gloomily. Suddenly, I became aware of how isolated we were. I could make out no road ahead or behind us. We were in the middle of the scrawny vegetation of the plateaus, on what appeared to be no more than a path.

"But where is the road, lieutenant Lennox? I cried out.

- There is no road in the North-West, my Lady. There is no bridge either, or changing post. These are the Highlands", he answered resignedly.

Then he added, trying to sound comforting:

"I have come here many times and, fortunately, I know the way. Otherwise, we would have needed an escort from Mallaig."

I couldn't have been more disappointed. I had grown up in the city, surrounded by streets, roads and ports that symbolized communications, trade and life itself to me. They were the very essence of civilization. And now, not only was I being married into a foreign clan, but also sent away to a wild country. I shuddered. I managed to control myself when I met the lieutenant's eyes, full of apprehension, and looked up with defiance: "I will make it, I thought. I owe it to myself, I owe it to Nellie and Vivian and, in spite of everything, I owe it to my family. The honour of the Keiths rests upon my attitude toward the MacNeil clan!" When it was time to leave, it is with great resolve that I got back into the carriage. The rest of the afternoon passed without incident, under gray skies, in a dreary and foggy landscape that felt like impending snow.

While Nellie and my guards were preparing our frugal evening meal, a four-men patrol arrived unexpectedly: three of the men were riding mules and the fourth led a cart drawn by an ox. I barely had time to catch sight of them before lieutenant Lennox enjoined me to get back in the closed carriage. Although the road we had been travelling was not deemed dangerous, since the rebellious Highlanders had been arrested by King James, he preferred that I remain hidden from view; this was clearly in keeping with the strictest safety code of this mature, dependable man, unfailingly loyal to my family. As I liked him and did not wish to oppose him, I always followed his recommendations. I was all the more willing to do so as I knew I could count on Nellie and Vivian to faithfully report back to me whatever they learned from the few people we met during our journey.

They finally brought me my meal in the carriage, since the passers-by gave no sign of wanting to move on, and indeed, they did not leave our camp until dawn the next day. I would have so liked to dry my skirts by the fire, like Nellie and Vivian, and to chat all evening with the strangers. When at last they joined me in the carriage for the night, I was not asleep. I was eager to find out what they had to say and I questioned them as soon as they had wrapped themselves in their cloaks.

"Well, my lovely, answered Nellie dolefully, they were nothing but peasants looking for work and a master glazier from Inverness. He repairs castle and church windows in the Highlands. His son is among them and is learning the trade. I believe they are decent folks."

My nurse then looked away and she seemed to want to end there her brief account. Was it the late hour and the strain of the day, or the general lack of interest of the encounter that made her want to remain silent? I could not tell. It was too dark for me to make out her expression, usually most revealing. But after a moment of silence, Vivian declared mockingly:

"I don't believe I'm wrong in saying that, even though their accent is horrible, at least two of them would not have been averse to some female companionship for the rest of the trip. In any case, they really had a good time at Mallaig castle while they were fixing the windows in the great hall, last month."

To my great surprise, Nellie sternly ordered her to be quiet, allegedly because she wanted to sleep. It wasn't like her to interrupt my maid whose chatter she particularly enjoyed. I immediately suspected that the information she had gleaned on the residents of Mallaig castle was worthy of interest. I tried to start her on the same topic, enjoining her to tell all. Through Vivian's disconnected tale, I learned that the lifestyle of the MacNeil lords was totally devoid of nobility or good manners. Carried away by her pleasure at telling what she knew, she spared me no details on the disparaging comments that the travellers had made on the heir of the MacNeils, whom they described as a good-for-nothing.

I understood then that my faithful nurse had wanted to protect me by her reluctance to speak. The least I knew about my future husband, the better I could face his family. In her eyes, not knowing about the man I would be bound to for life would guarantee my peace of mind. But she could not stop Vivian, whom I had ordered to speak. She could only hope that the maid would not dwell on

the more sensitive parts. But her hopes were dashed. Once Vivian had embarked on her tale, she could not be expected to differentiate what should be told and what was best left unsaid. And it was only when she ran out of breath and things to tell that my maid fell silent; she wished me a good night without the slightest idea of the alarm she had caused her mistress. Vivian fell asleep right away in the silence of the carriage, and Nellie soon after. I remained awake until dawn, torn between anger and fear of what lay ahead, not doubting for a moment what four strangers, unaware of my situation, said about a family who had hired them in good faith and given them lodgings for several weeks.

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Clouds heavy with snow were fraying at the edges on the horizon against which were outlined the steep mountains of Mallaig peak. Skies were gray for a fourth consecutive day. It might even snow. Iain turned his tired gaze away from the window and fell back on his rumpled bed. A familiar pain had been gnawing at his stomach since he had awakened. Beathag, with her back turned to him, was sleeping soundly, and her satin-white shoulders rose and fell regularly with each breath. Her long, red, curly hair unfurled on the pillow, but her naked body left him strangely indifferent. She usually rose at mid-morning. Iain would need to muster all his willpower to start a day he wished were already finished. First, he had to tear himself away from Beathag's bed, get dressed and go back to his own room, or go down directly to the kitchens and have something to eat, whatever his stomach could keep down. He had added another acrimonious argument with his father and one more drinking bout to the long list of excesses he had been indulging in for a while, from which he derived no real pleasure or pride, but that rather left him infinitely bored.

The ground floor of the donjon was plunged in a hushed stillness. No bright light or sound could come through the shut windows of the great hall from the yard or the guardroom on the other side. Only some muffled noises could be heard from the adjoining kitchens in the West wing of the castle. Anna was wearily busying herself with cook around the fires. Her stoutness and advancing years caused her to move in a sluggish manner, and this was only made worse by the moroseness that had overcome her since the death of her mistress, five years before. Her first thoughts of the day always turned to her as she prepared the breakfast dishes that had to be carried upstairs: one for Lord Baltair in his room which he rarely left, one for Guilbert, the secretary, who no longer came downstairs in the morning, and one for lord Iain who might not even be back in his room yet.

A young maid, still all sleepy, quietly came into the kitchen and enquired about her first duties. Anna knew that she dreaded having to bring lord Iain his tray. They had lost count of the maids who had quit the service at the castle in the past year because of the incessant harassment from members of the clan and officers. Anna took pity on her and, half-smiling, gave her lord Baltair's tray, which she usually took up herself, all the while wondering how many more months the girl would last at the castle.

Lord Baltair, chief of the MacNeil clan, had just turned sixty-three. God had been merciful to him, more than with other chiefs of the Highlands, who had passed on before reaching their fiftieth year. "Why am I still here" he would ask himself every morning since his wife Lite had died, a loss all the more painful as it had closely followed the tragic death of his first-born, Alasdair. Why, indeed, go on living with this gaping wound inside, and watch helplessly the decline of his clan? Misfortune had struck him in what was dearest to him, and had left him completely at a loss, deprived of what had once been his strength and glory: an exceptional wife and a gifted son, esteemed by all.

Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding Alasdair's death had never been cleared up before the clan council, and the fact that his younger brother Iain was under suspicion gnawed at his heart more cruelly than any affront. He was perpetually haunted by the question: "What had Iain done to his brother at the end of that fateful tournament of the islands in 1419, where death had cut him down?"

In front of the hearth of black stones, where a bright fire was crackling, Lord Baltair strained to get out of his armchair when the young maid came in with his breakfast.

"Put it down next to the bed, he said in a tired voice.

- Aren't you going to lie down, my lord? I can hear you, you're having trouble breathing. Did your legs hurt much last night?" she asked in a truly caring tone.

Servants rarely addressed him without first being asked. This girl could not have been on the staff too long. She was barely fifteen, not aware of his habits and clearly had not known the castle in its hour of glory.

"Well, what does it matter! It's the price I must pay for living to old age. Tell my secretary that I am waiting for him to take care of current business, and Anna to come so I can give her instructions for receiving Nathaniel Keith's daughter."

The efficient young maid set the tray down on the chest that faced the bed and retired quietly, surprised that her master had not sent for his son. Wasn't the future wife of Lord Iain coming from the family castle of the Keiths, in Crathes? It was already three weeks that a herald had come to announce this extraordinary agreement with Lord MacNeil. She suddenly realized that this was a special day and she rushed back to the kitchens, eager to share her excitement with the rest of the staff. She tore down the spiral staircase, holding her skirts. The prospect of Lord Iain's marriage aroused much curiosity among the female servants of the castle. Curiosity, but also the vague hope that a wife would succeed in curbing the indiscretions of a dissolute young man and that the new mistress from the East would establish order again in the castle, which had been left without anyone really in charge since the death of Lady Lite. High hopes indeed. In fact, life at Mallaig castle could hardly be worse, whoever its future lady might be.

When she got to the kitchens, the young maid stopped dead in her tracks. Lord Iain was sitting at the table in front of a steaming bowl of broth, wearing leggings, his shirt open and his dishevelled hair partly tied with a leather strap. In the middle of the smokey room stood Anna, totally unruffled; she immediately handed her the tray for the secretary and motioned her to take it upstairs; the young girl wasn't about to have the chat she had hoped for. Holding the tray, she twirled around and disappeared in the great hall.

Iain hadn't even looked up. He was engrossed in the steam rising from his bowl and he fiddled with a chunk of bread that he occasionally dunked in the broth. Without admitting it, he was bothered by the housekeeper's troubled look. Anna had been his and his brother's nurse. She was certainly the one person on whose esteem he could count. The only one not to hold his misconduct against him, the only one who saw him as the child he had been and who understood him for what he was. He hadn't yet exchanged a word with her, but he could feel her watching him as she served him. She obviously worried about the kind of reception he was planning for Gunelle Keith. Everyone at the castle shared her concern. Everybody knew that he was firmly opposed to this marriage and that he had made it clear to his father from the start. But it was pointless to go against Baltair MacNeil's wishes. Iain knew it, had always known it, but he was in no mood to keep silent about his own future, the way to live his life and the choice of the woman he would have to honour. Each of his violent outbursts against his father in the past few months

had one purpose: to oppose the arranged marriage. And this fight, whose outcome was never in doubt, had left both father and son completely drained.

It was this perpetual conflict between the two men that caused Anna much anguish which she bore in secret. She had served lord Baltair with unfailing devotion for thirty years, but her attachment for the ingrate heir was at times beyond comprehension. Lord Baltair's grief distressed her and made her more despondent with each passing day. Her old master's heart and lungs were worn out, he suffered from crippling rheumatism and his mind was immersed in regrets of the past. It broke her heart to see this authoritarian man sinking lower and lower. He had kept his clan away from the fraudulent practices toward the Crown that the other chiefs of the Highlands had indulged in during the twenty years that king James the 1st had been a prisoner of the English.

In actuality, Baltair MacNeil no longer ruled his men; he did not hold clan council meetings in his castle and managed the family estate through his secretary, without ever visiting his lands or his lairds in person. It was now up to the MacNeil heir to make order reign on his domain, as the serfs had the right to expect, and to defend it against the frequent attacks of enemy clans. The father rarely envisaged the necessity of preparing his son to his succession as head of the clan. He had to admit defeat at the sight of the young man sinking into a life alternatively of apathy and rebelliousness. It seemed to Anna that, at twenty-three, Iain was as much a stranger in the eyes of his father as the sons of the clan lairds. "These two men could really love each other, she often told herself, they are so alike." The old woman pinched her lips to hold back a comment and shook her head to chase away her gloomy thoughts.

The hot broth was slowly soothing Iain's upset stomach. He stretched his legs under the table, feeling with his toes the big, long-haired, mahogany dog who reacted to his master's touch by energetically wagging its tail. Iain gave Anna a stealthy look, then whispered in his bowl:

"She'll be here tonight. I wonder if she is just as keen as I am about this marriage. In that case, all is well and you'll have nothing to fear from the next MacNeil chief, even if I am the family's second choice! - You're not going to reject her at the altar, as you threatened to do yesterday, are you?" enquired Anna.

She had asked her question in a tone that was both gruff and affectionate, which is how she spoke when she was afraid to irritate him. As all the other servants, she had heard him quarrel with his father the night before at supper, one of the few meals the two men had shared in weeks. Anna glanced at the young man's harsh profile. Iain was silent. She would not get an answer from him, and that certainly did not surprise her. The young master had already revealed a lot in just a few words. Such was the strange heir of the MacNeils: taciturn, impetuous and elusive.

Iain drank up the last gulp of broth, then rose slowly. He vaguely smiled at his nurse, trying to reassure her, and nodded to thank her as he left the room, the dog close on his heels. What would he do at the altar, if he ever got there? There was always the possibility that the Keith girl would refuse him as a husband. That made him smile. "Surely a sign of wisdom on her part if she did". But he was soon brought back to more practical thoughts. If, resolute as he was, he had not been able to oppose his father's will, how could she, a maiden fresh out of a convent, be expected to do it with hers?

He was mulling it over in his head when he heard footsteps further up the stairs he was climbing. He looked up and recognized the young maid, back from bringing the secretary his breakfast, a tray under her arm. Their eyes met and Iain took pleasure in seeing her all in a flutter. She conspicuously looked down and stood still against the wall to let him pass. Her face had turned a pretty pink. Iain felt a surge of energy within. He made as if to reach for her, but she nimbly slipped away under his arm and dashed down the last few steps that led to the entrance hall. He

shrugged his shoulders and continued up the stairs, his brow furrowed with the day's worries. He was overcome with an urge to go riding on the moor, a pressing need that was akin to the desire to flee.

Upstairs, Guilbert Saxon, Mallaig's secretary, stood in front of lord Baltair, waiting for him to ask him to sit down. He was in his late fifties, had an emaciated face and was impeccably attired in a black doublet. He had followed in his father's footsteps as secretary to the MacNeil family. Unfailingly devoted to his master, he had also been very attached to the late lady Lite and mourned her secretly in his heart. He had no heirs, never having married, and had thus never nurtured any ambitions for the future. He saw himself as being at the end of his career and planned to retire at lord MacNeil's death. Business at Mallaig had been undoubtedly stagnant, but above all, he felt he could not continue to serve under Iain who would inherit the land as well as the title of chief of the clan. He might have gone on managing the castle's affairs under the elder son, for he had had great esteem for his personal qualities. But with the youngest, it was another matter altogether.

Baltair MacNeil looked up from the dimly-lit parchment he was perusing, heaved a sigh and motioned Saxton to sit on the other side of the chest where the maid had laid down the breakfast tray.

"Have you examined the contract and do you have a clear idea of what our cutting rights in the Grampians will yield, Saxton? If we keep sufficient hunting grounds, will the woods compensate for our losses with the livestock?"

- Undoubtedly, my lord, as long as we limit your concessions. On the other hand, your herds have done very well this summer and we will be able to sell more than the past two years. According to my estimates, Nathaniel Keith will pay for the rights on seven acres the first year and on four others the following year, which will bring in a total sum of seven hundred pounds to the house of MacNeil before the Autumn of 1426. Furthermore, your lordship will be able to grant the cleared lands to his knights and lairds, whose sons have reached the age of taking an estate, as you know.

Baltair MacNeil moved slowly in his armchair. His bones hurt all over and he had trouble finding a comfortable position. The marriage contract seemed satisfactory on the whole, but he was annoyed by his secretary's long-term view. His health did not allow him projections into the future, not even a near one. The idea of the serfs having to take their oath again oppressed him. He imagined Iain carrying out this noble duty: kneeling before him, men older than him, taking their oath. His face twisted at the thought. He got his breath back, thinking to himself:

"How can my son expect respect for the MacNeil name if he refuses to behave like a man? Why does he insist on remaining a provocative adolescent, eager to fight, to enter tournaments, to hunt, and fiercely opposed to any kind of education and good behaviour? Admittedly, his men admire him for his feats, and his enemies fear him, but the serfs mistrust his impulsiveness, and the lairds of the clan try to ignore him. Nobility is inherited, but esteem can be earned or lost, and it is essential to a clan chief. Iain will have nobody's esteem if he persists in his ways. Please God that this marriage bring him stability!"

The old chief turned wearily to Saxton and started going over the daily business. He felt uncomfortable at the mere thought of making deals with Nathaniel Keith. He had always dealt with associates: only a year ago, Keith was still an opponent. His secretary's even, slightly nasal voice always calmed him down. Thus he listened to him making his report, while he paced round the room. When he came to the window, he watched the snow falling, a fine, light snow that would melt as it touched the ground. In the distance, he saw a horseman galloping toward the plateaus, with a big dog right behind him. It had to be Iain. He was riding alone, which surprised

him. The hope that his son might be going to meet the Keith party made his heart beat a little faster.

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The road started to go down as we emerged from the woods that had surrounded us since early morning. Wet snow had temporarily covered the ground and, as it melted, left large black patches. I suddenly looked up. I had distinctly heard the lieutenant announcing mount Ben Nevis. I moved forward in my seat and caught sight, to the North-East, of this famous peak, the highest in this part of Europe, as I had learned in my geography classes in Orléans.

It all seemed so far away. In my mind, I could see my four years at the convent school unwinding as festive ribbons; I remembered the passion for learning that I felt from the day I had arrived, in the middle of my fifteenth year; the eagerness with which I had buried myself in my studies and taken to the life of a French schoolgirl; my insatiable thirst for knowledge, and finally my great disappointment at being called back to Scotland after the defeat of my compatriots in the battle of Verneuil-sur-Avre, on August 17 last. My father had deemed prudent to bring me home: the Scots in France were no longer as safe as at the time of the Scottish expedition to assist the Dauphin Charles against the English. Nonetheless, those three years of Scottish success in France had been very profitable for my father's business. The entire family supported his goal to conquer this Southern market, France, which in Scotland was still referred to as the "old ally". My own accomplishments at the convent school had gone unnoticed.

Vivian and Nelly stuck their head out from under the canopy that covered the carriage and looked toward the mountain. They were not impressed by the granite mass of the Ben Nevis, in spite of its snowy peak. They were visibly more interested in the herds of oxen grazing in the dark pasture that stretched in the distance of the moor. They started calculating the heads of cattle and the quantities of meat they represented. Their comments made me smile. "What could they possibly know about raising cattle when they could not even pluck a chicken without wincing?"

The wind had died down, but the cold made us wrap up well and pull back under the canopy. As for me, I wanted to see every tree, every stone, every cloud of this scenery that would soon be my home. The landscape before me was gray, wet and vast: the Highlands. On the horizon I could make out the sea, almost black, and the wild kingdom of the Hebrides Isles. I felt a pang of anguish. What was in store for me in these rugged Highlands where the people took after their Viking ancestors as much as after the Picts: bearded brandy drinkers, turnip and mutton eaters, warlike and, according to some, uncivilized?

Later, my lieutenant came to inform us of a stop: a few minutes to water the horses in the brook that ran alongside the road. Staring at the lands below, I noticed a horseman, followed by a dog, galloping toward the North. He was riding around the herd half a mile from where we were. I could also see three other horsemen that were rounding up the cattle. I wondered why there was no enclosure. I was used to the small, fenced-in pastures of the Dee river where a dozen cows at most grazed. Here there were at least fifty heads of cattle. I was troubled by a sense of the excessive nature of this country. I breathed in deeply the cold air and waited in silence for our carriage to set off again toward its destination: Mallaig castle.

Late that afternoon, as we passed a pine grove, it loomed in the distance at the end of the peninsula, between the two lochs<sup>[1]</sup>, outlined against the sea. Very imposing. The building stood alone on a promontory that seemed unassailable from where we were. Its donjon, the thirty-foot-high walls and the guardroom were all made of red sandstone, which contrasted with the gray landscape. There seemed to be no village built against its walls. Endless fields surrounded it on

all sides, some used to grow cereals, others as pastures. I counted seven cottages in the surroundings and a mill to the East. Nothing else. And that is how the Mallaig peninsula and its castle appeared to me for the first time.

Lennox made the horses come to a stop. He was giving instructions to have our arrival announced to lord MacNeil. Nial, our young guard, would go ahead. We had all stepped out of the carriage to admire the view. Nellie sighed, as if she had read my mind and come to the same conclusions:

"That's a pretty desolate place, with not much company. A lady had better enjoy her needlework, for she is not likely to see many troubadours at her court.

- It's true that the hustle and bustle of Aberdeen's harbour offers better opportunities for amusement, I answered, but some castles make their own entertainment thanks to the merits of their people. Who knows, maybe the MacNeils have their resident poets and musicians?

- Do you think, my lady, that they organize celebrations, banquets and competitions as we do, interjected Vivian in a dreamy voice.

- I have no idea, but we can be sure that there will be at least a wedding reception... isn't that so?" I answered, trying to sound cheerful.

Nellie gave me a circumspect glance, then averted her eyes from mine. She had no illusions on the festivities that were being planned for us. As for me, I was torn between the unfounded hope of finding at Mallaig an enriching and lively existence and the fear that the austere appearance of the castle might well reflect its true atmosphere. In the distance, I saw Nial galloping away. In spite of the fatigue, the hunger and the dirt that had clung to us during the six days that had lasted our journey, I suddenly felt no desire to reach our destination.

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Reverend Henriot was a short, young man, with a pleasant face. He wore the tonsure like a monk. A nervous twitch made him shrug his shoulders from time to time. He was standing motionless in the spacious yard of the castle, mentally going over the words of welcome that lord Baltair had dictated to him. He was beginning to feel the cold and he couldn't wait for everything to be over. Next to him stood lord Tomas, visibly ill at ease to be part of such a sparse delegation from Mallaig to welcome its future lady. The young man was tall and slender, had blond hair and intensely blue, intelligent eyes. He was neatly attired and looked noble and solemn. As lord MacNeil's nephew, he had naturally been chosen to present the family's respects. Lady Beathag, draped in a red cape trimmed with otter-fur, tried hard to conceal her curiosity under a casual air, with her scarlet lips pursed up in a stiff smile. She had perfect features and a milky-white complexion, but wore a perpetually disdainful pout on her face; a hennin crowned her beautiful, fiery-red hair. Last in the reception party, young Nial stood a bit to the side, eager to go back to his rightful place in his lady's escort.

At the back of the yard were waiting the guards and the grooms. Other members of the staff, curious and excited, remained hidden in the passage of the main door of the castle. Among them, Anna, who would surely be the first to be introduced to her future mistress, was making herself sick with worry. She absent-mindedly stroked the hair of a little girl snuggled up to her skirts. The wait had seemed endless, when at last the company slowly entered the yard. All in all, a carriage escorted by four men-at-arms; inside the well-crafted carriage, three smiling ladies: two young ones and an older one. "Which one is Gunelle?" eagerly wondered everyone.

Reverend Henriot shook himself out of his torpor and came forth to meet the party. The guards had dismounted and the eldest was helping the ladies out of the carriage. With the utmost dignity and respect, he introduced the first lady to the Reverend: lady Gunelle Keith. He held out his hands to her, which she took in hers, and spouted his prepared welcome speech. She had pushed back her hood, revealing her light-brown hair, braided and tied at the nape. There was nothing remarkable about her face: she had a freckled complexion, a high forehead round which she wore a blue velvet band, protruding cheekbones, thin lips, darting brown eyes, an intense look. She was no taller than the Reverend to whom she smiled, answering the greeting with a polite turn of phrase in a steady voice. The second lady, who was more glamorous and charming, seemed shy and stared at her toes. The eldest of the three was tall and very serious-looking.

Lord Tomas, whom the Reverend immediately introduced, walked up to Gunelle Keith. He greeted her by bowing his head, his right hand on his chest, according to the custom of the Northern knights, and, in a hoarse voice, paid his respects on behalf of the MacNeil family; then, he introduced lady Beathag, lord MacNeil's daughter-in-law, who started to curtsy without a word. Lady Gunelle received the greetings and answered them in kind, then turning to her people, she named them one by one, and each nodded in turn.

The round of introductions was thus complete. Tomas made a clear sign to the grooms who immediately took charge of the horses and carriage, making their way toward the stables. He then invited the ladies and their guards to enter the donjon. He opened the way with Reverend Henriot and lady Beathag and led them through the vaulted passage which they strided across without stopping to greet the servants waiting there. They continued in silence along the corridor that led to the entrance hall. It was dark and damp.

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I looked up at the walls and ceilings of blackened stone. "How gloomy is the interior of the castle!" I thought. Lennox walked beside me, unperturbed; his right arm brushed against my shoulder, his left hand rested discreetly on the pommel of his sword. I could feel he was tense, on the look-out. "What is going on?" I thought, slightly uneasy. I should have spoken to my hosts, who walked ahead of me, but had nothing to say to them. Furthermore, their backs were turned to me and they seemed in a hurry to get me wherever they were taking me. To the lords of Mallaig, no doubt. I was disappointed they had not come to greet me in the yard. It seemed to me that was a serious breach of basic manners. Maybe they were out, or busy, or suffered from some disability. Such were my thoughts when we walked across a huge entrance and came to the great hall. An impressive fireplace stood at the back of the large room and spread its comforting heat that enveloped us as soon as we entered. It was built out of skilfully sculpted stones and was deeper than any I had ever seen. The stone floor, that nothing covered, revealed dark patches of humidity. Two of the walls were decorated with frayed tapestries. The ceiling was made of blackened wood; it might have been painted in a bright colour once upon a time, but its height cast a deep shadow on the whole room. On the other hand, the windows were large and, on the South side, fitted with stained glass. Such a luxury in a place so remote, far-away from any city, struck me as rather extraordinary. I remembered the master glazier we had met on the road to Mallaig and his disturbing remarks about the inhabitants of the castle.

Lord Tomas turned to me and, ignoring the frown on my watchful's lieutenant's face, he firmly took my arm and led me to the fireplace in front of which were lined up several armchairs. Only then did I notice a man who could only be old lord MacNeil. He got up as I walked up to him. Under his green hat, of the same velvet as his long embroidered cloak, I could make out a full head of white hair, still remarkably thick. He was of medium height and he looked drawn, from fatigue, pain or simply old age. Letting go of my arm, lord Tomas immediately introduced me:

"This is Gunelle Keith, uncle, daughter of Nathaniel Keith, brother of William Keith, Marshal to the king and brother-in-law of John Carmichael, Bishop of Orléans. She is accompanied by her servants, who are happy to accept your hospitality.

- Welcome to the castle, lady Gunelle, he said very simply, taking my hands to stop me from curtsying. We were eagerly awaiting you and the members of your family."

He looked around the room and added:

"We are truly sorry they were not able to come here with you. The roads are not yet closed in the mountains, but they certainly are treacherous at the beginning of winter. Did you have a good trip? No unpleasant incidents, I trust?"

- Everything went marvellously well, thank you, my lord. My father sends his regards, and so does my whole family. He can rarely leave in November, for many cargoes come through Aberdeen before winter. And so it was agreed that my entire family would stay at our castle in Crathes."

He accepted this explanation without showing much emotion. He pointed an armchair to me and sank back into his, while enumerating the services at the disposal of my servants - lodgings, food and every convenience for all the time they chose to spend at Mallaig. I could not take my eyes of his severe face. He had regular features, a square jaw and very blue eyes. Thick eyebrows shaded his harsh gaze when he bowed his head. He spoke Scot with the same accent as Reverend Henriot and lord Tomas, but his words were more carefully chosen and refined. The skin of his gnarled hands was almost transparent and covered with spots; he kept them on his knees, with his fingers curled up. He seemed to have trouble opening and closing them. Baltair MacNeil was older than I had anticipated.

There was, of course, a question I was dying to ask: "But where is your son?" I had discreetly searched the hall and had not seen any man who fitted his description. My servants had sat down on benches and were conversing in hushed voices. Lady Beathag and Reverend Henriot had left the room. Lord Baltair was silent and quietly stared at me. I felt ill at ease and I let slip:

"My lord, is your son not at home at the moment? I was not introduced to him in the courtyard.

- My son is not at the castle, but we are expecting him. He should join us soon... for supper in one hour, if that suits you", he answered in a tone that betrayed a certain irritation.

This was surprising to say the least. Lord Baltair showed no desire to justify his sons's absence, all the while confirming that our party was indeed expected on that day. I informed him that I would retire to the chambers that had been set aside for me and my servants. He agreed and asked the housekeeper to take us upstairs. A kindly-looking woman named Anna stepped forward. As I left the room, I walked past Lennox and noticed how incensed he looked, and I smiled to reassure him. It had been undoubtedly a rather cold reception for the future lady of Mallaig, but neither I nor he could do anything about it. "Everything is going to be fine, Lennox," I whispered, to which he nodded without conviction.

We climbed up two flights of stairs; the steps were particularly deep. The bedroom was at the far back of the East wing of the donjon, forming the corner tower. It was surprisingly bright: two tall gothic windows fitted with white glass let through a soft light. Three large tapestries hung on the West and North walls; an oak vat for bathing was placed in a nook in the back wall. The floor was entirely covered with woven rugs. In the middle of the room stood an imposing bed hung with damask curtains. Two other beds were placed at an angle in the corner opposite to the door,

where our trunks had been set down. It was truly a most elegant room and I could tell that Vivian and Nellie shared my appreciation. Later I learned that it used to be lady Lite's chamber.

The housekeeper checked that there was enough water in the pitchers and the basins warming up in front of the hearth for our baths. On a low table were a pile of white linen neatly folded, a lovely pewter tray with some apples, a carafe with a goblet, some dried thistle flowers in a dish. Everything had been admirably planned for the exhausted travellers that we were. I felt my tense neck and back relaxing: for the first time since my arrival, I was able to breathe freely. This kind of thoughtfulness on the part of the housekeeper was a sign of civility and warmth that made me feel welcome. I was happy and relieved to note that Anna was very competent at her job. We had not understood a word she had said: she spoke Gaelic, probably like most of the servants at the castle. None of us spoke or understood this language of the Highlands. Of our party, lieutenant Lennox was the only one who did.

As soon as Anna had finished her chores and left the room, we dropped in our beds at the same time, sighing with contentment. We felt like laughing for relief. We had reached our destination and had a whole hour to feel like our old selves again.

They came to get us for supper when night had fallen on the castle. The walls along the corridors cast heavy shadows that the golden flames from the candles could not dispel. We entered the great hall: delicious smells of meat hung in the air. A good size table was set. By the number of plate settings and guests, I quickly figured that Nellie and Vivian would not sit at the main table. They also realized this and we parted company without a word. Of our party, only Lennox would join me for my first supper at Mallaig: he was standing rigidly, not far from the fireplace. The other guests were waiting for me in silence.

Lord Baltair stood by the table; he held out his hand to me as soon as he saw me and motioned me to come forward and sit in the middle. Across an empty chair on my right sat Reverend Henriot. Lord Tomas was right across me and, next to him, a tall, skinny man, all dressed in black, who was identified to me as Guilbert Saxon, the secretary. Across him, Lennox, impenetrable and tight-jawed, and at the other end of the table, another empty chair. "Lady Beathag's or the MacNeil son?" I wondered. They had not yet arrived and, while waiting, I examined the table at leisure. It was covered with an impeccably white tablecloth; flowers, whose name I did not know, floated in a bowl of scented water; in the centre had been placed trays full of hazelnuts and thick slices of bread. I noted once more a certain distinction, which, I don't know why, seemed rather incongruous in these parts.

Nellie and Vivian were sitting on benches near the entrance of the hall. I looked toward them as I heard the rippling sound of laughter just before lady Beathag and her servant appeared. I heard lord MacNeil next to me utter, in Gaelic, some comment in a caustic tone. Then turning to me, he whispered an apology which I quickly accepted. I concluded that Gaelic was the language spoken by everyone at Mallaig castle, including the chief of the MacNeil clan.

Looking at me with a fixed smile, lady Beathag sat down across Lennox and gave him an enigmatic look. Lord Baltair immediately ordered the service to commence. I gave a start: I could not help staring at the empty chair on my right. We were about to begin this meal of welcome without the son's presence.

However inconceivable that might have seemed, there was no doubt that Iain MacNeil had not yet returned. Lord Baltair kept the conversation going, systematically avoiding the subject. He was visibly shocked and no one dared to broach the question for fear of provoking his anger. I was shuddering with fear. In one hour, this old man had become an energetic clan chief. During the entire meal, not one word was exchanged in Gaelic, even between the people of Mallaig.

Obviously, an order had been issued to that effect. Since lady Beathag did not say a word, nor did she seem to follow the conversation, I concluded that she did not speak Scot.

We were served beef and mutton, boiled vegetables and quince preserves. Mead and beer were flowing freely and it was lord Tomas who made sure that my cup was always full. I was starving, and consequently did justice to the meal, chasing away the troubling thought of the son's absence. Lord Baltair politely enquired after my family, life in Aberdeen and my impressions of the Grampians, the newly acquired lands that I had crossed during my journey. He also addressed Lennox with great civility. But the atmosphere remained tense until the end of the meal. Baltair MacNeil was the perfect host. Furious, but perfect.

When we had finished eating, my escort rejoined me. I was relieved to have my servants at my side again. Then, in just a few minutes, the residents of the castle, some of whom were introduced to me, streamed into the hall. Knights, guards, servants, various tradesmen who worked within the castle's walls, their wives and lots of children of all ages mixed in joyous confusion. The sound of voices soon grew into a deafening noise. I noticed that the majority of them had red hair, coppery red. The women wore brightly-coloured dresses, but not particularly rich or elegant in style. All the Mallaig men had beards, except lord MacNeil, his secretary, Tomas and the Reverend. I occasionally caught curious looks directed at me and heard throaty laughter ringing out on all sides. My ears were buzzing with the Gaelic language and I was beginning to feel a little dazed. Two men, looking very concerned, would not take their eyes off me: lieutenant Lennox and lord Tomas.

Near the door, lady Beathag held a lively court. The Reverend and the secretary had gone off to a corner and were deep in conversation. Anna the housekeeper was hanging round her master's armchair, looking helpless. I would have liked to congratulate her on the successful planning of the meal, but I was too far from her and could not easily get away. Soon, I could not hide signs of fatigue. Fortunately, lord Baltair retired fairly early, merely nodding at me. I nodded back: finally, I would be able to go back to my room. I quickly went round the room, wishing everyone a good night. When at last I was ready to take my leave, Iain MacNeil had not shown up. He didn't come back that night. Nor the two following nights.