QUEEN MACBETH

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To my pal Linda Riley,
who knows all about being misrepresented!

Author's Note

There's a lot we don't know about the land north of Hadrian's Wall at the end of the tenth century. Partly that's because a vanishingly small number of people had access to ink and paper. And partly because those who did were more inclined towards copying religious texts than writing the medieval version of a blog.

But some things we do know. Macbeth and his lady were not the power-hungry bloody tyrants that Shakespeare wrote in his Scottish play. For a start, Macbeth wasn't even his name – it was Macbethad. His wife wasn't Lady Macbeth – she was Gruoch. If he couldn't get their names right, how can we trust anything else he tells us? I've left him as Macbeth, but I'm admitting up front that's for the sake of convenience.

We also know that when Macbeth killed Duncan – yes, he did kill Duncan, but it was on the field of battle, not in the dead of night when Duncan was a guest in his castle –

there was no such thing as Scotland. There was Moray and Alba and Dál Riata and Fife and a few other 'kingdoms'.

We also know, for example, there was no such thing as a direct line of succession. Your son would only succeed you as Thane, or Mormaer, or Earl if he had enough of an army to hold the throne. It helped if he'd had the good sense to marry a woman who would bring a solid alliance with her.

And so on. On the one hand, it's frustrating when there are so many more questions than answers. On the other hand, it leaves plenty of space for the imagination. And that's what I've enjoyed along the road to setting Shakespeare straight. I hope you enjoy discovering more about the incident-packed lives of Gruoch and Macbeth.

Any mistakes are uniquely mine.

Glossary

auld	old
bannock	a round flatbread made from oatmeal, flour and buttermilk, cooked on a griddle or a cast-iron pan. Usually cut into quarters, split and spread with butter.
barley bree	a primitive form of whisky
beldam	an assertive older woman
besom	an assertive younger woman
bide, biding	to reside or remain
birlinn	a small galley or longboat with a single sail and oars
bleezing	bragging, showing off
bonnie, bonny	beautiful, attractive
braies	breeches
bunnet	flat cap, Tam O'Shanter
cac-shiubhal	diarrhoea (Gaelic)
canny	careful, considered

chaps	knocks
drop spindle	a simple and portable method of spinning yarn
druimean	Mid-Perthshire Gaelic for hill ridge, the source of the place name Drymen
dugs	breasts
fechter	fighter, warrior (bonnie fechter: admirable fighter)
fidchell	chess
filidh	bard
girnie	peevish, complaining
houghmagandie	sexual intercourse
jessies	weak or cowardly males
lèine	linen tunic
machair	low-lying grassland
madder	a herbaceous plant that produces a red dye
merrels	a board game also known as Nine Men's Morris
milk gowans	dandelions
Moravian	a person from Moray
Mormaer	leader, ruler
pee-the-bed	dandelion
pile wort	lesser celandine
pintle	penis
pottage	thick soup or stew of meat/fish/vegetables/legumes

ramsons	wild garlic
siller	money (from 'silver')
Slàinte mhath	'Good health' – a traditional Gaelic toast, to which the reply is 'Slàinte mhor', meaning 'Great health'
slipe	sledge or a drag
smirr	a fine, penetrating rain
zibeline	the fur of the sable

Angus's feet always warn me of his coming. My women move with delicacy, steps barely whispering through the crushed oyster shells that line the path to our fastness. The monks always come in pairs, scuffing noisily to announce their arrival, as if to avoid any hint of impropriety towards us. I remain, in spite of everything, a queen.

But heavy-footed Angus pounds the shells to powder in his eagerness to be with us, to share whatever needs sharing. A successful hunting party on the shores of the loch, a new style of carving freshly arrived from a distant outpost of the Culdees, a far-off battle whose outcome will touch us not at all. It's all the same to Angus; it breaks the monotony of his days among the women.

He chaps at the door, mindful of his place. Ligach walks across, drop spindle in hand, twisting the fleece without pause. She spins her yarn with no apparent attention, her pattern of movement as regular as a tic, only with a more benevolent result. I have sometimes wondered whether she puts it to one side when she takes Angus to her bed. 'I think she must,' Aife says. 'Not even Ligach can spin on her back.' I am too fond of Aife to comment on her lack of imagination.

With an easy movement of her wrist, Ligach's thumb catches the latch and lets the door swing open. Angus's cheeks are pink above the thick russet of his beard, either from the cold March wind or from his haste to give us news. 'A boat,' he says. 'From the far shore.'

Not the short crossing, that narrow strait between us here on St Serf's Isle and the sheltered shore by the river mouth. No, Angus means the long way across Loch Leven. It's not as if nobody ever comes over to the monks from that direction, but it's not something that happens every day. Or even every week.

'And yesterday was St Patrick's Day,' he says quickly, eager to make his point. It's a point that eludes us at first. We exchange looks, faces blank.

'Remember?' He's got the wind behind him now, sure that for once he has the higher ground. He moves further into the room, his heavy tread filling the air with puffs of the incense smell of the holy grass, freshly spread only yesterday. 'Eithne said a holy day would bring danger for the king.'

Eithne's face clears. 'Malcolm,' she says. 'Remember? His men passed on the far side of the loch on their way north. I told you, he was making for Scone to prevent your son being anointed king.'

Angus nods eagerly.

'And I told *you* he was far too late. By more than half a year.' I generally speak softly to Eithne but there are times when even the generosity of long friendship slips.

'She did say he wouldn't succeed,' Aife reminds me.

'Not then, not the coronation,' Eithne continues, serene as she always is when she's convinced she knows a truth none of the rest of us has access to. 'But it's not too

late for Malcolm to end your son's rule. I said Lulach would lose his throne on a holy day.' *Like St Patrick's Day*, the unspoken words hanging heavy between us.

I turn from her and wrap my zybeline stole more closely around me. I step past Angus and through the door. Tears spring from my eye, forced by the bitter wind. It blows from the land where I grew up, where I sat on the throne alongside Macbeth for seventeen years. I have not been back since the day of the battle that robbed me of the love of my life; this is the place where I have spent my sorrow. Today, I expect nothing but more grief from that quarter.

I stare out past the slender pines and the sharp marram grass to the choppy water of the loch. My eyes are not as sharp as they were, but the boat is drawing nearer against the wind and I think I can make out two passengers huddled on the thwart, hunched shoulder to shoulder.

I return to our haven and settle on the tall carved chair the monks made for my husband when he became king, in honour of the support and succour he had always given them. No matter that they had heard the reports that his path to the throne was dappled with blood; they judged him by the actions they saw for themselves. They were as much Macbeth's men as they were God's. And still they honour his memory.

Aife crosses to the rear of the room and moves the curtain of beaten deerskin aside. She beckons Eithne to the window. 'Come here. Tell me what you see.'

When she's wholly present, Eithne uses her eyes in the same way the rest of us do. It's likely what saved her from being drowned a witch, that gift of being able to move between vision and reality. She leans into Aife. 'Aye. A coble with two men not at the oars. Soldiers, I'd say. Heads bowed.' She swivels round to face me. 'Gruoch, this will be a sad day.'

I've already made that reckoning. 'Not Malcolm's men, then.'

'He's still ignorant of your whereabouts.' Never one to hold back, Angus says what we'd all like to believe. 'Otherwise he'd have stopped on his way north.' Unspoken, something like, *to deal with you*. I may only be queen in name, but memories are long in these lands. Mine is still a name men would rally behind; Malcolm is shrewd enough to realise that, and to fear it.

'Our king knows we're biding here,' Aife says, defiant. 'He would not betray his mother.'

I shake my head. 'My son is a man like any other. If Lulach thought it was the way to an easier outcome, I would not think less of him if he gave us up. But I think he will not.'

'He has never been a bonnie fechter.' Ligach's tone is tart.

Ever loyal, Angus scoffs. 'Lulach is a true king.'

'And I am still a true queen of the royal line, not just the mother of the king,' I remind him. 'That is my value to

Lulach and to Malcolm. Macbeth taught me a game when he first came from Mull. He called it *fidchell*. It was a game of capture and conquest. The most powerful piece on the board was the queen. My son learned the game at Macbeth's knee, its tactics and its ploys. Lulach would never give up his queen.'



The first time I set eyes on Macbeth, I knew he was the very pattern of manhood. Not simply that he was well-set and even-featured, though that was no mark against him. But although he was a little lower in rank than the man I was wedded to, he seemed more like a lord than Gille Coemgáin. My husband was Mormaer of Moray, king of the north in all but name, Macbeth merely his cousin, bound to his side by blood and honour. All I knew of him before we came face to face was that his name meant son of life and that his men called him Deircc, the Red One. I assumed it was because his blade was drenched with blood.

I had not considered that it might refer to his fox-red hair. He looked like a man on fire, his eyes blazing blue as the heart of a lump of ice on a high moor. When his eyes settled on me, I knew he saw beyond Gille Coemgáin's wife to the woman I was meant to be. But when my father