

**VAL  
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Val McDermid

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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

<i>auld</i>	old
<i>bannock</i>	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.
<i>barley bree</i>	a primitive form of whisky
<i>beldam</i>	an assertive older woman
<i>besom</i>	an assertive younger woman
<i>bide, biding</i>	to reside or remain
<i>birlinn</i>	a small galley or longboat with a single sail and oars
<i>bleezing</i>	bragging, showing off
<i>bonnie, bonny</i>	beautiful, attractive
<i>braies</i>	breeches
<i>bunnet</i>	flat cap, Tam O'Shanter
<i>cac-shiubhal</i>	diarrhoea (Gaelic)
<i>canny</i>	careful, considered
<i>chaps</i>	knocks
<i>drop spindle</i>	a simple and portable method of spinning yarn
<i>druimean</i>	Mid-Perthshire Gaelic for hill ridge, the source of the place name Drymen
<i>dugs</i>	breasts
<i>fechter</i>	fighter, warrior (bonnie fechter: admirable fighter)
<i>fidchell</i>	chess
<i>filidh</i>	bard
<i>girnie</i>	peevish, complaining
<i>houghmagandie</i>	sexual intercourse
<i>jessies</i>	weak or cowardly males
<i>lèine</i>	linen tunic
<i>machair</i>	low-lying grassland
<i>madder</i>	a herbaceous plant that produces a red dye
<i>merrels</i>	a board game also known as Nine Men's Morris



<i>milk gowans</i>	dandelions
<i>Moravian</i>	a person from Moray
<i>Mormaer</i>	leader, ruler
<i>pee-the-bed</i>	dandelion
<i>pile wort</i>	lesser celandine
<i>pintle</i>	penis
<i>pottage</i>	thick soup or stew of meat/fish/vegetables/legumes
<i>ramsons</i>	wild garlic
<i>siller</i>	money (from 'silver')
<i>Slàinte mhath</i>	'Good health' – a traditional Gaelic toast, to which the reply is 'Slàinte mhor', meaning 'Great health'
<i>slipe</i>	sledge or a drag
<i>smirr</i>	a fine, penetrating rain
<i>zibeline</i>	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 had made a trade of me to Gille Coemgáin, I had no choice. They allowed me to keep my three women with me, but only because they believed them to be powerless. That's a mistake men have made too often around women.

The night Macbeth came among us, Eithne lit the candles in our quarters, then burned sage and bog myrtle and another sweet herb whose name none of us knew. We lay dreamy and drowsing on the furs Gille Coemgáin allowed us as a mark of his power and status, waiting for Eithne to reach the place she speaks from. 'He will be the one. He will surely plant a king.'

Her words sent a chill through me. It had been seventeen moons since the wedding and still there was no sign of an heir for Gille Coemgáin. Not for want of trying on his part. Aife, always sharp-witted, said my womb likely refused his seed because I had no love for him, and she may have been right. I was not so foolish as to resist his attempts to get a son on me, but it was only ever my body that was present; my mind was elsewhere, in the woods and the shorelines of our land. Never in the bed with him.

And it's true there was not much to love about Gille. He lived to eat and drink well, and that had coarsened the good looks he'd been blessed with. There was no tenderness in him; he was uncaring and rough, always putting his own needs and desires first. He had a high opinion of his qualities and his standing; he saw in me only a reflection of his own status. He trusted advice from no one, regardless of their experience or proven good sense. Gille always knew best.

And it appeared to have worked to his benefit. After the savage murder of Macbeth's father, his kingdom had been divided between Malcolm in Alba and Gille Coemgáin in Moray.

Macbeth might have hoped to become Mormaer of Moray, but sons don't always succeed their fathers if they don't have an army at their back. Lacking land, lacking support, lacking a wife of the royal blood trumped his place in the line of inheritance.

After the murder of Findlaich, Macbeth's father, there ran a fleet-footed rumour that Gille and Malcolm were responsible. It was hard not to suspect them of a conspiracy when both benefited so. But my husband had always denied it, and it seemed Macbeth accepted that. Now he had come to pay due respect. To put his small army at our disposal, were the English or the Vikings to visit. So, of course, there was a celebration. Gille had to lay on a feast that Macbeth could never hope to equal if we took it on ourselves to venture across the sea to his hall in Mull.

There was roast lamb, wild boar and venison. Sides of salmon and sea trout, smoked fish and mussels. Porridge sweetened with apples baked in honey and sweet cicely. Bannocks and bread made from the flour of oats and beans. Roasted turnips and onions, tiny sharp radishes and sauces from mustard balls. Stewed plums with crushed roasted hazelnuts. Cheese and curds. Me at his side in my finest robes.

*And, of course, strong ale and barley bree to set heads bleezing.*

*No expense had been spared, no stores left unplundered. Bellies would be grumbling with hunger to pay for this display of wealth. Not my belly, of course, nor my three women. Not Gille's either. But the others who depended on what came from our kitchen – they'd be going to bed with their stomachs empty for a couple of weeks till the larder was replenished.*

*Then the filidh took the floor with his usual bardic fervour. A tale of battle, told to the hypnotic rhythm of a tattoo on the bodhran. As the story reached its climax, Macbeth leapt on the table and laid a pair of crossed swords at his feet. 'Give me music,' he shouted, and the piper answered with a reel that made my head swirl.*

*Not Macbeth. He raised his hands above his head, fingers imitating a stag's antlers, and began to dance. His feet moved among the four quarters made by the blades so nimbly it became impossible to keep track of how he got there and where he would go next. His lèine was dyed madder red and it danced with him, rising above his knees, giving us flashes of his woad-blue braies. And his hair like a flame. I'd never seen a display of colour like it. He danced like a man possessed. Even Aife, who has no interest in men, flushed pink at the excitement of it.*

*He reached the end with a flourish and made a deep bow to Gille, then to me. He jumped down from the table; his men surrounded him and shouted his name. I saw a brief flash of resentment cross my husband's face. Clearly Macbeth had not heard how Gille liked to be the name given most praise, especially after a display of luxury such as we'd laid on that night.*

*Before my husband could glimpse the thoughts Macbeth's display had set running, I excused myself and slipped out of the hall, Aife and Eithne at my heels. 'You had better return,' I said. 'Don't give Gille occasion to make you the butt of his anger.'*

*They understood my reasoning. No matter what I felt towards Gille, I was bound by my father's insistence. He himself was the son of a king, which made me part of that same royal line. So he could countenance nothing less than the highest rank for me. Mormaer of Moray, king in all but name of the Highland fiefdom, was the perfect match. A marriage with Gille Coemgáin would make stronger my father's position and do him honour. Never mind that Gille had a bloodstained history and a jealous temper. I was traded for status. Not the first nor the last woman to be treated like a gaming piece*

*I placed but one condition on the deal. I insisted that my three women should remain at my side. Eithne, for her understanding of the world we cannot see; Aife, for the support and sustenance she gives Eithne's gift, and thus to all four of us; and Ligach, ever practical, who never sees a problem, only a challenge. They have been my companions since childhood, and I knew I would struggle at Gille's court without my three allies at my back.*

*Of course, Gille distrusted them and missed no opportunity to treat them harshly. He could not attack me directly, for my father's name still carried weight even in Gille's territories. So he made them surrogates. If he had noticed me leaving the feast accompanied by Aife and Eithne, he would take out his wounded pride on them.*

*I watched them return to the hall, arm in arm in the pearly moonlight, then made my way to the physic garden Eithne and Aife had created. It was fragrant and soothing, the night scents different from the day. I breathed deeply and felt my turbulent heart return to its regular beat.*

*But the turmoil followed me.*



Eithne keeps watch as the boat draws nearer to the shore, pitching and tossing against the hilly horizon. I don't envy them the journey. 'I don't recognise them,' she says. If anyone else spoke with such certainty, we'd scoff, for who among us can be sure of recognition from the back of men's heads? But Eithne sees differently.

'Away up to the monastery, Angus,' I say. 'Tell the abbot to fetch them up to the refectory and feed them. Stick by his side. Your very presence will keep him honest.'

'What about the others?' Aife demands, anxious.

'The monks will follow his lead. They have obedience bred into them.'

'Even Brother Brendan?' Eithne says.

We exchange looks. From anyone else, it would be a casual enough comment. From Eithne, it's a warning. A reminder that Brother Brendan is a thorn in the side of the abbot, a law unto himself who questions every instruction and holy precept in his thick Irish brogue. He has no malice in him, but he has never approved of our presence here. 'Women are a temptation to our chastity,' he once said to me. 'Even crones like you.' Scornful, I laughed, and he laughed with me. But I could hear the unease that lay beneath.

Angus already has his hand on the latch. His face is a question, directed at me.

Ligach speaks. 'Send Brother Brendan here, Angus. Tell him I need help with the hives. He loves the bees.'

'He loves the honey more,' Aife points out.

'We'll stop his mouth with honey. Eithne, you have what you need to hand?'

She's already on her way across to the carved oak chest my brother made for her before he was murdered. It's two trays deep. The top level contains the everyday herbs, the ointments and tinctures she uses to treat common ailments such as coughs and afflictions of the skin. The lower level is not for the eyes or hands of anyone less skilled than Eithne. That means almost anyone in the whole country.

'White poppy and henbane,' she says, lifting out the top tray and removing two lambskin pouches from beneath. Eithne passes through the deerskin curtain to the cubbyhole where she prepares her concoctions. We are so still now I can hear the grinding of mortar and pestle.

She emerges and takes down a new flask of mead. 'I was keeping this for a celebration,' she says, sadness in her voice.

'If we survive tonight, that will be worth celebrating,' Ligach says, her voice sharp.

'The boat's at the shore,' Aife reports.

We fall silent again, watching Eithne pouring a beaker of mead, adding more honey, then tipping in what looks like a very small amount of powder. I can't believe it will suffice, but I'm not about to start doubting her capabilities.

I move across to the window and stand behind Aife's shoulder. Should anyone look, I'd be

no more than an outline. Beyond the window are the carefully tended clusters of plants that Eithne has been cultivating since we fled here after that last battle sent us into exile. Her skills in diagnosis and treatment have paid our way, more even than the endowment of the monastery land Macbeth and I made years ago.

The two passengers gather their cloaks, tucking them into the rope belts at their waists. I see the glint of steel. And a long streak of red brown from shoulder to waist on one of them.

Soldiers, then. Not simply messengers. They clamber over the side of the boat and splash through thigh-deep cold loch water. Neither of their faces is familiar to me, but Aife says, ‘The tall one? He’s the youngest Seaton boy. His father waited on your husband, Gruoch. Surely he’ll not be one of Malcolm’s men.’

I wish I had her certainty. After Lumphanen, after the battle when my heart broke, I doubt everything and everyone.

Then the abbot appears, habit hitched to his knees, almost running across the machair to the sandy beach, the sharp sea grasses whipping his bare calves. I’ve never seen him move so fast. The cantor is at his heels, Angus bringing up the rear. They stop short of embracing the strangers, but it’s clear the encounter is a welcome. A wary welcome, but a welcome nonetheless.

And then a mighty battering at the door startles us. My heart almost stops, but Eithne remains self-possessed. ‘Brendan,’ she says calmly. ‘Aife, let him in.’



*I moved between the clusters of plants, running my fingers along stems of rosemary and lavender that lined the path. Their familiar fragrance calmed me; Eithne said it allayed the superstitions of those who think she’s a witch. I wasn’t so sure about that; I thought what stilled the tongues of those who would denounce her was the protection our royal throne granted her. Everyone knew it would be an act of folly to accuse the handmaiden of the Mormaer’s wife of witchery. It grieved me to owe anything to Gille, but I had him to thank for that. I suspect he did it out of fear rather than love; Eithne unsettles even the most battle-hardened men with those eyes that seem to see straight through them to the far shore of their nightmares.*

*And she had unsettled me that night, with her impossible implication that Macbeth would be the one to give me a son. Even to think that was dangerous beyond comprehension. If she’d made such a prophecy in the hearing of Gille Coemgáin, the Mormaer of Moray, the husband of Gruoch, nothing would have saved her. Or the rest of us, in all likelihood. Me, Aife, Ligach – we’d all have gone down together with Eithne.*

*Deep in thought, I walked on, trying to make sense of my reaction to Macbeth. I’d seen handsome men before, though not many so easy on the eye. I’d heard fluent-tongued men before, though not many with his quickness of wit. I’d even seen dancers with such abandon and flair before, though few with such finely turned legs. But there was something that marked him out and I seemed unable to put a name to it.*

*'Unable or unwilling?' I suspected Aife would have asked, a tease in her voice to temper the temerity of her response.*

*Before I could find the answer, I heard quick footsteps at my back. Cursing my recklessness, I swivelled round, reaching for the brooch at my shoulder. Its pin was long and sharp; I learned from my mother the importance of always having some defence to hand.*

*I turned and faced the very danger that was troubling my thoughts. Macbeth slowed to a halt a few feet away from me. He spread his hands to show he was unarmed, though I was not convinced. He was too careful, too clever to enter another man's hall without something to protect against the fickleness of alliances. At the very least, there must have been a dagger concealed somewhere about his person.*

*He smiled, dipping his head in acknowledgement of my status. 'My lady Gruoch. I hope I didn't startle you. I came outside for air and I saw you among these plants here.' Not quite apologetic, not quite flirtatious. But somewhere in the middle.*

*I scolded myself for the blush I felt rising from my neck. Then I told myself it didn't matter, that the moonlight would obscure a response I couldn't afford. 'One of my women grows them for the pot. And for their healing qualities.' I sounded stiff and formal to my own ears, which was definitely the safest path for me.*

*His smile quirked into something more mischievous. 'Is she the one they say is a witch?'*

*I frowned. 'They would not utter such lies in my hearing. Eithne is a wise woman with rare gifts in tending the sick. There is no magic in that, just an understanding of how plants work hand in hand with our bodies.'*

*He nodded. 'For we are all one with nature, if we can only decipher the complicated bonds. I have such a herbalist back on Mull. Your Eithne is one to keep close and keep safe.'*

*'She is. As you have a gift for the dance, so has she for the plants.' The words were out before I knew it. The man brought a dose of cac-shiubhal from my lips.*

*'You enjoyed my dance?' He performed a quick set of steps.*

*'Perhaps not as much as you did.'*

*He was not at all put out of countenance. A wry expression flitted across his features, and he gestured to the fallen beech trunk that Aife had persuaded two of Gille's wood carvers to turn into a crude bench. 'I love the dance, I can't deny that. That yoking together of precision and euphoria. But my legs are tired now. Shall we sit a while?'*

*'I do not make a habit of sitting with strange men in dark gardens,' I said, stiff as I could manage.*

*'But I am not strange, I am a kinsman. I think we share . . . what is it? A grandfather? A great-grandfather?' He settled on the bench as if it were shaped to his body.*

*'We share a darker blood.' I sat at the other end of the bench, studying his face in the moonlight. It threw a dramatic cast on his features, silvering the vivid red of his hair. I rebuked myself for the thought, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like to run my hands through its thick waves.*

*'Findlaich.' His merriment had disappeared, his mouth a thin slash across his beard. 'Is it true, then, what they say? That your husband's hands are red with the blood of my father?'*



*I looked away. I did not want to meet that blue stare without the warmth I'd seen in it a few moments ago. 'Is that what you believe? Did you come here to test your conviction?'*

*'I did not grow up alongside Gille. I don't know him like a cousin or a brother. So I can't be sure when he is lying to me. Coming here at the head of an armed band, taking an eye for an eye – that would have been the choice of some of those closest to me. But that way, I could never be certain I was killing the right man. So I chose to come as a friend so I could learn to judge for myself.'*

*I turned to face him again. His face was sombre, the animation put away for future use. 'I can be of no help to you in that quest. My husband does not confide in me about matters of strategy.'*

*He gave an impatient shake of the head. 'No, no. You misjudge me. I was not trying to provoke a betrayal from you.' He looked away. 'I apologise, I should not have spoken so freely.' A frown. 'I don't know why I . . .'*

*'I'm the one who raised the matter. I appreciate your frankness. In our hall, my women and I have to assume the role of spies to find out what is happening.'*

*His eyes returned to my face. 'That must feel . . . strange?'*

*'It feels necessary. Choices are made that affect our lives. Sometimes a matter of life and death. Even if we have no right to be part of the decisions, I think we have a right to know the outcomes. My father was the most traditional of men, yet he was willing to explain himself to me.' I shrugged. 'It seldom changed anything if I disagreed. But at least I knew what was coming for me.'*

*'When I marry, I like to think I would be more like your father than your husband.' He shook his head, an expression of disgust on his face. 'Listen to me. "When I marry." I have little enough to offer a woman. The disregarded son of a murdered father who has not even managed to revenge his death.'*

*'Better to be slow than to shed innocent blood, surely?'*

*'Not all of my kinsmen see things that way. I have to tread a careful path.'*

*I couldn't help smiling. 'Judging by your footwork between the swords, that should come naturally.'*

*He smiled too, and I noticed his shoulders relax. 'I plan to survive, my lady.'*

*I dared. 'I hope you do.' And the small voice in the back of my head wondered whether talking thus to me was part of that survival strategy.*

*He rose, wincing a little as his back straightened. 'I must go back. Gille will mistrust my absence.'*

*'Mine also. The advantage I have is that we women can always fall back on the ailments of our sex.'*

*He chuckled. 'I have enjoyed our conversation. Perhaps we can talk again?'*

*'How long do you plan to stay?'*

*He was on his feet, looking around, checking for watchful eyes. We had been partially sheltered by the surrounding plants, but a warrior takes nothing for granted. 'We will be here for two or three weeks perhaps,' he said. 'Cousin Gille has some days' hunting planned. He wants*

*to show off how plentiful the game larder of these hills is. To remind me that I am the poor relation.’ That wry glance again.*

*‘There’s more than one kind of richness.’ I had no idea where this boldness came from; I had seen too many bad outcomes for women who were careless. I was generally the most careful of women.*

*His eyes met mine in a level stare. ‘I hope to find that out for myself.’ Then, in a swift movement, he reached for my hand and brought it to his lips. They were cool and dry against my fingers, but when he withdrew, I felt as if I’d been branded. ‘Till the next time,’ he said and disappeared into the shadows like a ghost.*

*He’d barely gone when Ligach slipped out from a cluster of fennel as tall as she. ‘Well played, Gruoch,’ she said, head to one side, considering.*

*‘I had no game in mind,’ I protested. ‘I was simply conversing with our guest.’*

*She raised her eyebrows, amusement lifting the corners of her generous mouth. ‘If Eithne is right, then there is a game to be played.’*

*I stood up and faced her. ‘Eithne is not always clear – and not always right.’*

*Ligach linked her arm in mine, and we moved back through the garden towards the hall. ‘But if she is right . . . this is a game you might enjoy?’*

*Any reply would have held me hostage, so I said nothing.*

*Not that night.*



Aife lifts the latch and Brother Brendan lurches in. His tonsure still reveals stubble black as sea coal from Fife, and his dark eyes conceal more than they reveal. He’s a big man, and clumsy with it, except when he’s helping Eithne with the bees. Then, he becomes a delicate creature, his fat fingers handling the honeycombs with an unexpected tenderness that protects the honey and the wax walls of the cells. It’s true that he loves the honey, but he also seems to love the bees. It goes both ways – Eithne says he has never been stung, that the bees crawl on his arms but don’t sting him. Aife says he’s so thick-skinned he doesn’t notice, but none of us takes her literally.

He stops a couple of steps into the barn. He always makes sure to keep his distance from us, as if being closer than a spear’s length will drive him wild with untameable lust. ‘Angus says you need help with the hives?’ he says, his voice a deep rumble in his chest.

‘I want to move the one by the wall back alongside the one nearest the barn,’ Eithne says. Then she points to the beaker on the table near him, meanwhile pouring another four beakers from the special bottle. ‘But first we should celebrate the arrival of visitors. We don’t often see strangers, and I’ve been saving this bottle for a special occasion.’ She lifts one of the beakers and raises it in a toast. The rest of us follow her lead and call out the ancient Gaelic toast, ‘Slàinte mhath!’

Brendan wastes no time in yielding to temptation. He lifts his brimming beaker and takes off half of it in a single draught. He wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his cassock and smacks his

lips. 'Praise be to God,' he exclaims. 'Eithne, you have excelled yourself! You'd make the Blessed Virgin herself turn to drink.' He takes another slurp. 'Magnificent,' he says.

We all murmur agreement and it's no lie. The mead is sweet and rich, but with a fragrant and elusive quality that sets it apart from Eithne's usual offerings. She pushes the bottle towards Brendan. It's untainted by her concoction, but it's still a strong brew. Brendan tops up his beaker and swallows another gargantuan swig while we merely sip at the small ration Eithne has allowed us.

'Tha's . . . tha's ambro . . . ambaro . . . amborsio . . .' he slurs, burping. Then giggles. Then another gulp. 'Witchcraft . . . I mean, wishcraft . . . not that, youse arenae . . .' Then a crash as he goes over like a felled tree, taking two stools with him.

'He'll be out for hours now,' Eithne says, clearly pleased with herself.

'Are you sure?' I ask.

Eithne scoffs. 'The apothecaries in Rome told me they use it to render patients insensible so they can perform all kinds of surgeries. From what I heard, we could cut his leg off and he wouldn't notice.'

'All the same, should we tie him up?' Ligach asks, studying him from various angles.

'Roll him into the corner,' I suggest. 'When he wakes up, he'll believe he's just having the world's worst hangover.'

So, heaving and grunting, and cursing too, we manage to manoeuvre big Brother Brendan into the far corner of the room, among the pile of fleeces Ligach hasn't got round to spinning yet. By now, he's snoring. Thankfully, the pigs are penned between the barn and the abbey; they'll get the blame if the snores make it as far as the monks' cells.

'Now what do we do?' Aife asks.

'We wait,' I tell them.

'For what?' Ligach next. I hear a nervousness in her voice that's not like her.

'For as long as it takes for Angus to come back with news. And in the meantime, Eithne can burn some herbs and see what answers she can give us before we decide what questions to ask.'



*The morning after Macbeth's dance found Gille in a dark mood. He sent for me while most of his men were sleeping off the effects of the barley bree and the women were still working around the snoring sprawl of Macbeth's men to clear the worst of the mess from the hall.*

*I found him in his chamber, still in his nightshirt. My heart sank; a summons like this usually meant he was set on another attempt to get a son on me. But that morning he wanted something different.*

*He gestured to a settle, half-occupied by his discarded banqueting robes. They stank of smoke and sweat and cooked meat. 'What do you make of our cousin, wife?'*

*I sat down, arranging myself to best advantage. I had to tread carefully. I knew I must not appear to have taken the wrong kind of interest in Macbeth. 'He seems amiable,' I said. 'Better*

*to dance than be quarrelsome, as some of our cousins can be.'*

*Gille ruminated, chewing the ends of his moustache. 'You know some men say I was behind the death of Findlaich?'*

*Time to flatter. 'If you had wanted to murder Findlaich, you would not have hidden behind the hands of other men. You would have faced him directly and the world would know it.'*

*He smiled. 'You know me well. But Macbeth does not. Do you think he believes the rumour?'*

*'There is no sign of hostility from him or his men. They are not heavily armed. They didn't pick fights when they were drunk. They just got more drunk and more cheerful. They seem to be without guile.'*

*'Aye, but they could have stashed their weapons nearby before they arrived. They could be lulling us to sleep, persuading us to drop our guard. Then falling on us in our beds and gutting us. Taking their revenge for the hurt they think we caused them.'*

*I allowed myself a low chuckle. 'They're not that subtle, Gille. Macbeth has few fully-fledged warriors at his back. These lads are barely one step up from peasants. If that had been their plan, they could have moved on us last night. Half our men are still insensible after their excesses. You were generous to allow them to indulge themselves so much.'*

*'Not all of them,' he smirked. 'I picked ten of my best fighters, men I can trust. I ordered them to act like drunken ruffians, but to remain sober. To watch Macbeth and his men, to discover whether they were also pretending. When the carousing was over, they reported that the visitors were sincerely and thoroughly pished.'*

*'There you go. They're only here to pay tribute and have a good time at someone else's expense.'*

*He shook his head. 'I wish I could believe that.' He pushed himself upright, dragging a wolfskin across his shoulders. 'What does your woman say?' He looked away, not meeting my eyes. He hated to admit there might be some substance to Eithne's utterances. It was an insult to his manhood, to need that reassurance.*

*If I'd been foolish enough to answer him honestly, Gille would have made sure not one of Macbeth's company was left standing. It would have become a tale of hospitality betrayed that reverberated throughout Moray and Alba; it would have given Malcolm the perfect excuse to march on us. But since my marriage I'd grown proficient at lying; I'd had plenty of practice. 'Eithne says Macbeth comes in a spirit of goodwill towards Moray.'*

*'To Moray? Not to me?' He snapped back to stare at my face.*

*'Moray is you, my lord. And you stand for your entire kingdom. Any man who hurts Moray hurts you, you know that.' A wary nod from Gille. 'And so it follows that goodwill towards Moray is goodwill towards you. If I thought Eithne's words meant anything different, I would have come direct to you. I wouldn't have waited till you asked me.' I got up from the settle and joined him on the bed.*

*Time to be the devoted wife.*

