

**THORNS**

A play by Terry Kroenung

© 2002

**SCENE:** *Macbeth's castle of Dunsinane, mid-11<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Gruoch** (*curtseying*)

My lord Macbeth.

**Macbeth** (*crossing to her*)

A blessed Yule gift from the gods, perhaps, but never a mere party favor. (*kisses her hand*)

**Gruoch**

You honor me, sir.

**Macbeth**

Oh, no. It is you who honor me...riding all this way in the snow to hear stammering love rhymes in a musty old fortress.

**Gruoch**

Musty? Perhaps. I would have to take you at your word for that. Who could tell with every chamber awash in roses? (*smelling them*) How on earth do you grow them here in winter? A little sorcery in the off-season?

**Macbeth** (*smiling*)

More prosaic than that, I'm afraid. I have a Frenchman gardener who makes them thrive under glass atop the south tower. I spend nearly every afternoon up there. Cutting off blossoms pleases me more than cutting off heads...contrary to my reputation.

**Gruoch**

Without your skill at the one we might have precious little opportunity to enjoy the bounty of the other.

**Macbeth**

Lamentably so. It is a hard world. But I hardly fight alone.

**Gruoch**

Truly spoken. Yet you live alone. A valiant thane, honored above all other men in Scotland, yet with no lady by his side. A choice to wonder at.

**Macbeth** (*pause*)

Not entirely by choice.

**Gruoch**

My lord?

- 2 - THORNS

**Macbeth** (*escorting her to the stage left chair*)

I would not have you buy the proverbial pig in a poke.

**Gruoch** (*smiling*)

No one could rightly consider you such a----

**Macbeth**

Please. Permit me. (*pause*) At my birth there was fire in the sky. My father, astonished at such an omen, begged a seer to explain the event, for good or for ill, but truly. She prophesied that my mother would pass before the full moon...and any woman I married would die with blood on her hands, raving.

**Gruoch** (*catching her breath*)

And your mother---?

**Macbeth**

Died of plague.

**Gruoch**

Oh! I'm so---

**Macbeth**

Ten years later.

**Gruoch** (*eyes wide*)

Then the prophecy was---

**Macbeth**

Not quite accurate.

**Gruoch**

Well, soothsayers and astrologers are rarely...entirely...so.

**Macbeth**

She breathed her last on the day before a full moon. My grieving father pointed out that the seer had not specified in her prophecy precisely **which** full moon. Before my mother's final sigh had ceased to echo in the chamber, he swore me to eternal celibacy, that I might be spared the curse that had befallen him.

**Gruoch**

I marvel, then, that you and I are arrived at this meeting.

**Macbeth**

You may well do so. I assure you, I would not be here if I were still of the mind that the prophecy still hunted true. I have sought out countless astrologers, prophets, seers---yes,

- 3 - THORNS

even witches---in order to learn the value of their predictions. What I have come to believe is that you, or I, or your lovely handmaidens there (*women giggle*) could divine the future as efficaciously as most practitioners of the black arts.

**Gruoch** (*standing*)

Then your oath is broken?

**Macbeth**

I told my father so as he lay dying. They may have been the last words to reach his sad tired ears.

**Gruoch**

So here we stand...a brace of orphans.

**Macbeth** (*stroking her cheek*)

Mayhap...a new mother and father. Someday.

**Gruoch**

I blush, sir.

**Macbeth**

It only adds to your beauty.

**Gruoch**

I do not color because of your words, my lord, but because I, too, have sworn an oath. One I dare not break.

**Macbeth**

I would never ask it of you. What is it?

**Gruoch**

Despite the fine feminine gown you see me in, I must tell you that I was quite the tomboy as a young girl. Climbing trees. Catching frogs. Handily defeating all the boys in contests at arm wrestling and spitting...

**Macbeth**

Many a gawky girl, now a graceful lady, might say the same.

**Gruoch**

The king saw me one afternoon, after I had pinned both his scrawny sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, to the ground and rubbed cow manure in their faces. He laughed, held me to his breast, and said it would take a strong man to win me and keep me. I perfectly recall laughing with him, and declaring that I would remain a maid to the end of my days, unless I found a great hero who could tame me. That night I swore the same on a falling star over Inverness.

- 4 - THORNS

**Macbeth** *(to himself)*

Fire in the sky...

**Gruoch**

So, shall we have a spitting contest, my lord? *(looks about)* No, the appointments of the hall are much too costly. Arm wrestling? *(strokes his arm)* No, the seams might split on your fine raiment. *(sees sword display)* Ah! Perhaps a genteel dance in steel?

**Macbeth** *(appalled)*

My lady, I dare not!

**Gruoch**

Tut! Where's the harm, sir? *(draws swords)*

**Macbeth**

In your lovely flesh, if this miscarry.

**Gruoch**

Miscarry? You talk like a frightened bride *(walks up very close to him)* I do not fear your weapon. I am well-taught. *(brings sword handle up between them, pommel-first, puts it in his hand)*

**Macbeth**

I like this not. I have many a scar from practicing this in deadly earnest, while you---

**Gruoch**

---Have never been touched. *(pulls his face to hers)* Besides, who says this is not in deadly earnest? *(bites his ear)* Be at ease. I shall not tell the king.

**Macbeth**

If you lie dead, my lady, **I** must needs tell him.

**Gruoch**

If I were to...die, I would fain have it at your hands, brave Macbeth. *(quick kiss)* Lay on!

*(She pushes him away suddenly, launches a cut at his head, which he just manages to parry)*

**Macbeth** *(a whisper)*

May the gods guide my hand.

*(They fight with spirit. Gruoch does most of the attacking. They go over, around, and under the furniture, scatter the women, and use every inch of the stage. Gruoch is having a wonderful time. Eventually the fight ends down center, with her on her back, defeated but not disarmed. Macbeth straddles her, clearly thankful that she—and he, truth be told— is not hurt)*

- 5 - THORNS

**Gruoch** (*running a hand teasingly up his leg*)  
See? Not a scratch.

**Macbeth** (*pulling her to her feet; she ends up full-front against him*)  
Save on my heart.

**Gruoch** (*pause; moving to the table*)  
Did I score, then?

**Macbeth** (*following her; pulls rose from vase*)  
Can you doubt it? (*offers rose to her*)

*(Gruoch clasps both her hands around his hand; slowly, deliberately, with a thin smile she squeezes until his face betrays that the thorns are piercing his palm)*

**Gruoch**  
More battle scars, my thane. My love. (*long kiss, hands still clasped tightly*) My husband. (*motions to Woman 3, who gives her a white handkerchief; Gruoch dips it in the vase water, starts to clean his wounds*) They will tell legends about us until **all** of the stars do fall.

**Macbeth**  
And the moon, too...my lady Macbeth.

*(She finishes cleaning his hand; she dips the handkerchief in the vase again and begins washing his blood from her own hands)*

**Gruoch**  
Foolish prophecies...(*keeps washing*) What do witches know...? (*keeps washing*) How can the puny planets reign over the lives of such as us...? (*still washing*) We will make our own destiny, my lord.

**Macbeth** (*grasping her hands*)  
They are quite clean, my...love.

**Gruoch** (*smiling*)  
So they are. (*gives bloody handkerchief back to Woman 3*)

**Macbeth**  
I go to write the king, to praise his matchmaking skill. (*kisses her hands*)

**Gruoch**  
Send all my love to my foster father. (*long kiss; during the kiss, she rubs her hands*)  
Well, nearly all.