

Warrior Queen



Skaaha walked to the hut in bright spring sunshine.

She wore a fine white woollen dress, glittering silver earrings and a blue cloak pinned with a brooch that shone like the moon. [...] Greeting Terra, who guarded the shut, she put her hand on the catch and opened it.

The man inside gripped his hands together to stop them shaking. Twenty of them had left Harak on this raid. Half had died on that beach. His only company in the hut were their heads, hanged from the roof to dry. The young queen who entered was finely dressed and beautiful. Glossy black hair, braided round her head, tumbled in coils down her back. But she was the same woman as that naked she-witch who'd smiled so coldly in the half-light of that brutal night.

[...] The red-haired woman warrior who came with her yanked him to his feet. Stumbling, he was propelled out of the hut into daylight. The queen strolled alongside. A priest fell in behind. His presence brought no comfort. They headed towards the sea, striking a high outcrop of rock. He could hear the wind howl high in the sky though the air was still, without a breeze.

"We have a custom in our country," the queen said. "Every spring, we dip rags in water and tie them, as our wishes, to a tree." She paused. "Do you do this?"

"No." He shook his head, hands still trembling. They passed the rock, the ground opening out to the sea. Ahead, a trader's boat waited beside a jetty. The trader, in a long, patterned coat, stood in the prow. Pale-faced, he stared towards them.

"You might like to tell your country of this custom," she suggested, nodding for him to look back. The wind moaned louder here, almost human.

He turned. Behind the rocks they had passed was a wide grassy circle. In its centre, a massive oak tree spread leafless branches. High among those branches hung the naked bodies of men, hung by their hair. His nine companions swayed, hands tied behind them. [...]

"Your boat was sacrificed in the sea," the queen said. "Beric will take you home." Her hand grasped his hair, forcing him to look at her. "You came to war against the Island of Wings. I let you live so your tongue will speak what it has seen." Her eyes were dark as night. "Tell your people the Land of Bride has a new warrior queen. Tell them she is the shadow of death. Tell them" - her voice rang hard as iron - "I am Skaaha!"

Janet PAISLEY, *Warrior Daughter*, 2009