

The Twelfth Stone

By Jana Laiz

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful - a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

John Keats, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, IV

Chapter 1

“I willna marry him. Ye canna force me!” Rionnag spoke defiantly, with more courage than she actually felt.

“Och, aye, I can and I will and there’s naught ye’ll do about it!” her mother said.

“Then I’ll go before ye put yer marriage shackles around my neck!”

“Ye’ll go right tae the altar, that’s what! Ye will no disgrace us or yerself!”

When her mother spoke like this she knew there would be no argument.

Rionnag tossed her head back and went to her room. Let her mother think she’d won. She would wait for night and the moon and then she’d leave. Her parents had arranged this marriage when she was a wee bairn, but according to custom, she couldn’t meet him until the wedding day. How unfair! she thought.

“Mòr, please brush my hair,” she entreated her maid whom she knew hovered outside the door. It always made her feel better to have her long hair stroked. The door, which had been ajar, was flung open and Mòr entered unceremoniously, Ceitidh, Mòr’s aide, following in her wake.

“Certainly. If ye wouldna be sae defiant, yer mither wouldna be in such a state all the time.” The maid, who had been in charge of her since the day she was born had no qualms about speaking her mind to the girl.

“Weel, do ye no think my situation is intolerable?” Rionnag demanded.

“Aye, that I do, but that has naught tae do wi’ it. I ken what yer feeling, but yer mother willna bend in this matter tae be sure.” The maid removed the foxglove cap from Rionnag’s fair head and began brushing her silken hair.

“Weel, she’ll soon see that I am not sae easily forced,” she replied with a gesture indicating the conversation was at an end.

Mòr on the other hand was not so eager to end it. "Listen tae me, my girl, I love ye as if ye were my own bairn..."

"I wish I was," Rionnag interrupted

"Let me finish. Ye are the daughter of a queen and king and in matters of marriage, it is yer duty tae obey yer parents. I ken ye don't love the lad, but in time ye may..."

"Love him! Mòr, I've never even met him. Ye ken that!"

"Princess, speak like a lady!"

She rolled her eyes, "Yes, right. Ye *know* that I *do not* love him!"

"Aye, that I do, but I hear tell he's a fine lad. Handsome too!" she winked at the girl trying to lighten the situation.

"Aye, I've heard Prince Kier... ooh, ah, the prince is a lovely boy..."

Ceitidh blundered, blushing scarlet. Even the prince's name was not to be spoken in front of his bride. Poor Ceitidh rarely said anything lest Mòr scold her, and though Mòr said nothing, she gave her subordinate a withering glance.

"I dinna care for looks. That's no the point of the matter. What of my choice? Nay, I willna go through wi' it," she declared and she threw herself down on the bed. Mòr sat down beside her, her bulk nearly tilting the bed over, and patted the hair of her lass.

Rionnag's statement was true. She cared nothing for looks, and Mòr knew this because for all the lass' beauty, she hadn't a vain bone in her body. Rionnag was the bonniest of all the lassies in the hill, the envy of many. Her hair shone golden and curled naturally at the bottom, her eyes were the darkest violet with

an amethyst cast to them. They shone as if there were tears welling just below the surface, but Rionnag's sure smile indicated that if there were any tears, they were tears of laughter. That smile formed on a full mouth was the object of many a lad's fancy.

Mòr stayed until she thought the girl was asleep and quietly left the room. As soon as the maid was gone, Rionnag opened her eyes and looked around her chamber. The gnarled wooden bed with its webbed canopy and blanket of spun silk was the place she liked best to dream. Sweet peas, violets, and periwinkles grew in profusion on their covering of soft green, perfuming the air. Her birch chair in the corner was where she spent many the hour curled up with a book. She would miss this place, but her mind was made up. When the moon rose, she would leave.

There was a knock on the door and in walked a handsome man wearing a robe of the finest velvet. His hair was ebony, his eyes, indigo. Upon his head he wore a crown of gold, encrusted with blue stones that matched his eyes: Tanzanite stones, for power. The antlers, normally prominent, at the moment were retracted until only the tips showed from within the circle of the crown. He looked fiercely at the girl, but then his look softened to one of fatherly love.

“Why do ye give yer mither such trouble, my lassie?” her father asked.

“Oh, Faither, I dinna want tae marry. I want tae stay here and be with ye! Why must ye force me tae do this thing?” She nearly cried out the words.

“Rionnag Ban, my daughter, this is a matter of the Seelie Court. Ye are a princess of that Court, and ye must abide by its rules. Ye ken that! This marriage

has been planned since ye were wee and if ye don't go through wi' it, there'll be trouble from the court.

"I dinna care what the court does!"

"Child, ye must remember, it isna only the court that will be affected if ye don't wed. All of Faerie will feel it." He hesitated before he went on, weighing his words carefully. He looked at his wild-eyed daughter, the blessing of his life, and yearned for her to be a bairn again. But this, the year she was to be wed was upon them and this marriage was ordained.

"Ye'll no be far from here when ye wed. I'll see tae it. But Rionnag, ye have been told the truth of what is happening tae oor world. The dark forces are gathering as the old forests are destroyed, as the earth is befouled. Come, look." He took her by the hand and led her to her window. She could see the encroaching gloom, the dark shadowy tendrils creeping around bush and briar. She turned her head away, but her father gently turned it back, forcing her to take another look at what was happening, even within the royal lands. She pulled away once more, pushing aside all thoughts but how unfair this marriage seemed. Her father took her face in his hands.

"Lassie, I'm that sorry tae say, Faerie is fading. Yer marriage with the Prince of Ireland's *Daoine Sidhe* will strengthen the pure side, and perhaps save our way of life. I know it is a great responsibility, overwhelming perhaps, but do not fret, I'll still be King for some time, and yer mither will still be Queen. So please, don't rile us again. Next time I willna be sae understanding." With that he kissed his daughter on the top of her head and left the chamber.

“Acchh!” she spat out. She had barely heard a word he said, her ire was so high. How could her loving father not budge? Why must she be of royal blood? Who cared what the Seelie Court did? Her resolve became stronger as she waited for the rising of the moon.

From her bed she looked out and listened to the familiar sounds of twilight. The birds were chattering their goodnights to one another. She saw the outline of an owl fly past, early, she thought, and heard the muffled scream as he took his first victim. Finally, after what seemed like hours, the moon peered from behind the great Rowan tree outside her window and spread dappled light throughout the forest. She took one last look around her room, and opening her iridescent wings, lifted herself out of the window. She landed high on the branch of the familiar Rowan and crouched for a few moments to listen. Tonight, there were no other sounds. No music, no bells, nor pipes, nor fiddles. No songs, nor voices carried on the soft breeze. How fortuitous.

Her heart tripped erratically in her chest as she left the branch and headed for the old ring. Remembering the ominous shadows, she looked behind her nervously as she made her way to her destination. She had found it only days before, nearly hidden among the overgrown brush. The old stones were tumbled and worn, standing in their circle of power. She could tell that it was a rarely used ring from the distant past, but one that none would think to look for and her essence would be long gone by the time they might discover it. She had only gone through a ring once with her father, a long time ago, when she was a wee thing, but that was a popular ring that was used every feast night. Her father had

wanted to show her the other side, its beauties and dangers. It had been *Samhain* then and easy to get across, unlike this night, which was no feast night. She had never forgotten the colors and the way the light fell there and it seemed the perfect place to go to escape what she perceived as such a cruel fate.

She followed the path from Rowan to Oak to Birch to Ash until she found the spot. She looked around to make sure no one was watching. A hedgehog gawked at her then hurried away. A Pixie spy? No, just a hedgehog, she told herself. She found the ring just as she had left it. No one had disturbed it. The stones in their circle of power were worn with age. Moss and fallen leaves covered them, the fey symbols made illegible by time. She circled above it several times trying to give herself the resolve to follow through with her plan. She had no idea where she would come through on the other side, but it had to be better than a forced marriage. She took a deep breath and muttered the old words to herself. She had learned the words from her mother's lexicon of spells, an ancient volume containing various magics, from mixing up hurricanes, to capturing changelings and mortals, to crossing over to the other side. Rionnag had found the book when her mother was busy with the Council, so involved with the rapidly shifting and precarious conditions of the seasons, she scarce remembered she had a daughter.

She'd had to memorize the words quickly. Her mother would have been in a rare state had she found Rionnag with the book. Only those adept in wielding power were entitled to use that book, and Rionnag was neither ready nor skilled enough. Now, as she eyed the ring, she prayed she would remember.

The words were old, older even than the ancient tongue she spoke. She had to practice them until they were strong in her mind. Any mistake could prove dangerous, even fatal. She took a last look around. Then, collecting her courage, she made the old symbol, recited the spell, and stepped through the ring.

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The coyote stood like a sentry below her partially opened window as he had done so many nights before. The curtain shifted and he saw her peering out, catching his yellow eyes in her blue-green stare, her long brown hair moving in the light breeze. The clouds raced past the moon putting the coyote in and out of shadow. Perhaps in greeting, perhaps warning, he howled into the night, his eyes fixed upon those looking down at him. A large cloud covered the moon and he was gone, melting into the darkness, leaving no trace he had ever been there except the faint echo that lingered on the breeze.

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