

The Woman Who Danced for the Sun

A Story of Ireland and Far
Beyond

H. Wayne Smith

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Dunraven

Erin, in the year 915

The blow landed like thunder. Caught unaware, Riganna reeled against the wall of the filthy, ramshackle barn. Stunned, she tasted blood and struggled to stay on her feet.

“You’re lazy! Good for nothing! Worthless!” Corann bellowed. His breath stank of ale and steamed in the bone-chilling cold. He lurched toward her on unsteady legs, his grimy face contorted with rage.

Wildly, he flailed a ham-like fist. Riganna saw the blow coming and ducked under it.

“You won’t hit me again, Corann!” she screamed. “You’ve already left your marks.”

“I won’t hit you?” he mocked. “I’m your step-father. I’ll do what I want.”

“You’ll rot in hell first!”

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Corann dismissed Riganna with a bitter laugh and slurred, "You never even saw me come into the barn. I caught you dreaming . . . like always." Relentlessly, he moved toward her, blocking her escape.

Desperately Riganna backed away. Her eyes darted left and right in search of a hoe, a rake, a stick . . . anything to fend off the drunken giant.

Another lurch forward and Corann leaned against the wall to steady himself. "Got your mother to thank," he hissed. "She put those crazy thoughts into your head. She made you think you can be something you'll never be." He taunted her. "A lady. From a fine family."

His sneering lips uncovered yellowed, rotten teeth. "Bred to wear fine clothes and live in a big house . . . to drink wine from a silver cup and rule over the peasants." He spat. "Peasants like me!"

"Her family did those things!" Riganna shouted. "They lived in a manor house. They had warm clothes and they ate meat. They had servants. They . . ."

"A century ago!" Corann roared. "A century and more! Now they're nothing but dirt-poor farmers. Just like my people!"

"No they're not! Not at heart!" Riganna saw the lethal look in his eye and took another step back. "And I'm one of them. We're not filth, like you!" She retreated another step. "My mother only married you . . ."

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“Because she had to,” Corann said.

Panic welled inside Riganna’s breast as Corann’s fists curled into huge, sinewy bludgeons. He had trapped her alone with no way to escape. How had she been so stupid? Why had she allowed herself to daydream? Even in her panic, she knew the answer . . . anything to take her mind away from this place.

“I sent you for straw,” Corann growled, “an hour ago. For my bed.”

The word ‘bed’ seemed to spark an idea behind the dull eyes. He staggered forward, and Riganna backed into the wall. Corann’s breath came heavy as he hissed, “I’ll get some use out of you yet.”

“If my father still lived . . .”

“But he’s dead, ain’t he?”

Relentlessly, Corann stalked closer. The smells of his sweat and putrid clothing mingled with those of manure and rotting hay. Through clenched teeth, he rasped, “You ugly little bitch! You whore!”

With a sudden lunge, he grabbed at Riganna. She screamed as she struggled against the brute force of his loathsome embrace.

Suddenly she heard the rip of fabric as her tattered dress gave way to clutching fingers. Cold air rushed against her naked skin, and Riganna’s hands flew to cover exposed breasts.

Pressed against the rude wooden wall, she fought to get away. A wave of pain shot through her

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as rough splinters raked unhealed scars on her bare back.

The pain brought a blind fury. Riganna screamed her pent-up hatred and rammed her knee into the huge man's groin. He doubled over with a groan, and she rammed it again, harder.

In an instant, she broke past him in a headlong run toward the thatch roofed farmhouse, tripping over the shreds of her ruined skirts. Seconds later, Riganna burst through the open door of the one-room house. Her mother, Eimher, gaped in horror at the rent clothing and the wild look in her daughter's eyes.

Long ago, Riganna had vowed never to cry, but now hot tears of shame and rage streamed down her face. "I'll kill him," she shrieked. "I'll kill him if he ever touches me again!"

For a moment, the two women stood and faced each other in the smoke-thick air of the chimneyless hovel. A cooking fire smoldered in the hearth, its muted crackling the only sound save Riganna's racking sobs.

Eimher followed her daughter's terrified gaze toward the barn. "You have to go," she whispered.

Eimher's words spurred Riganna to action. Hastily, she grabbed her tattered cloak from its peg. As she clutched it to her breast, she hesitated. "Mother, I can't leave you."

Just then, a clatter echoed from the barn, and Eimher pushed Riganna toward the door. "Be quick!"

she urged as she choked back her own tears. "Don't let him catch you!"

For a moment, Riganna hesitated. "Mother" Then from the corner of her eye she saw Corann stagger into the barnyard with a murderous look on his face and a stout cudgel in his hand. Riganna shot Eimher a parting look and bolted from the door to sprint toward the main road.

Eimher called after her, "Remember what I've taught you, Riganna. Remember who you are!"

Riganna barely heard as she ran faster than she had ever run in her life. The bellows of Corann's fury mingled with the screams of her mother as he turned the cudgel on her. But the sounds faded rapidly, drowned out by the great gasps of air that fueled her flight.

Heedless of the gawping stares of people on the road, Riganna ran until she felt her heart would burst. When she came to the lane that coursed through the coastal marshes and into Dunraven, she paused to catch her breath. As best she could, she tied the shards of her dress together and pulled the cloak tightly around her. Then Riganna brushed away her tears, stiffened her spine and began to walk.

As the day wore on, lowering clouds blew in from the sea and a chill wind rose. With the wind came an autumn mist that bore the cold straight to

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the bone. Riganna cursed her threadbare cloak and stalked grimly ahead through the gloom.

At last, she arrived at the little village of Dunraven. Maybe she could stay here for a while. Corann would not pursue her. At least not right away. He could be certain that Riganna would tell what happened, and he would fear reprobation by the parish priest, Father Kennelly, and the scorn of the townspeople.

She trudged onward, past deserted thatch-roofed shops and houses. Their dark windows stared at her like empty eye sockets. It was market day and everyone had gone to the village square near the shore of Bannow Bay, with its outlet to the Celtic Sea.

The morning's scene flashed through her mind. It was the first time Corann had tried to rape her. His many beatings had never frightened her. Instead, they made her hate him. But this was different. The thought of his filthy flesh pressed against her body almost made her retch.

She had escaped, but who could she turn to? She had no family other than her mother. Corann had made sure that she had no friends. But she was certain of one thing. She could no longer bear her old life . . . the monotony, the toil, the isolation . . . and worse, Corann. Nor would she allow herself to end up like her mother, the abused wife of a drunken peasant. No! She would not let it happen. She would go to a nunnery first. Or stow away on a ship and

sail away somewhere. Anything but go back to life on the farm.

She gritted her teeth and shook with anger. Despite her hunger and fatigue, she quickened her pace. She had almost reached the square when an unexpected hubbub caught her attention. Grateful for any distraction from her misery, she turned up a narrow lane and pushed into a jostling crowd of peasants.

A red-haired fishmonger's wife spotted her and called, "Look! It's Her Highness." Riganna hated the sight of the woman's pock-marked face. The malicious old gossip never had a kind word for anyone, least of all Riganna. Her words reeked of sarcasm. "Maybe that stranger yonder is a kinsman of hers. Maybe a high king related to her mother." With this remark, a little clutch of nearby women turned jeering faces toward her and joined in rude laughter.

The anger welled up, but Riganna bit her tongue. She would not take the bait. Not today. But the words piqued her curiosity. What stranger?

With a malevolent glare at the old hag, she pushed copper-colored hair from her eyes and edged further into the square. After a moment she paused to peer over the motley caps and bonnets of the crowd. This was easy since she was taller than the other women and more than a few of the men.

The sight of a hawk nosed stranger stopped her short and drove all other thoughts from her

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mind. She recognized him instantly, although she had never seen him before. He could only be the self-styled Celtic priest known mockingly as the "Old Druid".

Everyone knew of him because of his odd ways. With a small band of disciples, he tramped the countryside from Killeagh to Fewes preaching with a calm intensity against Ireland's newly arrived Norse overlords. Ireland chafed under the harsh rule of the hated Vikings, and the country people embraced his message.

But they looked askance when the Old Druid railed against the church and urged a return to the old ways of the high kings and the Druidic priests. This aspect of his preaching had intrigued Riganna from the first time she heard about him. Her mother's people – her own people – belonged to those times, and life was better then.

Riganna had heard many preposterous stories about the man. Nonetheless, she stood mesmerized at the sight of him, a remarkable figure standing on the shore, his back to the water. His long cape of elegant white wool billowed and crackled like a ship's sail in the rising wind. Despite his calm voice, fierce black eyes flashed beneath a tangle of iron-gray brows. Though wrinkled and bent, the old man exuded a wiry strength. Strong, gnarled hands gripped his wooden staff. Cords of hard muscle knotted his wrists. Riganna pushed forward to catch his words.

He spoke almost conversationally. "Our fathers knew the one true way, the power that once made Ireland great. It lives within the Earth, the mother of us all. It sings within the living rocks and within the trees and the flowing rivers."

Someone shouted, "Blasphemy! Who'll save our souls, old man, if we turn our backs on the Church?"

"The church can't save us from ourselves," he said. "Nor from men who come from across the sea to plunder and pillage. The high kings ruled with their wisdom and their courage. Ireland must take up their ways again and save herself."

The crowd began to seethe with anger. Harsh words rumbled as the mob edged toward the old man, who stood calmly while he watched their faces. His gaze rested on Riganna for a long moment, and she stood transfixed.

Then Riganna spied Sven Bluetooth on the periphery of the mob. Riganna's bile rose at the sight of the Norseman. More than once, Corann had threatened to sell her to him as a slave. To her disgust, he had told her many times that the barbarous savage wanted her because she knew the Norse tongue and was quick with numbers.

Now Bluetooth caught her gaze. Riganna knew that the lustful look in his eye had nothing to do with languages or cyphers. Quickly, Riganna tore her glance away from him. He's paid off the townspeople,

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she thought. Either that or he's threatened them into harassing the old man.

More murmurs rose from the crowd. Men pushed forward.

"Is there even one among you who will come and join me?" the druid asked evenly. "One who has the courage to walk the old path, to put the kings of Ireland back on their thrones and honor the ways of our fathers?"

The mood grew uglier. Menacingly, the throng pushed forward. Someone cursed. A man in front brandished a hay rake.

With a look of disappointment, the old man surveyed the crowd and said in the same, calm voice, "You won't listen. So I have no more words for you. But think on what I've said."

Abruptly a scar-faced farmer shouted an oath and rushed toward the druid. The crowd surged. A sudden fear swept through Riganna. The villagers meant to kill him!

But just as suddenly they stopped, fearful, as the druid confronted them. Menacingly, he raised his staff high overhead. Something in his face . . . in his blazing eyes . . . made the people of Dunraven hesitate.

Riganna felt it, too, an icy surge of dread. Somehow, the strange old man awoke a collective uneasiness, some vestigial fear born of dark places and distant times.

While the townspeople held back, the stranger continued in a voice that now sounded like rolling thunder. Riganna stood shocked and thrilled, for his words resounded in the ancient Irish tongue. "I am Celtchar, Druid of the Drum Hills. I'll abide many things, but I won't tolerate an attack upon my person. So I raise a curse against you, the people of Dunraven, who despise the ways of your fathers, you who would harm a stranger." His eyes bore in, and the crowd edged back.

"I curse your sons and your grandsons; and I curse all you undertake in the world from this day forward. May your fields be barren, and may your daughters be childless."

Speechless, the crowd gawked. To them, the words made no sense. Long ago they had lost the tongue of their forefathers. But the power in the old man's voice held them back.

Of all those in the square, only Riganna understood, thanks to Eimher's teaching. She thrilled to hear the ancient words spoken with such conviction, and without taking time for thought, she formed a steely resolve. I will join them, she thought. Celtchar of the Drum Hills. I will join that old man and his band or die trying. He stands for all that my people have lost. Besides, she thought with a sigh, I don't have anywhere else to go.

Suddenly, without warning, a fierce wind howled in from the sea and swirled around the marketplace. Dust and smoke stabbed at Riganna's

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eyes and blinded her. She coughed and covered her face with her cloak.

Then as quickly as it came, the wind died and the old man was gone. Like the dumbstruck crowd around her, Riganna stared at the place where he had stood.

Riganna did not think that she could walk another step. The previous night, she had slept in the stoop of a ruined house, resolved to find the old man come morning. When the dawn broke, she started out eagerly enough, but now the day waned, her stomach ached with hunger and her feet throbbed. All day, she had listened to first one and then another peasant who told her where to find him, only to tramp in lonely circles through woods and across bogs. Now, guided by the scent of a wood fire, she was headed toward Brandon Mountain. She couldn't go any farther, she thought. At least not today. She would beg for food and help, no matter whose fire it was.

She stopped when she heard the low murmur of voices. For a brief moment, she struggled with the desire to run away. Anyone could be sitting around this fire. Even Norsemen.

But she knew she was too tired to walk any more. I'm not sure I'd survive the night in these woods, she thought. So she steeled her resolve and burst through the brush.

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She found herself in a little clearing surrounded by oak trees. Late afternoon sunshine shafted through the trees to bathe the scene in a golden glow. To her surprise, a small group of men in white robes stared at her from a campfire circle.

These were the druids . . . Celtchar and his band of disciples. She stared back at them, too shocked to be afraid. And then she saw the shocked expressions on their faces.

And no wonder, she thought. She had burst from the trees like a banshee. Her clothes were torn and dirty. Tangles matted her hair. She bore the marks of Corann's beatings – blood oozed from the raw wounds on her back and stained the ruined wool of the shawl. Her swollen mouth bore testament to Corann's last blow, which had split her lip.

Even as she stood bruised, exhausted and embarrassed before the druidic band, Riganna's heart beat faster with a sudden presentiment that she would never see her stepfather again. If the druids refused her, she'd go somewhere else, even to the convent at Waterford if she had to. But come what may, she knew that she'd never return to Dunraven. Beneath the exhilaration she also felt a vague and formless guilt about leaving her mother. But she wouldn't think about that. Not now. Too strong was the heady prospect of freedom.

She stepped toward the little group. "I'm Riganna of Dunraven," she announced in the ancient

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tongue, "and I've come a long way. Will you show hospitality to a stranger?"

As if he had been expecting her, Celtchar rose courteously in greeting. In the archaic language, he said, "I disemboweled a rabbit today, and the signs foretold that we'd have another soul at our camp before nightfall. I knew it would be you. I saw you in the town."

He ushered Riganna to a place by the campfire, and along with the rest of the tiny band, listened attentively as she told her story. When Riganna had finished, Celtchar said, "The old ones never turned away one in need. Nor shall we." He added, "But your neighbors in Dunraven have forgotten how to treat strangers."

Celtchar then examined her wounds and began to cleanse them. He applied a poultice to the cut on her mouth and pungent salves to the others. Riganna submitted to these tender ministrations and spoke quietly of how her mother had taught her the ancient tongue. Riganna also related how Eimher had schooled her in all she knew of the old ways, including more than a little about the healing herbs and ancient rites.

One of the young men brought Riganna a rich and delicious stew of lamb and vegetables. Although the broth stung her injured mouth, she ate ravenously. It was the first meat she'd tasted in weeks. Celtchar then ordered a bed made for Riganna and brought a basin and soap for washing.

The druids gave her a healing tea and gently covered her with woolen blankets, softer and finer than any she'd ever seen. The druids talked quietly among themselves, and Riganna soon fell asleep beside the fire to the drone of their voices. Dusk had yet to fall.

The clatter of meal preparation woke Riganna abruptly. Disoriented, she sat bolt upright to see the morning sun peek over the tree tops. She'd slept through the remainder of the prior day, all night and well into the following morning.

As she watched the white-robed men bustle about the camp, a sense of curiosity began to replace the pain of the past days. At the same time, she felt a surprising sense of vitality. Her stomach grumbled with hunger, and though her welts and bruises still ached, the swelling and discoloration had already diminished.

Soon a young boy came to sit shyly beside her. He offered a cup of tea made from pungent herbs, different from what she had drunk before. Riganna sipped slowly while the boy stared at her curiously.

"I'm Bryan," he said at last. "I'm an orphan. If not for Celtchar, I'd be a scullery slave Killeagh." Riganna found it remarkable to hear ancient Gaelic words emanate from such a young mouth. Before, she had only heard the old language from her mother and her grandmother. The boy continued, "We're a little alike. Want to see?" Before she could answer,

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Bryan raised his robe and showed her a back laced with scars, far worse than Riganna's.

Gently, Riganna traced the ugly marks with her fingertips. She looked upon Bryan's round and freckled face, framed in unruly red hair. A sudden wave of compassion washed over her.

Before she could say anything, Celtchar joined them. He inquired earnestly about her well-being and offered warm bread slathered with sweet butter. Greedily, she gulped it down.

"I've heard of you in the territory around Dunraven," he said. "They mock you there. They say you have crazy notions about who you are, about your lineage."

"Yes, they mock me. They ridicule me. They never give me a moment's peace." she said bitterly as she chewed. "But I don't have any crazy notions. I can name my ancestors from my mother's line, all the way back to Padraic, from the house of Cu Chulainn himself."

"Ah," the old man mused. "Cu Chulainn . . . the one who slew the hound of Culann the smith and then bore that hound's name as given him by no less than Conchobhar, the mighty High King." He added, "Here we speak the name of Cu Chulainn with reverence."

"As I do," replied Riganna.

He looked at her gravely. "And you say your mother's line goes back that far?"

She nodded. "Her name is Eimher."

As if speaking to himself, Celtchar said, "Eimher... Cu Chulainn's queen. That's a rare name these days." He studied her face for a long moment. "And your father's people?" Celtchar asked.

"They came from sturdy farming stock. But I never knew him. He died before I was born."

"And the people of your stepfather, the one who did this to you?" He gently touched her swollen mouth.

"They came from the swine pen," the maiden retorted as she savagely tore off another hunk of bread. "My mother married him of desperation. Her own people have all died away. They've gone the way of the old gods. She had no one to protect her."

Riganna put the bread down and stared at Celtchar, who watched her expectantly. With glistening eyes, she said, "Celtchar, I came to join you. In my heart, I believe in the ancient ways of Erin, in the path my mother set me on. She taught me the old tongue and the old lore. Her stories at bedtime were of the glory of the druids and the high kings. She made me love the dignity of my family, of my lineage. Let me join your followers." She cast her gaze downward and added, "Besides, I have no other place to go."

Celtchar smiled gently and asked, "Do you understand what you see here . . . why we dress in ancient garb, why we live off the land like our forefathers . . . why we practice the old ways?"

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"They say that you do all this so that someday you can restore Ireland to its rightful rulers and to the gods who dwell in the trees, and the wells, and the streams . . . the old gods." As Riganna spoke, her excitement mounted. "They also say that you have legions of men in the hills and that they'll rise and send the Norsemen back to their longships."

Celtchar silently tugged at his beard as he studied the earnest face of the young woman. "You're right, in a way," he said. "We've taken up the hallowed ways of the old ones, and we devote our lives to the pursuit of ancient knowledge. And we keep to ourselves in the woods, in celibacy and poverty, much like the Christian monks."

"I've followed this path all my life. But as you see, the others are young. I've taken them all from dire situations and brought them to this life. For example, this pup, Bryan," he tousled the boy's hair, "is the latest to join me. I've had to teach all of them in a very short time what the ancients once taught in years of rote and learning. I'm afraid I've left many gaps in their training.

"And I've finally come to accept one very important thing. The seeds sown long ago by Saint Patrick have grown into a strong and mighty tree with deep roots. We'll never hew it down and restore the old gods to Ireland. Nor will we dislodge the Norsemen. They control Erin now."

Celtchar's gaze drifted away, toward some distant horizon. "But listen to what I say. One day

even the Norseman, savage that he is, will bend his knee to the cross.”

While Riganna stared at him incredulously, Celtchar rose. “I’m sad to say there’s no place left in Erin for those like us who would choose to be druids, perhaps no place left in all of Europe.”

Riganna stood and faced him. “But what about all those men in the hills? Surely your numbers will . . .”

Celtchar laughed gently. “My dear Riganna of Dunraven, there are no men in the hills. That is, none beyond these.”

With a sweeping gesture, he indicated his tiny band of followers. “Here is every last follower of Celtchar, Druid of the Drum Hills: one small boy, two sons of farmers and two bastard sons of monks. Now I suppose we’ll add one battered and beaten maiden. We seven are all who comprise the ancient and true faith of Erin.”

2

The Druids

Riganna quickly recovered her strength as the days passed. Thanks to Celtchar's careful ministrations, the marks from Corann's beatings faded. The old druid gave her a white robe and a small tent of her own. Curious, Riganna studied her new companions.

She soon saw that the scullery boy, Bryan, was by far the brightest of Celtchar's pupils. From the first, the youth sought her friendship.

The dark-haired Guaike and the fair-haired Laegh were the bastard offspring of priests from the abbey at Jerpoint. Arrogant and churlish, they demanded that Riganna perform the most menial tasks, as each member of the tiny band had a carefully prescribed set of duties. But Celtchar intervened to save her from this, and she soon realized that the old man held her in special regard.

Riganna felt a sense of kinship with Oenghus and Sedanta the cast-out sons of farmers. Quiet and strong, friendlier than Guaike and Laegh, they

nonetheless kept her at a distance. This annoyed Riganna at first, but the feeling ebbed when she realized that the youths preferred to keep to themselves and sought no one's companionship very often.

As soon as Riganna was strong enough, Celtchar brought her into the instruction. She was thankful for the things her mother had taught her, but from the beginning, Celtchar went much deeper than Eimher had ever been able. It took all Riganna's power of concentration to keep up.

Celtchar devoted much time to the healing and magical herbs and to the rituals for gathering them, warning that their mystic powers would be lost if the fledgling druids failed to follow the rituals exactly. Early on, Riganna learned the secrets of vervaine and how to use it to cast lots and foretell events. When the Dog Star rose, Celtchar led her to a clump of the weed, with its tiny white flowers and long unruly "tail." First he showed her how to mark a circle around it. Then he covered her right hand with a sacred cloth, made especially for that purpose, and guided her through the proper way to gather the plant, with her left hand, into a clean, new napkin. Once she had separated the plant from the ground, she followed his pantomime and waved it high in the air.

Riganna also learned to gather the ferny selago plant by watching Celtchar, as chief druid, bathe in clean water and don robes of white to

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signify internal purity. As an act of humility and reverence, he gathered the herb in bare feet after sharing a sacrament of bread and wine with Riganna and the others. Celtchar explained that selago served as a preservative against all forms of misfortune, its smoke a balm for sore eyes.

Later, Riganna felt the burn of humiliation when the group took up the study of samolus, a low, broad-leafed plant gathered while fasting and placed bruised, as a curative for disease, in locations where swine and oxen drank. As dawn broke one morning, Celtchar led his band to a low bog near a little creek that flowed to the sea. Bryan took Riganna as his partner and together they went in search of the herb. As she picked her way through the dripping foliage, Riganna sharply drew in her breath. She had found it . . . and, for once, before the others!

“Look, Bryan!” she called. “Here it is!” Bryan ran to her side while the others turned to watch. Swiftly, Riganna reached with her right hand to pluck the herb, but Bryan grabbed her arm.

“No!” he cried. “Not with the right hand. You must use your left.” Frustrated, he added, “And you’ve looked upon it! Now you can’t gather it.”

Riganna backed away as the others joined them. Embarrassed and angry, she watched as Bryan guided Oenghus’ fumbling left hand to the plant. Without looking, the farmer’s son plucked it from the ground. Only then, and after a mildly

contemptuous glance at Riganna, did his eyes rest on the unassuming weed.

“Do it right,” the youth said, “or not at all.”

Riganna looked at the cold faces around her. Only Celtchar held warmth in his eyes, while Bryan stared sadly at the ground.

No matter how hard she worked, Riganna could not catch up with the others. Moreover, as the old druid drove his young charges through their learning, he made no provision for Riganna's newness. She fretted and chided herself for her dullness. Despite what she'd learned from her mother, the others enjoyed too great a head start, thanks to Celtchar's superior instruction. She wondered if she would ever catch up.

One day she proved dreadfully slow in recitation and managed to forget a whole passage. Even little Bryan did better. Once again, Riganna felt the sting of humiliation. A rude remark from the normally reserved Sedanta hurt all the worse.

In despair that evening, she drew Celtchar aside. "I'm afraid," she began, "that I'll never be as good as the others. They all know so much more than I, and you teach us so rapidly. They resent it when you slow down to help me."

Celtchar saw that she was close to tears. He spoke to her gently. "I see something in you,

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Riganna, that I don't see in the others. It's something from deep inside, and it sets you apart.

"You lag behind now . . . behind all of them, even little Bryan. But remember, the quest for knowledge is a life-long journey. What matters is how far you go, not the speed of your first steps."

Riganna thought for a moment. "I understand what you say. But the others are too far ahead. I'm discouraged. I can't help myself."

The corners of Celtchar's mouth turned up into a little smile. "Don't you understand the enormity of what you've set out to do?"

Riganna did not have time to answer before he said earnestly, "I train druids, high priests. It's a long course of instruction, but he who completes it emerges a wise and learned man . . . or woman," he said with a nod toward Riganna.

Celtchar continued. "The complete education of a druid normally requires twelve years. If you have the character and tenacity to pursue it . . . which I believe you do . . . you'll become a powerful priestess. As I've said, there's something special about you."

"Twelve years . . ." Riganna interjected.

"Yes. This is what you must accomplish in this, your first year of study: fifty sacred inscriptions in ancient ogham text, the grammar, twenty tales, and those poems I see fit for you."

He grew more animated as he continued. "Second year: fifty more oghams, six minor lessons in philosophy, thirty tales, and more poems . . ." He

continued rapidly through the twelfth year, ". . . six score orations and the four arts of poetry: Laidcuin Mac Barceda's art, Ua Crotta's art, O'Briene's art, and Beg's art. And you'll learn these from the words I speak. You won't study parchments like those scribed by the monks. This is the ancient way of learning." He gave her a knowing nod. "That's how I learned, and so will you."

Celtchar must have sensed that his words had awed Riganna, because he gazed kindly at her for a moment. "Don't worry," he said. "You have the gift for it."

Riganna could not share Celtchar's enthusiasm. She asked, "What kind of life do I have to look forward to? If I can even do this, I'll live in these woods for years while you teach me. And then what? We can't go anywhere else. We'll all be outcasts forever."

Celtchar chuckled. "You haven't seen the broad canvas yet. It's time for me to reveal what the others already know." He added, "You showed you had courage when you came to me, and you'll need that courage in our quest."

"Quest?" Riganna interrupted.

"What better word for it?" the old man said. "As you say, we'll be outcasts forever if we stay in Ireland. The day of the druid and the warrior king are long gone. The church and the Norsemen have seen to that."

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He placed his hand on her shoulder. "So we'll leave Ireland. We'll take our religion, our philosophy and our learning someplace else – to a corner of the world where they can flourish. That's our quest, Riganna."

"But where? How?"

Excitement gleamed in Celtchar's eyes. He laughed aloud and said, "Don't you see, child? That's the beauty of it! We'll go to a land where there's no church and there's no Norseman . . . and the Christians and the Norsemen, themselves, will take us there."

Celtchar smiled at the puzzled look on Riganna's face. "The Norsemen believe they possess a useful tool in old Celtchar. They think I help them tear the people of Erin asunder, to divide them."

Riganna shook her head. Still she did not understand.

"The Norsemen are crafty. They're the ones who invented the stories of Gaelic armies hiding in the hills. Why? They know that an ancient Celtic paean echoes deep in the hearts of more than a few men of Ireland. Even if it's subtle and covert, this siren song challenges the church. The old beliefs aren't completely dead."

Riganna looked at him doubtfully, but he continued. "Given the chance, some would welcome the rule of a Gaelic warrior king and an Erin governed under Irish law. On the other hand, many Christians would sell their lives to defend their

church. This tension causes an undercurrent of discord in the land. The more it divides our people, the easier it is for the Norsemen to subjugate us.”

He continued, "Have you wondered how we survive in these hills? We don't have a farm, yet we eat well. We have no commerce or trade and yet we have good clothes . . . no, better than that, clothes of the best wool." Riganna stood bewildered and fingered her own well-made garment, by far the finest she had ever worn.

"We have the Norsemen to thank," Celtchar said with a little smile. Then he pulled from his robes a leather purse and spilled the contents on the ground at Riganna's feet. Gold coins glistened on the grass.

"Sven Bluetooth himself subsidizes this band. He sends gold by one of his men every time the season changes."

At the Viking's name, Riganna inhaled sharply and her eyes grew wide. Yet she remained silent.

"Thus," Celtchar continued, "the barbarian keeps alive the ways of the druid."

The old man's excitement abated. "At least he did. Now it's clear, from what you saw in Dunraven, that Bluetooth has no further use for old Celtchar."

Riganna stood silently and stared at the gold that lay spilled upon the ground. Had she made a terrible mistake? The barbarian Norseman, the man she hated and despised next only to Corann . . . to

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whom she had almost become a slave . . . had sustained and supported Celtchar. How could she trust the old man? Suddenly a queasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

Then Celtchar's enthusiasm returned. "But maybe it's just as well that Bluetooth has turned his back on me. Listen, Riganna, here's the real wonder of it! The Christians gave us the way to keep our faith alive."

"The Christians?" Riganna asked, even more surprised.

Celtchar nodded. "You've heard, no doubt, about Saint Brendan, the sailor?"

"Of course," Riganna replied as she struggled to keep her emotions in check. "He sailed into the sea from Brandon Creek. That's near here, midway between Tramore and Dunraven."

"Yes, yes," Celtchar said impatiently. "But what did Brendan do?"

"The sagas say he rode a whale called Jasconius. But . . ."

"And the sagas also say," Celtchar interrupted, "that he sailed a curragh to the west, where the ocean ends, and found a new land . . . a land of pine forests peopled with red savages."

Riganna struggled to fight back tears and said, "What's that got to do with us? We're not sailors. And what good is a fairy tale about sailing in a little boat to a land full of savages?"

"Don't you see? It's no fairy tale! Brendan showed us how to escape this land . . . in a curragh. The Norsemen think their gold bought foment amongst our people. But instead, it went to build a boat for us . . . a boat just like Brendan's. That's how I spent most of Bluetooth's gold! I paid the shipwrights!

"In this boat, a sea-worthy curragh, we'll sail across the ocean to find a new home for ourselves and our way of life. We'll pursue our studies free of the Norse yoke, and if the proper time ever comes, we'll return to Europe. If not, we'll remain in our new land. Maybe we'll even convert the barbarians there to our own beliefs. The Christians are very good at this. I don't see why we can't do as well."

Celtchar grew silent and studied Riganna's face. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Riganna could not drive the thought of Sven Bluetooth from her mind. "You used Viking gold. And from Bluetooth!" She stared at the ground for a moment and then raised her eyes to level a furious gaze at Celtchar.

"My . . . stepfather," she spat the word, "planned to sell me to Sven Bluetooth as a slave! And you're in league with him." She shook her head. "What's more, you've built your plan . . . your future . . . the future of all of us . . . around some cock-and-bull story of a monk's voyage."

Riganna's words took Celtchar aback. After a moment, he continued deliberately.

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“Brendan’s voyage is fact. It’s not just a story. And you’ve got to understand one more thing. The Norsemen came to our country to plunder and rule it. I hate them as much as you.”

Celtchar’s eyes blazed, although he kept his voice low. “However, I’ll take Viking gold if I can use it to make the old ways live on. I’m willing to appear their pawn if, in the end, I achieve victory for my cause. And you must know this: I’ve devoted my considerable years to this quest. I’m an old man and I’ve got to see it through before much more time passes.”

When Riganna made no reply, Celtchar said, “You’ve got to choose. Will you stand by me or not?”

For a moment, his gaze bored into her. Then the old man moved away and left Riganna alone with her thoughts. She returned to her tent and pondered for the course of the day about what Celtchar had revealed.

At length, far into the evening, while the rest of the group gathered around the communal fire for the day’s final lesson, Riganna emerged, her mind made up. She would go with the old man. And she would go with a clean conscience. In the grand scheme, they would use the Norseman’s own avarice to defeat him. Finally, she had seen the beauty of it.

Quiet and unseen, she left her tent and stood in the shadows while the students recited Triads in the manner of the four ancient bardic colleges. One student began the Triad and then passed it with a

nod to another for the second part; the second student, in turn, passed it on to yet a third for completion and the beginning of a new Triad.

"The three great ends of Knowledge: Duty . . ."

"Utility . . ."

"Decorum. The three great laws of man's actions: What he forbids in another . . ."

"What he requires of another . . ."

"What he cares not how it's done by another. Three things corrupt in the world: Pride . . ."

"Superfluity . . ."

"Indolence. The three primary principles of Wisdom: Obedience to the laws of nature . . ."

"Concern for the welfare of mankind . . ."

Riganna strode into the firelight to complete the Triad, "Suffering with fortitude all the accidents of life."

Celtchar stood to regard her for a moment and said, "You've made your decision."

"I have," Riganna replied firmly. "My heart lies with the ancient ways of my forefathers, the kinsmen of my mother."

She sighed. "And what they say about me in the village is true. I can never be one of them. I don't belong there. All my life I've yearned for a time that's long gone and for a chance to be more than a farmer's daughter. The time for dreaming is past. Now it's time to act."

She looked Celtchar squarely in the eye. "If I belong anywhere, it's with you. I have nowhere else

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to go, no other friend. And the truth is, I've got to find out who I really am. Am I just a peasant girl, or can I be something more than that?"

"And my dealings with the Norsemen?"

"At first I thought you were a traitor," she said. "Now I see that, in your own way, you're a crafty old warrior." Firelight danced on Celtchar's face as he studied his new companion.

"But tell me," Riganna continued. "Where is this boat of yours? And where will we sail it?"

"Why," Celtchar said with a broad smile, "it waits for us even now on Brandon Creek, where the curragh of the Christian saint was built centuries ago. It's nearly finished, and lucky for you that the shipwrights were slow at their task. If they'd finished sooner, we'd have sailed in the summer, before you joined us. Now, we're forced to go in the autumn. In fact, we'd better leave soon, before the weather turns too foul for sailing."

After the others drifted away, Riganna and Celtchar talked through the night. Riganna learned more than she had thought was known about the voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot, how he had sailed with seventeen fellow monks to the "Land Promised to the Saints," a mysterious place somewhere westward beyond the far reaches of the ocean. Celtchar told her how the voyage had lasted seven years, and how the wanderers had been set upon not only by the whale, Jasconius, who had "picked up their vessel as if he wanted to lift it into

the air, then lowered it again as if he might drag it to the bottom of the sea,” but also by fire hurling demons, great floating columns of crystal, and sea creatures as large as islands. Celtchar fired her imagination with monk’s tales of the Island of Sheep and the Paradise of Birds.

As Celtchar stirred the fire, he also told Riganna the story of his own life, how he had been a fisherman in his youth, and how he had once sailed a curragh all the way to the east coast of Scotland. He told her that, in those days, he had been the student of a man named Ughaine Mor, a druid of the first order, and that from him he had learned the druidic ways.

As Riganna's eyelids grew heavy, she asked Celtchar, "If we travel to the west like Brendan, won't we run into Viking longships? The Norsemen have a settlement in Iceland. Surely they sail west from there."

“Oh yes,” he replied. “We’d be in danger from the longships and even worse – from the savages who drove Brandon back to Ireland.”

In reply to Riganna’s quizzical look, he said, “We’ll sail to the south.”

“South?” she asked. “To France? Or Spain?”

“No,” he said, the faraway look once again in his eyes. “I plan to go much farther, to the land they call Africa, south of where the Mohammedans live. There’ll be no Northman there and no Christian

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either. If we encounter heathens, maybe they'll be more friendly than the ones Brendan found.”

The Woman Who Danced for the Sun is available on Amazon.com.

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