

Storm's Children: Fog's Children

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1.A Beginning

Riona tried not to fidget as she watched thirteen faces in the glow of a single tallow candle. The soft light made them seem like young people, gentle people, but Riona knew better. She had known each of them in one way or another since birth, her father's friends, and the laugh lines competed with worry lines on the faces of these old soldiers.

Orion set aside the stick he had been carving. "We are agreed," his deep voice softly disturbed the quiet.

Eyes flicked to Cami and she nodded with her head and her right hand.

Other voices softly echoed, "We are agreed." Some hands echoed Cami's gesture as well.

Skelly spoke into the quiet. "Riona should have a vote as well."

Some agreed aloud, none disagreed, eyes turned to her, disembodied in the tiny light.

Riona quickly flashed her hand up near her shoulder to nod it, tried to speak, but could only whisper, "We are agreed." She had been asked to speak in the past two weeks; she had been asked to excuse herself from some of the conversation, too. She had never expected to be given a vote.

Quiet settled again, but not silence; thirteen people made a whisper of sound like the hiss of waves on sand. Riona held still where she was, up against the wall left of the doorway.

Their vote of agreement belied two weeks of discussion, argument, debate, silences, communal meals, restless sleep. Riona had been sent for water, sent for food, sent to wash dishes. She truly did not want to look at another plate for a long time. Her father and the others had talked almost constantly. They did not dare leave the small lodge in any numbers, lest a wandering patrol spot them and question them. The forced inactivity had made some of them grumbly, and Riona was surprised that the council had succeeded at all.

Her father's friends had known each other for over twenty years, however. They had depended on one another through fear, battle, council, hard work, and grief in a long-ago battle; once their number had been far greater. Trust between them was absolute.

The hard work was about to begin again, and this time, Riona was part of it. She watched the movement in the center of the room.

Cami uncrossed her legs and moved to kneel before the candle. Her hands fluttered like butterflies, blessing the light and all whom it touched. "We stand between the candle and the night," she gestured. Shadows flickered across the walls and the faces of her friends. "We stand between the children and the storm." With a sudden clap, she put out the candle, and the quiet was broken.

Deep sighs, the shifting of bodies, voices in darkness grew. “Ow,” someone muttered, “Rion, you have a hard head.”

Riona’s father answered in his deep voice, “I can’t sling you a snappy retort, Skel, you knocked me out.”

Chhk, chhk. Sparks flew onto fibrous tinder that had been lain by daylight. Soon firelight filled the room. Riona watched her father’s friends rise, stretch, move to make a very late meal. Skelly came up to her and put out a hand to help her up. “You’ve taken on something huge, Ri. I know you’re sure now that you want to do it, I...” He stopped and shook his head. “I just wish I could give you something to carry for when you’re not sure.”

Riona ducked her head slightly. Then she stood up straighter. She had agreed to an adult’s task; it was time to stop ducking out of people’s way. “I’ll carry all of you with me, Skel. You and Derryn and Ro, all of you. Your courage and your dreams.” She faltered for what to say. How could she reassure someone she had always looked up to?

Skelly ruffled her hair and smiled. “And your father’s stubbornness.”

She laughed. “And my father’s stubbornness. Maybe now it’s a good thing?”

The laughter lightened her heart.

“You won’t be all alone, Ri. I’ll be easy to find in Eastport. Just remember that we’re strangers, right?”

Riona nodded. She would remember. It would be a long walk to Eastport - she’d have time to remember everything. Everything that depended on her. She straightened her shoulders again.

Skelly smiled when she did. “You’re going to be just fine, Ri, and I think better than fine.” He glanced toward the makings of supper. “I’m going to head out right now, beat the crowd.”

She watched him make his goodbyes with words and touches and hugs and a kiss for Cami. He had lain his backpack already beside the door. Pulling on mitts and slipping them through the armholes of his cloak, Skelly picked up the pack by one strap and headed out into the dark night.

Over the course of the next few days, all the others left by ones and twos. They spoke to Riona and her father each in their own ways. Finally just the two of them remained in their small lodge. The regular order of things was restored: two beds, covered with quilts her mother had made long ago, one neatly swept hearth, half a cord of wood stacked against unexpected weather. Riona and her father usually only used it during hunting season, and they liked to keep it looking as it had when her mother had first set it up.

Riona and her father sat beside the fire in twin rocking chairs in the evening. She finally spoke. “I’ll be going in the morning.” Why did her voice have to crack at that instant?

Orion only nodded. “We could go at least half way together.”

Riona shook her head. “If I’m going to start, I need to do it all the way. Not start out, but really be with you, and then start out again when you turn around...”

Her father nodded. “I understand,” he said simply. “Have you thought what you will do for anchors?”

Riona nodded and remained silent. She had been putting this off as long as she could. Finally, in a low whisper, she gave voice to her fears. “Daddy? Everything depends on this, right?”

He nodded. “We don’t know when the next chance will come. It could be a hundred years. It could be long after anyone remembers what we know, long after anyone even remembers we were free.” He stared for a moment at the fire. “Long after anyone remembers what your mother did.”

She took a deep breath. “So it’s important to do it right.”

He looked at her in firelight, his eyebrows raised, “Right.”

She moved forward from the chair to kneel on the hearth. She took the soft leather amulet bag from her neck and emptied its contents on the great granite slab. With gentle fingers, she moved through the objects, sorting them, thinking of the stories they came from in her life: her first lost tooth; a loop of braided tail-hairs from the first horse she had ever ridden by herself; the dry powder that was mingled dust from flowers and herbs that she had tucked in the bag at different times; a few beads and pieces of sea-glass; a tiny clay figure.

Beside and behind her, Riona’s father was silent, intent.

Riona dropped her things one at a time into the brightest glowing coals of the fire. She blew the dust of herbs and flowers from its pile onto the coals, releasing a scent of spring.

When the hearth before her was bare, and all her amulet had been given to the fire, she placed her palms down on the warm stone. For once her voice did not quiver. “I put aside the things of childhood. I take up the mantle of a woman. This is my hearth, and I shall keep the fire alight.”

She rose silently. She could see out of the corner of her eye that tears glistened on her father's cheek. Down from the mantle she took a bowl which fit in her two cupped hands. The rough stone felt reassuring against her fingers, and the sparkling amethyst points inside made her smile. This geode had been found years ago, she was told, passed from mother to daughter and finally to her own mother, a glittering bowl for the gentle magics needed to care for their household and their many responsibilities. She kept her face turned from her father even as he gasped. Standing firmly on the hearth which was now hers, Riona dropped the geode on the granite.

The smashing sound ripped through what had been peaceful night quiet. Blinking to see through tears and biting her lip to keep from sobbing, Riona knelt again. She lovingly swept the pieces back together into a pile. Barely whispering, she said, "May what was broken be made whole." She counted them into her amulet bag and replaced the bag around her neck.

Finally she turned part way toward her father. "There are thirteen pieces," she said.

"There would be," he answered her. He held out his arms, and though she was now grown, he rocked her in his arms one last time until she slept and he carried her to her bed and tucked her in.

1.1 Traveling

Riona's footsteps crunched dry leaves as she traveled alone through the thick old woods. She almost flinched with every

step. It seemed to her that the sound of her feet could be heard for miles, and probably her heartbeat could, too.

Patrols could be anywhere in the woods, and the chance of meeting one terrified her. “I’m not doing anything. I’m not doing anything but walking, going all the way to Eastport to visit,” she reassured herself. “I’m the most boring person in the whole country, and patrols would much rather go steal game from a hunter.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth. She had spoken aloud without thinking, and that was the sort of comment that would get her arrested.

“I’m not thinking right. I’m hungry,” she said aloud. Yes, that was it, it would be all right to speak aloud if she kept track of what she was saying. “Fallen tree up ahead. Looks like home. Great.” She trotted off the road to scratch out a nest among the dry leaves which had gathered up under the fallen hemlock. Making camp was as simple as that. After eating a quarter loaf of bread and big piece of cheese, she washed it down with water from her canteen. She made her toilet far from her sleeping place before the light had faded, and tucked her blanket under her and pulled her cloak over her. Tired from her fourth day of walking, she slept deeply.

Toward dawn, Riona dreamed that she was not alone and she woke suddenly, pushing the cloak off her, pushing anything away from her. She could see no one, but could not shake the sensation of a soft, cold touch on her skin. Her abrupt movement seemed to echo through the still forest, the sound magnified by a thick fog. Between fog and morning twilight, Riona’s world had

shrunk. She lay as still as she could, listening. She heard no step, no drip, nothing at all. She shook and held her breath.

Silence.

Again she heard her heartbeat, loud enough in her ears to rouse any patrol. Finally she let out a long, rushing breath and that rang loudly, too.

Her heart leaped in her throat when a sudden, sharp “chit” split the air. Then sudden relief, it was only a squirrel. Slowly morning sounds reached her, a bird rustling, a breath of light breeze moved the leaves, the squirrel bounded along branches to a situation right above Riona.

“Good morning,” growled Riona in a rumbly morning voice. “Thank you for getting my heart started.”

She took her time waking, stretching, and eating. She longed for a bath. By the time she had light, she was swinging once more along the road to Eastport. Not much farther.

One more sleep in the woods, tucked in a hollow under a pile of leaves. Her muscles protested the hard ground after so many days, but loosened with the walking. By the time her legs and hips and shoulders protested the walking, walking, walking, she was grateful for the ground which received her tired body.

Afternoon on the sixth day, the lights and sounds and smells of Eastport came to her. She had passed three farms already, and stopped at the fourth. Riona had practiced what to say, took a deep breath, and went to the farmhouse.

“Excuse me, goodwife,” she said to the woman hanging laundry between the small house and barn. “I need a place to sleep. I-” her story dried up on her lips.

The stout woman looked her over. “Well, you don’t come from town, that’s for sure. Probably haven’t got any coin. How you happen out on the road?”

Riona swallowed. “I came to find my Aunt Artá. My father died and I can’t stay in Craiklee. I came to find her, but I can’t.” Riona glanced nervously over her shoulder. “I didn’t want to stay in the town overnight.”

The woman’s eyebrows raised, “Hmph! I don’t blame you. Well, if you can stack the wood, you have a bed. If you know how to milk, there’s milk and bread, too.”

Riona exhaled in relief. “I thank you. That’s very generous. I’ve milked goats and I’m willing to try on your cows.” She stepped forward with an open hand. “I’m Riona.”

Her hostess stepped to her and touched Riona’s open hand with her own. “Apirka,” she said. “Aine will be home before dark. You’ll sleep in the hay loft, Riona.”

Riona smiled. “I’ll be grateful for a soft hay bed after walking all week. Are there just the two of you?” She looked skeptically at the size of the clean farm.

“Just two of us at night. Hands come up from the town by day, and I always let them go a little bit early on Sabbath eve.”

Riona nodded. “I’ll be grateful not to be walking on Sabbath. What will be on in the town?”

“After Health of the King? Oh, market, storyteller. Sometimes there’s a parade, but not this week.” She pulled one end of a sheet out of her basket and Riona hastened to tug the other end out and hold it up to the line as Apirka pinned the whole thing up. “Come to think of it,” she continued, “Sabbath

will be the best time to find out what happened to your aunt. Everyone will be at Market Square.

“Naturally,” agreed Riona. Everyone would.

1.2 The Problem

Early the next morning, once milking was over and the animals comfortable for the day, Riona walked the Eastport Road again, this time with Apirka and Aine. Riona’s milking skills had passed muster, and the fresh milk and bread for supper and breakfast greatly fortified her spirits. The three took turns pulling a hand cart loaded with fur and knit goods.

“Our harvest is all contracted for,” Apirka explained as they walked. “We don’t have to cart in produce on Sabbath, as it’s all taken during the week in season. We just make a few things by the fireside at night for extra.”

Aine raised her eyebrows at Aprika. “I don’t know if it’s anyone’s business.”

“Hmph!” snorted the stouter woman. “Perhaps I should say that I make a few things for extra while Aine mends tools. Perhaps I should say anything I want!”

Riona stammered, “Oh, please, don’t! Don’t argue because of me! I’ll pay no mind if you tell me not to.” She turned imploring eyes at Aine.

Aine considered her as they trudged along. “Mind what you wish, then. Doesn’t hurt anyone to know we work hard.”

Riona had been absorbed by the conversation and did not notice the turn in the road until they were well into it. The woods fell away and the land began to fall away to the sea.

“Oh!” cried Riona, stopping to a standstill. A cold finger of fear crept down her back. “Where... where is the town?”

For down below her, she saw nothing but thick, white fog filling the bay-shaped gap in the woods and rolling out, out in the huge endless distance that must have been the sea.

Aine laughed. “It’s under there, girl. Just let the sun work on the fog a bit, you’ll see it again well enough.”

Thus, Riona approached Eastport cloaked in fog, walking with two strangers. She grew aware of more and more people joining them on the road.

By the time they made it to the Market Square, pale sunlight was working through the bank of fog, thinning the fog, slowly winning the competition for dominance of the day. Hundreds filled the square, perhaps two thousand; certainly far more than Riona had expected.

Apirka leaned close to the girl. “Remember all the outlying farms and such. Everyone reports here for many miles around. Keep an eye out for your auntie.”

Two lines had started already of citizens presenting their cups to the patrollers. Riona could see, as she did in her home town, that some had filled their cups and almost drained them immediately. She hoped she never knew that desperate thirst, taking one more sip and one more, until only the barest drop remained at midmorning to drink the Health of the King.

She waited in line patiently and then stood beside the hand cart while her hostesses went through the line. They had not been desperate to fill their cups, but each of them were sipping as they returned to her.

“Aahh, that loosens the bones,” said Apirka as she began laying out the knitted hats and mitts.

Aine chuckled at Riona. “This one’s young. She may complain of aching bones, but she’s not dipping into her Health yet.”

Riona smiled at herself and ducked her head. “I’m just fourteen, goodwife. And my father never let me sip before the toast.”

“Don’t you fret, dear, that’s good manners it is,” inserted Apirka, “and I’ve heard enough of your words to know that you grew up with good manners and modesty. You’ll do.” She turned to the center of the square. “Oh, it’s time!”

Riona turned as well to where a Patrol Captain stood on a raised stone dais. His uniform fit him trimly and he carried himself with authority. His voice filled the square and washed over the hushed crowd. “Good Sabbath, good folk of Eastport!”

“Good Sabbath,” replied the crowd in one, rehearsed voice.

The Captain smiled. He knew what the crowd wanted, and had no reason to keep it from them. “For justice, and plenty, and peace, we give thanks and drink the Health of the King! Long may he reign!”

“The Health of the King! Long may he reign!” the voice of the crowd rocked the market square and all drank. Some had only their last bare drop, most had at least a good swallow left in the cup. Riona and some others began the toast with a full cup.

Riona raised her cup and prayed gratitude with every fiber of her being. She swept her eyes over the other patrollers, ranged around the outside of the crowd. They smiled and talked

with the townsfolk, and Riona was quite sure that they were taking a complete list of everyone present. They would search for any missing face they could notice, would ride out and bring the drink to anyone who had missed toasting the Health of the King.

Riona raised her cup and sipped deeply, profoundly grateful for the quirk of health or magic that rendered her and her family immune to the weekly dose of poison.

1.3 In the Town

The crowd did not thin, but began to swirl in color and sound. Some games began for children, vendors called out their wares, good wives with large baskets flowed from stall to stall, stopping for a gossip.

Riona watched the crowd eagerly. There must be someone here, someone who didn't respond to the Health the way other people did. She barely caught that Apirka was speaking to her.

“I beg your pardon? Would you say that again?”

Apirka looked amused, but Aine did not. “Pardon granted, girl. I said not to stick with us. Go find your auntie. You know the way home, yes?”

“Yes, yes I do, and I'll be there before milking. Thank you,” she answered.

Backing away from the hand cart, Riona nodded her farewell. In a few steps she turned and began working through the crowd. It would have been easy to be caught up in that current, buffeted along, but she made her way steadily toward the children playing games. No longer a child herself, certainly

the age of many apprentices here, she trusted that people of her age might still take an interest in games. Anyone much younger than she would be unable to help her. Her father and his friends had been clear on the point that anyone older than twenty would be under the influence of the poison.

Children were playing at Races and Graces, at Hopping Scotch. A circle of six older ones played at Kick-Sack. She watched the games for a few minutes.

“You could join in, you know,” came a sudden voice at her ear.

Riona startled and a skinny fellow of her own height laughed at her. She stammered and gulped and said the first thing that came to her mind. “I... I’m looking for my aunt Arta.”

The boy laughed. “If you’re looking for an aunt, why are you watching children’s games?”

Riona stared for an instant. “I thought I’d just look for her kids. They would be playing.”

“Oh, good idea,” said the boy. “How old are they?”

“Um... seven and ten,” she answered.

“Maybe I know them. What are their names?” he offered.

“Carrick and, um, Bevin,” she fabricated on the spot.

The boy laughed at her, his eyes crinkling up and twinkling. “You’re not very good at lying,” he shot at her. “You have to know your story beforehand and you have to believe it, too.”

Riona felt her face flush and she could say nothing.

“Not many can make it up as they go along,” he said, “but you happen to be talking to one of the best.” He turned to face

the games. “Now try again. You’re looking for your aunt. Does she have any children?”

Riona sputtered. “What?”

He turned to her with his eyebrows raised. “We’re going to work on your story. You got to be able to tell it better. Ready? Does your aunt have any children?”

“Um...,” began Riona as she figured out what he wanted her to say. “Yes, my cousins Carrick and Bevin. They’re seven and ten.”

He smiled. “See? You’ll get it. Except for the ‘um’. And people usually name the older child first.”

“Ten and seven,” she countered.

“Good, but you have to switch the names, too.”

Riona furrowed her brow and stared at him puzzled.

He shook his head. “Carrick was the seven year old, right, and Bevin was ten?”

“But what does that...” she began.

“It does matter. If you want people to believe in what you’re saying, you have to believe in it. Your cousins have to be real to you. You need to know which one of them pulled your braids at the family gathering and which one was still in diapers.”

She looked at his green eyes and his creased forehead. She realized that for all he had been teasing her, he was in earnest as well. His direct gaze unsettled her.

“How do you know so much?” she asked. She turned to face the Kick-Sack circle.

“I told you, I’m one of the best,” he answered. He was quiet while the older children in the circle completed a complicated pattern with the sack. The next-to-last player, a girl with skirts kilted up, kicked it up high with her knee, but the last boy in the ring missed his kick by inches.

Riona turned to make a comment to the boy, but he had vanished in the crowd.

1.4 Progress and an Obstacle

Only after losing sight of him did it occur to Riona that the boy who had approached her might be exactly whom she sought. He knew a frightening amount about lying, as though he had to do it all the time.

She let out an exasperated sigh, blowing the hair off her forehead. She tried to find him in the moving crowd, but even on tip toe she couldn’t see enough to find the boy. She didn’t even know his name. Turning in a full circle, however, she was startled to see Skelly, her father’s friend, up on the small dais that the Patrol Captain had used earlier.

She almost called out to him, but quickly stopped herself. What was he doing? Well, it was a public place, and no reason she couldn’t wander over to him. Slowly she walked, this time letting the movement of other people jostle her in the general direction she wanted. As she walked, she took the time to take the mysterious boy’s advice. What was her story and how did she know Skelly? It seemed too complicated. Better if she didn’t know him at all; better to just be curious about a stranger setting up to do something on the dais of the market square.

Skelly was tucking away his pack and setting up a camping stool. Taking off his cloak with a showy swirl of blue, Skelly began to hawk his own wares.

“Story! Who wants a story? Tall tales, small tales, feats of daring and adventure!”

Children flocked, oldsters sauntered. Riona moved closer to Skelly along with a portion of the crowd.

She noticed a patrol officer join the listeners. His red tunic made him stand out, and even in the jostle to get near the storyteller, there remained a buffer of space around the patroller. Riona hoped that Skelly saw him and didn't say anything he shouldn't. Suddenly she realized that such a censor must be present on most Sunday mornings and that she needn't worry about Skelly.

On the other hand, if his words were directed at her, she would have to pay close attention to get more out of the words than the patroller could. Sigh. This was going to be harder than she thought.

He began with the story about The Cat Who Wore a Cloak, to get the smalls to laughing and happily settled down while their mothers shopped. He recited a few poems, ones that Riona knew and that she had heard him tell before. Why did he add that strange ending onto The Wanderer and keep his voice tight? She remembered hearing it from the time she was small. His rich deep voice had seemed bigger than her father's house when he told the tale of the lordless warrior wandering the northern sea.

She shrugged and listened. Perhaps his voice had to be different to be used in this market square with so many people listening. Perhaps that was it.

Before long, he went back to a story for children, one about a mischievous elf. He kept it light, but Riona could see that the patroller was not too fond of this story of mischief and small rebellion. The uniformed man cleared his throat at one point during the story and Riona could hear the pacing and tone change in Skelly's voice as the elf suddenly learned his lesson in a very different way than she had expected the story to go. Hmm.

Who else had noticed? That's what she was here for, to see who else listened like she did, who else craved the stories of change and difference.

Skelly finished the tale with a rousing, silly rhyme which many of the listeners seemed to know, an ending to this tale which was the same every time? Perhaps any tale about this character ended thus. The crowd was pleased with the story. Riona saw Skelly flash his smile, but suddenly it changed. Where he had been speaking to the crowd and smiling broadly, suddenly his smile softened and became personal. For just a flicker of time, he seemed to communicate something to a blonde lass who had been near him.

Oho? thought Riona, did Skelly have a sweetheart whom her father did not know about? She maneuvered herself through the crowd to get a better look at the woman's face. To her surprise, she was no more than sixteen years. A riot of gold and strawberry gold curls kept escaping from braid and cap. Copper

freckles were flung across her face with what seemed to be generous abandon. Her eyes, expressing simultaneously watchfulness over two much smaller kids, delight in life, amusement at Skelly, all while rolling with impatience in the direction of the patroller, sparkled in enough facets of blue and green to make Riona think of the amethyst geode that she carried in pieces around her neck.

On closer look, the sunny-countenanced girl wore an amulet bag, so she was not the mistress of a hearth.

Riona suddenly laughed at herself. She had certainly taken so the responsibility of her family's heart, but no one would know it of her, since she still wore her amulet pouch. Was this lying? Was it pretending to be something she was not? She didn't want to be that kind of person, but the disguise certainly afforded her an extra layer of protection as she went about her rigorous journey. And protection for the amethysts.

Did geode crystals ever come in those shades of green and blue, her mind returned to the mysterious older girl.

Riona moved herself one step at a time closer to her, finally finding a place behind the girl in the crowd. She expected the girl to turn from Skelly and move to Riona.

Instead, the mysterious girl moved toward Skelly, to throw something in his hat and exchange a couple of words with him.

Riona saw her opportunity and snagged one of the two children that the girl had been watching out for. "Hey, do you want to see a trick?" she asked.

The redheaded child nodded with big eyes and Riona showed how her thumb could come off and be replaced right it

front of the child's eyes. By the time the crowd had thinned and Riona had moved on to making a doggie with her hand, both Skelly and the girl could see Riona and the youngster giggling together.

Skelly did not even make a gesture of acknowledgement, although his smile could have been directed at Riona as he faced the girl as he folded his camp chair back up.

The mysterious girl leaned forward to hear something he said low, and shot a look at Riona. Coming over quickly, she ruffled the boy's hair and sent him scampering to find the other child.

"Little brothers," she laughed, "always doing something. I hope he wasn't bothering you."

"Oh no," smiled Riona. "He's a dear. I've never had a little brother I could show that trick to, so it was fun."

"I'm Ailis," said the girl, holding out her open hand.

"I'm Riona," she answered, touching her hand to Ailis'. "I just got to town - I'm looking for my Aunt Arta."

Ailis wrinkled her nose. "I haven't heard of her, but she could be from outside the town. You don't see her here?"

Riona looked through the crowd. "Not yet, but this is a really big crowd, I just missed her."

Ailis looked at her steadily. "I hope she didn't miss drinking the Health of the King," she said.

Riona shook her head, "Oh, no, I'm sure she wouldn't miss that."

"When did you get to town? Where did you sleep last night?"

“I walked from Craiklee, just got to the outskirts yesterday. I stayed at a farmhouse.”

Ailis’ eyebrows shot up. “You walked from Craiklee?”

Riona nodded.

“That’s at least a week. I didn’t think you looked that tough.”

Riona smiled. “Well, from the outskirts. I just walked as long as I could, slept when I needed to. I’ve done many miles of walking before.”

Ailis shook her head. “Still a long way. Must have been nice to be out of the way of Patrol for a while. Did you miss a Sabbath?” she asked almost eagerly.

Riona shook her head slowly. “No, no, the patrols are out over the highways, watching out for travelers, too. What were you thinking?”

“Nothing,” Ailis answered automatically. “Not a thing. But tell me this, how do you know Skelly?”

Riona held stock still for a second. “I don’t know him at all, just heard him this morning.”

Ailis’s eyes flashed. “But you know his name. You’ve heard of him. And he knows you! He said so.”

Riona's eyes opened wide. “He did?!”

“Yes, he did. So I’m sure you know him.”

Riona’s voice softened. “What did he say?”

Ailis’ voice softened, too. “He said he vouched for you.”

1.5 Hope seems lost

Riona stared. “OK. Skelly vouched for me. I’ll take it that he’ll vouch for you. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

Ailis shrugged. “Back at home. The baker’s.” She led the way to the wonderful-smelling baker’s shop. Although the fires were banked to ashes for the Sabbath, the warmth and scent of baking filled the small building. The blonde girl turned on the doorstep to the baker who sat selling his old goods from baskets in front of the shop. “This is Riona. I’m showing her my room. Will you watch the boys?”

The baker nodded, caught up in a transaction involving seeded rolls, and the girls entered the stone house.

Grabbing a crusty bread, Ailis led the way up rickety stairs and paused at the bottom of a ladder going still further up. “It’s really just an attic, you can’t even stand up, but Father said I could use it for my very own room.” She proudly led the way up the rope ladder, swaying gently as she climbed.

Riona followed, and threw herself on the floor before a tiny window which gave a view of the entire market square. “You’re as high up as anything on the square!” she gasped.

Ailis smiled. “I love it. I love being away from the town even though we live right in it.”

Riona let silence fall for a few moments. “You don’t feel like part of the town, do you?”

Ailis’ face clouded. “I can’t be. I’m not like them. I mean, they’re not bad people. I’m just not the same as them.”

Riona asked slowly, “So, when you drink the Health, you don’t feel a flood of warmth?”

Ailis was still.

Riona waited.

“You do know Skelly?”

Riona nodded. “He’s my father’s best friend,” she offered.
“and my friend, too.”

Ailis spoke very low. “I don’t feel anything.”

Riona nodded barely again. “Neither do I.”

Ailis let out a huge sigh. “Oh, I’ve never been able to say that - I mean when I was a baby and my mother had to stop me from saying it, just told me that it was good for me and not to say such things and then as we got older and my friends were getting all silly with it and pretending to crave it like some big men do, and I still didn’t feel anything-”

Riona held her hand up. “I know. I know. It was like that for me, too.” She took a deep breath. “I’m lucky because I know someone else who doesn’t feel the Health. I had someone who could tell me what was going on and that I had to keep it secret.” She looked out the tiny window. “I’ve come to Eastport to find you. To find other kids who don’t feel anything when they drink the Health.”

Ailis’ face drew close. “What does it mean? Are we freaks?”

Riona shook her head. “No, no, you’re OK. I’m going to tell you all about it.”

Ailis broke the bread in two. “I think I’m gong to need this.” They each took a bite.

“All right,” said Riona, “here goes. The Health is not just a drink, it has a kind of medicine in it. It’s not the kind of

medicine that you went to the herbalist to get. It's the kind that the Patrol puts in the Health and makes everyone drink."

"So it keeps us well?" asked Ailis?

"No. It keeps us the way they want us. It makes people calm, and mostly obedient. It makes people obey laws, even silly ones, and makes life easy for the Patrol. We very rarely step outside the laws."

What do you mean by silly laws?" asked Ailis.

"Well, what do you think of the curfew?"

"It's annoying, sometimes I don't want to be home by the bell. Sometimes I want to stay out, especially in the summer."

"OK, but why do we have to go in for curfew?"

"So we'll be safe..."

"Safe from what?"

Ailis looked at Riona in confusion. "From bandits, from being lost, from, well, whatever's out there in the night."

Riona waited.

"All right, I don't know what's out there, but I certainly don't want to know." Ailis shrugged.

Riona finally nodded. "Now, are you likely to get lost in your own home town?"

Ailis rolled her eyes. "Not likely! I know this town like no one does!"

"Right!" said Riona. "And are bandits allowed out after dark?"

"No, no one's ... I mean there aren't any... I mean bandits aren't allowed..."

Riona kept her eyes wide. "What is a bandit?"

Ailis shrugged. “A bad person. A mis-deeder.”

“And are they allowed anyway?”

“ ...

“When the King became King,” Riona skipped ten years of bloody history in one brief phrase, “he called on all citizens to drink his Health every Sabbath. The Patrol puts the medicine in the special mead barrels, and dishes it out. They make sure everyone drinks, and anyone who skips, they ride out after. They go after Health-skippers with more care than they hunt monsters.”

Ailis nodded agreement.

“So,” she continued, “everyone’s kept obedient by the Health. You and I, and I hope a few others, aren’t affected by it, but everyone around us obeys the laws and we’d be very quickly punished if we didn’t. We’d even be punished for questioning the Patrollers, because then we sound like we’re not affected by the Health.

“Which we aren’t”

“Right” Riona smiled and shook her head. “You see how complicated it is? And for kids like us, we don’t have anyone to explain what’s going on. When the Health began, anyone who didn’t take it, or who wasn’t affected by it, was taken away.”

“Taken away? Where?”

Riona shook her head again. “I don’t know. I only know some rumors. I’ll tell them when we have time. For now the main thing is some of us aren’t affected by drinking the Health, and we have to hide it from the Patrol. We can think things and

do things that other people can't do, and in a place where the laws aren't necessarily fair, we're probably the only ones who can notice and do anything about it.

"All too much," Ailis began. "but not too much, I understand everything you've said and it makes sense. I'm different from my father and my brothers. I'm different from other people our age. I don't want to be in trouble all the time, but I don't want to just do what I'm supposed to all the time either. I know I'm different, but I don't want to be the only - wait!"

"What!?" Riona sat up with a startle.

"How do you know all this? You didn't just figure it out by yourself?" Ailis seemed suspicious.

"No, no," Riona hastened to reassure her. "I didn't figure it all out. A few, very, very few, of the adults who first resisted the Health and stayed immune to it survived. One of them was my father. He taught me everything that I know and how to survive without showing that I'm immune."

Quiet sat with them.

"Now you're looking for more people who are immune?"

Riona nodded.

Ailis looked at her. "Skelly's your father's best friend."

Riona nodded again.

"He's immune."

Riona grinned wryly. "He knows that you are, too. I think that's why he spoke to you about me."

Ailis sat back with satisfaction. "That's why he's always dancing on the edge of trouble, too."

Riona's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh, yes, about once a year he's investigated to explain one or another story that he told. Ones that skirt the edge of the way the usual stories and songs go."

Riona suddenly understood. "When he's telling things the way that the King and patrol don't like it, when he might be telling another side of a story!"

Ailis spoke softly. "When he might be calling them liars." She took a deep breath. "There's a lot you know that I want to know."

Riona looked again out the window where the afternoon light streamed in. "There is a lot. I'd like to see if there are more like us, more our age. It's my job to find as many as I can and tell them."

Ailis put a hand on Riona's arm, "Tell me true, Riona. Who sent you?"

Riona extended an open hand to Ailis. "I volunteered. My father and Skelly and a few others came up with the idea, but I offered to do it myself. They were going to do it themselves, but some of them are still under suspicion. You said yourself that Skelly's in trouble about once a year. I'm sure any extra suspicious doings - like spending too much time with teens who are also troublesome - would get him taken away."

Ailis held her hand, open, palm forward, in the air between them. "Will you never lie to me?"

Riona held her hand up to meet Ailis', fingertip to fingertip. "I will never lie to you."

“Will you tell me as much as you can?” asked the beautiful girl.

“I will tell you as much as I can when we have privacy,” answered Riona.

And for a third time, Ailis extracted a promise. “Will you guard my secret?”

Without hesitation, Riona answered, “I will guard your secret.”

Their hands turned to interlace the fingers in a sign of deep friendship. Riona suddenly held up her free hand, which was met almost immediately by Ailis’. “Will you keep my secret and that of others we might find?”

Ailis nodded, “I will keep your secret and that of others we might find.”

“Will you help me to find others in Eastport?”

“I will help you to find others in Eastport.”

Riona paused as she searched for the right words. “Will you search for the truth?” she asked.

Ailis kept her eyes on Riona and spoke slowly. “I will search for the truth,” she said.

The two girls sat with all their fingers interlaced.

Finally Riona spoke. “You know this kind of oath is forbidden?”

Ailis nodded. “That’s why I offered it. I’ve never seen anyone use it, not since I was very tiny. But I’ll never forget.” mist seemed to form in her eyes. “Every once in a while, I visited my Granny. She taught me this oath. She said it was magic.”

Riona nodded. “That’s what I heard, too.”