

## 1.6 Centering

The girls spent the afternoon talking quietly. At one point, Riona spotted the boy she had met earlier out the high window. “Do you know him?” she asked.

“That’s Aidan, he’s a pest and troublemaker if ever there was one.”

Riona looked at Ailis with her eyebrows raised.

Ailis opened her eyes wide. “Oh! Well, if I were looking for people our age who don’t seemed to be automatically obedient, it would certainly be him. I’ve known him for years and he’s forever fooling.”

Riona answered, “Why not watch him and think about him for a few days. What does he do most of the time?”

“His father’s a weaver, and Aidan is apprentice. So if it’s daytime you can always find him.”

The girls parted friends and Riona found Aine and Apirka before they wended home.

“My aunt was here, but moved south about four months ago. Met a tinker and married him!”

Aine looked askance, and Apirka looked worried.

“Whatever will you do? We should ask the patrol about her.”

Riona nodded. “I thought I’d go back in to town tomorrow and see if I can talk to the smith. He’d have the best idea where the tinker was headed. Then decide whether to follow or see if I can find a position here in Eastport.”

The women nodded and continued along the road to their farm. At the lookout, Riona turned back.

“This morning, when it was filled with fog, I don’t know, I thought the fog had swallowed the town.”

This time it was Aine who answered. “It did, perhaps. Just as it does every day. Then the sun fights back the sea fog endlessly. When the fog’s too thick, it eventually rains. Hungry stuff, fog.”

Riona was unsure if Aine was laughing at her, so she kept silence.

The next morning, Riona set into town early enough to see the fog filling the harbor and town again. She felt a touch of the same panic she had the day before, but she sat down where she could see it all quite clearly. “No use in being afraid of it,” she said out loud.

She made herself sit still. No sounds could she hear at first, but slowly came the breeze sounds and the animal sounds. Definitely the seagull sounds. She sat and kept silence and listened and watched. She felt occasional washes of panic when she thought of the town as gone, wiped away by the fog which held it. Instead of moving or distracting herself or talking herself out of it, Riona let herself panic, and felt it fully. She could almost step outside her mind and watch herself panic. It lasted less and less strongly, and finally disappeared.

The sunlight worked its magic on the fog and Riona watched the threads of mist rise and roll and boil away from the main bank. Slowly, slowly, the fog thinned. She could see features of the town - roofs and chimneys, lifting their own

columns of smoke up to the morning air. Soon she saw outlines of houses, and of the waterfront, and of the Market square.

Bit by bit, she saw neighborhoods burst suddenly into full color as the sunlight burned away all the vapor. When the entire harbor lay in sunlight, glittering like the new day, she heaved a huge sigh.

That had been hard to do, to sit for so long just witnessing the fog and sun do what they would, but it was worth it. They were not fighting, or eating one another. They were dancing an ancient, continual dance, and Riona was touched by the beauty and the grace of it.

Descending in to the town again, she sought out the weaver's near the market square. She found not one shop but three, right next to a shop that sold cloth which arrived on the many ships which came in and out of Eastport. Looking at the different kinds of cloth and unexpected colors, she wandered from shop to shop until she found Aidan in the fourth one.

He looked up when she entered. He hadn't been weaving, but doing something to big spools of slender yarn. Riona could hear the rumble of a loom and she spotted a spinning wheel attended by a youngish woman not far from Aidan's station.

"There she is. I wonder what your story is today?" he looked at her impishly.

Riona smiled but wanted to turn that conversation around quickly. "Today I need to make new socks. Do you ever sell yarn?"

Aidan raised his eye brows. "We do. Something plain?" He stood and moved to a row of shelves. When Riona nodded, he

picked up three skeins of yarn from a shelf. “These would all be a good weight.” He spread them on the counter and Riona lightly fingered each skein.

She chose the lightest shade of yarn. “May I have two of these? Might as well have too much as not enough.”

Aidan nodded and put the others away, grabbing another light shade wool skein. He named a price and Riona carefully counted out small pieces of money. “Thank you, Aidan” she said, and picked up her purchase.

He took the bait. “Hey!” he called before she passed through the doorway. “How do you know my name?”

“Aidan,” hissed the woman at the spinning wheel.

He turned his eyes back to the woman and mumbled an apology. He came around his table and approached Riona. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at you. I just... Well, how *do* you know my name?”

Riona smiled. “I asked about you. You didn’t stay around for the storytelling.”

“No,” the lad shook his head. “I get in trouble when I get all those ideas in my head.”

“But you love the stories?”

His eyes lit up. “Sure I do! I just listen to them too much.”

Riona lightly touched his arm. “Listen. I’m going to be going around town looking for work, but at the end of the day? Are you free to talk?”

One of his eyebrows quirked upward. “What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“I mean I’m from Craiklee. I might know different stories than you do. I want to hear some and tell some. What do you say?”

Now both eyebrows were raised. “Sure! After evening bell, I’ll have about half an hour before supper. Meet me where I met you yesterday?”

“Perfect,” she said, “and I’ll bring another friend, too, Ailis Bakers.”

His brow darkened briefly. “If you have to. She’s trouble. But you’d better tell the first story.”

Riona left having promised to tell the first story and looked for the rest of the day for a little work. Since she was young and new in town, she knew that opportunities would be rare. The chance came completely unexpectedly between the basket weaver’s shop and settling down with lunch. Riona had just bought herself a new loaf of bread and an apple when a furious squealing, honking, and yipping filled the square.

Two big dogs chased a whole flock of geese into the square. Absolute chaos and hilarity ensued as the goose-herd tried to protect his flock, the dogs were chased with sticks, someone who seemed to own one of the dogs flew around screaming, and every street vendor was upset.

By the time it was settled, the big brown dog had been hauled off and spanked roundly. A smaller boy was crying over the dog being hit, and the geese were rounded up and herded back out of the square.

“Jilly, Jilly,” the little boy cried, looking still through the square for the smaller dog.

One large merchant came out to chastise the boy. “That dog of yours is no good, untrained, and a danger. Keep her out of town or she’ll get a beating and not come back, you hear?!”

The boy ran to the edge of the square and tried to hide his crying against the stones. Finally he searched for his dog.

Riona called very softly to him. “I think she’s a very good dog.” He looked up in surprise. Riona shifted to reveal the shiny black dog she had been hiding under her skirts.

Jilly bounded to her young master, knocked him over with kisses, and bounded back to Riona’s lap. To the boys utter amazement, she snuggled down in the lap, tucked her snout under Riona’s knee, and cuddled quietly and sleepily.

The boy didn’t dare shout and attract any attention to his lost-and-found Jilly. Instead, he approached Riona cautiously. “How did you make her do that?” he asked.

“I didn’t make her do anything. She just knows that I’m quiet and calm. She wanted a snuggle.”

“But she’s big and woofy and rough and a trouble!” he protested.

Riona took a wild guess. “Sort of like her little boy?”

He nodded with wide eyes.

“And when she came over to visit me, she’s quiet and snuggly.”

He wiped away the last of his tears and looked at his Jilly with appraising gaze.

“Could you show me how to snuggle her?”

“Sure I can!” Riona began.

Suddenly a woman's voice rose over the crowd, "Ca-van! Ca-van!" she called.

The boy scrambled. "My mother. Jilly we have to go, we're already late and we're in huge trouble..."

Riona stood and the black dog shook herself off. "I'll walk you back to your mother, maybe it won't go so hard on you."

The boy Cavan seemed doubtful, but the three walked together to Cavan's calling mother.

"There you are, you rascal and that dog -" she stopped herself. Jilly was sitting quietly beside Riona. "Well, you've calmed down now..."

"Goodwife," began Riona. "Jilly's a smart dog. I could show Cavan how to calm her down if you like."

Cavan's mother was obviously in haste to get along on her errands. She looked from the quietly sitting dog to her son, whose eyes had become huge and pleading. "I can't pay you," she said shortly.

"How about supper?" Riona asked.

The woman nodded. "Cavan, you and that dog get one more chance. This is it, you hear me?"

"We'll see you at supper time, Goodwife, she'll be a changed dog."

The woman walked on along the streets with a backward glance. Cavan looked up to Riona with worried eyes. "How are we going to make her into a good dog by supper time?"

Riona ruffled his hair. "Don't you worry. She's already a good dog. We just have to show her how. Where can we go that's quiet and maybe grassy?"

Cavan and Jilly led the way outside of the center of town and part way into the meadows. “This is a good place to play “Stick”,” he said.

“I’ll bet it is,” answered Riona. “It’s a very nice place to sit with a good dog, too. Why don’t you throw a few sticks for Jilly and show me what she can do.”

After about fifteen minutes of chasing several sticks, Cavan and Jilly returned to Riona. She praised Jilly and patted her and handed her canteen to Cavan.

“You see, she is a good dog, sweet and playful and you and she are going to learn how to be peaceful together, too.”

“I’m going to learn?” asked Cavan, alarmed.

“Yes,” decided Riona. “She can’t be a peaceful dog unless her master is peaceful, too.” Riona pointed to the dog, who was beginning to snuggle into her skirts again.

Cavan looked at the dog he loved, being a quiet happy dog. He hated learning things, but for his Jilly, he would do anything.

“What do I do?”

“Can you hear the sea?” asked Riona.

“Well, I hear the donkey going by and the wind and the voices from the town...” he began.

“Can you hear the sea?” she repeated.

Finally the boy stopped and listened and strained. It took several long breaths, but finally, he whispered, “I can hear it.”

Riona made her voice soft and low, an echo of her father’s voice when he helped her to calm down. “Listen to the sea, Cavan. Listen to the sea and to my voice, just as hard as you can.



“I’m putting my cloak on the ground next to you. Slide over so you’re not sitting on the bare ground.”

The boy opened his eyes and bounced over on top of her cloak. “That’s nice of you!” he said.

“Hey!” she interjected softly. “You’re supposed to be still listening to the sea.”

“Still?” he asked.

“Yes,” she was firm. “Just the sea and my voice.” She gave him a few seconds, during which she pulled her cloak up round his shoulders to keep him warm.

“Now I’d like you to listen to your breathing, too, feel it passing in and out of you. Hear what it sounds like.” she paused. “Feel what it feels like, rushing in and out of your nose and your throat and your body.”

Riona counted out a full minute while she watched the boy’s face furrow with concentration.

“You’re doing very well, Cavan. This might be hard, but I promise this will help Jilly. You can do it for Jilly. Let’s listen to your breathing and the sea again.”

Another minute passed. Riona listened to the breathing slow down to match the rhythm of the great waves in the harbor.

“That’s it, Cavan. Now I’m going to tell you about your body, how to make it calm to help Jilly. If you want to lie down so you can concentrate, that’s just fine...”

Riona took three deep breaths as her father always did. “Think about your feet, Cavan. They run and play all day, they get tired. But your feet are strong. You’re going to let them rest right now, resting feet, just touching your stockings just resting

in your sandals, resting on the ground.” She paused while watching his face. “When you breathe out, you can feel the tightness leave your feet. Breathe in,” she timed her words with his inhalation. “And breathe out the tightness in your feet.” She let him take a few breaths that way.

“Your ankles, Cavan, they run and dodge and turn all directions. They need to be warm and flexible to stay strong. Feel the wool of your socks and I will tuck the cloak in around your ankles to keep them extra warm. As you breathe, you can breathe the tiredness out of your ankles.”

By the time Riona reached Cavan’s legs, he made a great sigh and turned to lie down, curled up, in the middle of the meadow.

One step at a time, she told him about his body, how strong and fast it was, how it could get tired, and how to feel the tiredness leave as he breathed out. “Your arms will relax, too, in just a moment. Right now, I want you to open your arms a bit. Jilly is sniffing you and she wants to come snuggle.”

The boy opened his arms and his eyes, but didn’t bounce up. His sleek, black dog burrowed into his arms, turned once, and flumped down with a sigh. Both of them closed their eyes again.

“Can you feel Jilly’s breath?” Riona asked.

“I can,” he relied.

“She breathes faster than you do, but you may try to breathe with her. Just feel her chest rise when yours does and fall when yours does.”

In a few minutes, Riona had coached him through relaxing his shoulders, his throat, his face and scalp.

“Now your mind, just let it drift, listening to the sea and feeling Jilly’s breath.”

Not to her surprise, his even breaths grew slow, and she watched over him carefully while he and his good dog Jilly napped in the sun in the meadow.

Twenty minutes later, Cavan snapped his eyes open. “What happened? Is Jilly sleeping?” Just that much movement had woken the good dog, however, and she turned to lick him.

Riona smiled at the boy. “I think you and Jilly are ready for your second lesson,” she said.

“What was the first lesson?” Cavan asked in confusion.

She laughed. “The first lesson was how to relax your body, one bit at a time, until Jilly relaxes, too. You must practice it every day, preferably at bedtime, but you’ll find yourself able to do it just a little bit without falling asleep in a few days. Do you think you can remember my voice when it’s time to practice?”

The boy nodded, his eyes on his dog.

“Good, remember me when it’s time, and you can just follow my instructions again. Now it’s time for playing Stick.”

“Stick?” asked Cavan. “She already knows that.”

“Of course, she does, and its fun for her. That’s one secret, is for her to have plenty of games of Stick before she needs to be a calm dog. It gives her something to do with that energy. Do you think you can get up and play Stick first thing every morning?”

‘Wow, last thing at bedtime, first thing in the morning, this is hard work!’

Riona fixed him with her sparkly eyes. “Is she worth it?”

Cavan flung his arms around the good dog who sat so happily in his lap, thumping her tail in his face. “She’s worth anything.” he said.

“OK, how will you tell her it’s time to play?” Riona asked. “It helps a dog to understand words if you use the same ones every time.”

Cavan thought for a moment. “Stick!” He said, “Go get your stick!” And the two were off for another quarter hour of fun.

By the time Riona and Cavan made it to his house for supper, Jilly could sit down when Cavan made a sign with his hands. Most impressive, Jilly kept her feet on the floor and wiggled happily at her family instead of making a ruckus.

## 1.7 A Story

Finally evening bell rang. Riona excused herself to meet Aidan and Ailis in the market square.

She found her new friends playing a game of Flip with the pebbles. “Hallo!”

“Who’s your little shadow?” asked Aiden

Riona whirled.

There was Jilly, panting and wiggling happily - with Cavan peeking out from behind a corner.

“Get yourselves home right now!” Riona made shoo-ing motions.

Cavan looked up with huge eyes, “Can’t we stay for the story?”

Riona began to send the boy away with his dog when Ailis put her hand on his arm. “I think that Cavan would like this story, too, Ri.”

The girls exchanged a look.

“He’s pretty young...”

“I’ll keep track of him, Riona,” the other girl said, “I really think he should hear it.”

Riona nodded. “All right, then. All right, you know your neighbors best. Everyone get comfortable.” She settled down cross-legged and began.

“Once upon on a time there was a land whose people were poets and artists. Children grew and made mistakes and learned and quite often disagreed with their parents.”

“This isn’t an approved story, is it?” commented Aidan.

Riona chuckled. “Each person had a gift or two, a way of seeing and being in the world that other people couldn’t see or do, and each small gift helped in everyday living. For example, some mothers had an automatic sense of where their children were, and so there did not need to be as many rules about where the children were allowed to be. Some people had the gift of calming down a little at a time, and so they had control over their anger and their fear.

“Hey, we have that gift!” said Cavan, patting Jilly.

The young storyteller smiled. “Some folks touched the weather and some folks could whisper a message to their friend

far away. Each gift was different, and each one seemed like magic to those who didn't have a similar gift."

"That *is* magic!"

"It sounds amazing, but it was just like regular life for these people. Some people were stronger at it than others, but there are ways of getting better that you can practice.

"Hey, this isn't a story," protested Cavan.

"Are you trying to say that magic is real?" said Aidan.

"I said, it's not magic. It just what regular people can do -" Riona took a deep breath, "when they're not full of the King's Health."

"Once upon a time, there was a council of hurtful beings who wanted the food and wealth of a certain land. They found out about the people whom they wanted to enslave.

"Why did they want slaves?" interrupted Cavan.

"No one really knows, they just wanted to be powerful.

"This council of beings found out that the people were used to following Kings - that there had been a King in distant memory, who had disappeared. They pretended to be The King, come back to them, and ready to lay down new laws and change their lives."

"But how can a group of people pretend to be a King?"

"Do you *always* interrupt?" Aidan asked the smaller boy.

"Have any of you ever seen the King?" asked Riona. "No, it could be an elephant for all we know. So, no one sees the king, yet we drink his Health every week."

"In exchange for peace and prosperity, we drink the King's Health, and we have paid in free will. Our people are not free,

cannot challenge the laws or sue for new ones to be made. The King's Health saps the free will of most people. And a few - like us - are not affected by it. When we rebel against the king in any way, we are obvious, and the Patrol can eliminate us. That is why we hide what we're really like"

"But what can we do?" Aidan asked with a wary eye.

"We relearn the skills of the Gifts. I can teach you some of them. There's an old spell, a big magic, that takes the work of people scattered all over the continent. That's what I'm here for. I'm supposed to find you -

"Find you myself!" a huge voice shouted.

"Run" yelled Riona, as she disobeyed her own instructions and headed straight toward the patroller, hoping that her friends were scattering out of sight.

The patroller certainly hadn't expected a young girl to attack him directly - or, not attack so much as launch herself at him in a hugely ineffectual tackle. Her slight frame made no impression on him, but his startlement did. In the five seconds that it took him to wrap his arms around Riona and call for help, Aidan, Ailis, and Cavan had disappeared into the town's twilight.

## 1.8 Struggle

Riona sat in the jail cell waiting for who knew what? She wasn't sure how much the patroller had heard, and the more he had heard, the less she would get any kind of chance to explain or escape.

She had retained her cloak, and so could keep herself warm and slightly protected from the damp. She had to get control of her worrying and *think!*

Outdoors, a sound of adults passed, moving about the square before the curfew. A familiar voice, and Riona found herself listening to Skelly, who strode very close to the window of her cell.

“Vanished in the fog, that’s what he did. Breathed it in, turned to fog, and no one could see him. He slipped the chain, ghosted down the tower, rescued the maiden and vanished with the boat full of treasure and no one ever saw him.”

“Ha! that’s the tallest tale I’ve heard you tell, Skelly,” one of the other adults answered.

“Well, I’ll just have to keep working on it. Cid I ever tell you the one about the cat in the cloak?” The adults’ voices faded out of range.

What on earth had he meant.

Disappear into the fog.

The scary fog that came every morning to the harbor.

She should find a way to blend with the fog? What could she do?

Well, the fog wouldn’t come until the next morning, she thought, I might as well try to sleep here, just me and the mice.

Riona did manage to sleep. She dreamed of her cloak; she dreamed of grey horses running running, pounding over the surf from the sea toward Eastport. Her eyes snapped open and she realized the Fog was coming.



She swallowed the feeling of panic in her throat. Riona did her best not to cry out. And she prepared to break out of jail with a magic that she was not sure existed.

## 1.9 Climax

First deep breaths, she reminded herself. Next relax step-by step.

Her feet touched the straw beneath them; she breathed her tension out of them. Her ankles felt tired, she breathed new rest into them. Her legs, cold and a little cramped, she breathed relaxation into them. It took several breaths for her upper legs, and more than a minute for her hips. Each time she exhaled, she felt more tension leaves the powerful muscled of her hips, but then when she tried again, still more relaxed. She continued to breathe out the tension, until she could feel the slight re-gaining of it when the exhalation was through. She let it happen and then on the next breath consciously kept her muscles loose. Finally her hips felt soft and warm and relaxed.

Slowly, slowly, then, she moved her consciousness up her body. Slowly , slowly she let he spine and belly and lungs be relaxed and moving naturally. She found herself needing a stretch, after her sleep for a few hours, and allowed herself a bone-creaking deep stretch, after which she returned to her hips for relaxation.

One step at a time, her hands, her arms, her shoulders, Riona let the relaxation fill her body. Her breathing was deep and slow.

She scrunched up the parts of her face and let them relax. Her raised her eyebrows and let them relax. She let her relaxing attention drift to her scalp.

Finally, feeling that all her muscles were sufficiently relaxed, she began to center. She felt her own warmth and strength and continued to breathe deeply. She felt the air fill her lungs, became intensely aware of the rush of air inside her. She felt gravity hold her body down, felt the heaviness of her relaxed muscles. She felt the straw pressing up against her, felt the floor beneath the straw, felt the earth and stone and depth of the earth beneath her, holding her, direct connection between her heavy, centered body and the deep, massive earth.

With a gentle suddenness, she realized that the air was cool and a little moist. She was not just breathing, but breathing in the fog. Since her body was relaxed, like a napping cat, she didn't panic or change her breathing, but was able to observe and feel and smell this new development.

The fog filled her with a gentle touch. Riona had been afraid of the fog before, she had pulled away from it and tried to fill it with sounds of her voice. Now she let it be what it was and experienced it as a soft touch. Not a loving touch, but certainly not a sinister one. In fact the fog was just what it was, no more or no less, and it touched her entirely without judgement and without needing to be judged.

What is it like to be fog? Riona wondered, and drew the soft greyness deeper into her lungs. Shaped, but almost shapeless, fluid, responding both to gravity and to the lift of

evaporation. Invisible in the separate droplets, but so thick and opaque all together that whole town could disappear.

That was it. Let the fog cover her outline.

She greeted it, she embraced it, she invited the fog to cover her like a cloak and asked it politely to travel with her.

Slowly and softly, Riona moved. Her relaxed body did not strain, but always moved to a position where her skeleton, rather than muscle tension, held her. She rolled up and balanced in a crouch. The morning light had not yet begun to lighten the sky, but false dawn was a near promise.

She thought she could even see the fog inside her tiny cell.

A soft sound reached her, and she looked up to the window. A knotted rope dangled from the high window. She studied. She could probably squeeze through that window. She smiled.

With movements as slow and soft as the fog, Riona began to climb the rope. Her strong hands and feet gripped it, and she moved so slowly that no sound reached beyond her small cell. Riona climbed, she delighted in the climb, and she continued until her hands gripped the edge of the window.

Thanking Skelly or Aidan or Ailis for the knots in the rope, Riona twisted her legs around it tightly as she tried to work herself through the window. Now trying for purchase on the wall, now pushing against the rope, Riona managed to squirm her shoulders through the opening. Not long after, her strong arms pulled the rest of herself. Slowly, slowly, she pulled through and, headfirst, dove down the outside of the building, only a body-length, still clutching the rope with her feet.

With her hands on the ground and her feet sliding out of the window, Riona was rather sure she had not been in such a silly position for a long time, but it was what she needed to do. Still, still, she moved with the slowness of the fog. She glided her legs down to the ground, she balanced in her crouch again, and slowly, slowly stood.

Not a sound in the market square. Not a sound from the window behind her. Silence. She breathed deeply again the heavy, misty air. Silence.

This time she did not run from it, but embraced the silence and took it as her friend. She waited, imitating the silence, grateful that it was all around her.

In a minute she gently took hold of the rope. Reaching up, she untied it from the hitching post. She coiled it and carried it away, leaving no trace.

Riona moved with the grace of the fog and its silence as well. Where to go?

She felt no need to return to Apirka and Aine's farm, she would only bring trouble to them, after all they had done. And for the same reason, she didn't want to approach Ailis and Aidan or Cavan. But she did have work to do with them.

Her mind made up, she moved on to Ailis's father's bakery. the thick bank of fog moved with her.

Suddenly voices up ahead. Riona pressed against the stones of the building beside her, but she didn't dare make the clatter of running feet. I am the fog, she thought in her heart, all you see is a thick patch of fog.

Two patrollers came near. Turn away, she thought. They spoke in voices made louder by the still morning air. I am the silence, she thought.

They did not turn away, but turned right down the alleyway where Riona stood, stock-still against the wall. She did not even dare to breathe.

“Yeah, we’ll find ‘em. This is better than hunting season,” one patroller said to another.

I am the fog.

They walked right by.

Riona did not move for a full five minutes, listening to the voices and their foot steps retreating down the alley, through another part of the market square. She remained still in her little bit of cloud, deeply grateful for it, for the silence, and for Skelly’s clue.

Slowly, with the care and grace that a cat uses to climb a fence, Riona moved her feet again, one at a time deliberately and passed her way to the bakery.

First light filtered into the town, diffuse but pervasive in the fog, a kind of light of its own. The baker was up already, letting his first breads rise and baking his first sweet breads.

Riona stepped cautiously to the door and the warmth of the light. The baker looked up, smiled, and turned over his shoulder. In a moment Ailis, up early and with arms covered in flour, swept to the door.

“You made it!” she exclaimed. Then not wanting to let on to her father that she meant Riona had made it out of jail, she

continued, “I knew you’d want to see how we make the creme-filled ones.”

Riona came into the light and warmth of the bakery although she kept herself out of the window light.

She looked at and oohed over all the good smells and rows and rows of rising good things.

“You girls will have to wait to bake them,” said her father. “Go upstairs and giggle like girls and I’ll call you in half an hour.”

## 1.X The Adventure Continues

The girls climbed the stairs then the ladder to Ailis’ bedroom. “How did you get out?” Ailis asked.

Riona showed her the length of knotted rope. “I think it was Aidan who left it, if you’ve no idea how I got out. I used a new bit of... let’s just call it magic for now. It was amazing and I don’t know how long it will last. I had better get a move on - I’m continuing southward. Will you return the rope to Aidan?”

At Ailis’ nod, Riona began to open her amulet pouch. Ailis gasped.

“I’ve set aside my amulet, jut two weeks ago. I took up my father’s hearth before I came to Eastport. This bag now carries some magic from my mother...” There was a catch in her voice. she plucked out one of the broken pieces of the geode.

“Will you keep this here? Will you keep it in your high tower room and think of me? You can even hold it when ... oh, no, I don’t know if I have time to teach you any magic -”

Ailis interrupted. “Cavan says he knows. He ran here last night before going home. He said you taught him something that he can teach us...”

Riona nodded gratefully. “The take this,” she closed her friend’s fingers around the piece of amethyst.

“You can even let the boys hold it when they practice, too.” Riona added after thinking “I think that their energy and good thoughts would benefit it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t actually know. This stone is part of a spell that no one I’ve talked to actually knows how to do, I’m going off an old song I heard once - the kind we’re not allowed to sing any more. I just know that you should keep this here. I have the other pieces of the mother rock. I’ll be leaving them all over the country. And somehow, that will make us all stronger.”

Ailis tucked the stone into her amulet pouch. “I’ll miss you. Travel well.”

Silence hung between the girls, but this time not an enemy to be vanquished by their voices, but a friend to keep them safe.

They descended, entered the bakery as Ailis’ father took a pan of fresh sweet meats out of the oven. light and puffy. Riona laid a coin on the counter and took twelve of them. The baker tossed another one at her. “I’ve never been able to count a proper dozen,” he smiled at her. Take that many.

And so, again moving slowly, but now with good warm food in her, Riona passed out of Eastport and into the deep woods. She moved along the coast but not along the road, and not a single person saw or heard her until the sun burned through the fog.

More road ahead. More patrollers. But they would not know her in the new town. No one had marched or ridden past her, they seemed not to have guessed where to find their jail-breaker.

Riona smiled. She wondered if they even knew how she had gotten out.

“Thank, Skelly,” she whispered to the town as she left it. “I know why you are my dad’s best friend, and once were my mother’s. They would thank you, too.”

Riona turned and walked on in the clear new day, on to another town, another part of her beloved country, on to another place where the magic called Freedom had all but died. She walked on, ready to rekindle the flame.