

The Ruby Key

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One – Before the Offering

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The sun slid down toward the tops of the trees. I only watched for an instant, for though everyone in Hillrush had been working since before sunrise, we were not yet finished. We raced the sun, it at that moment it seemed it would beat us all.

My best friend Catri lugged the last wandering lamb from her family's flock into the barn, and her oldest brother trudged in, carrying his cot and blankets and a long knife and a bow and arrows. Catri told him, "Mama said she'd bring your drink and dinner before the offering." And then she turned to me. "Any chores you have left, Genna?"

I said, "Nothing that has to be done by daylight. I have spinning and knitting tonight, but I've done the milking and the wash and brought in the clothes. And covered the garden with board-boxes, lest nightlings trample the new plantings. And got the cow and the goats into the shed."

Catri's mother raced past us in one direction, chasing her three youngest children into the house. She would not attend the offering; her husband would do give for her, and for himself, and for his oldest son, while she kept the children safe.

Hadgard the priest ran in the other direction, past the

Justice Tree and toward the prayer house, his green tunic and baggy breeches flapping behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at the sun, muttered, "Oh, Spirit and little gods preserve us," and picked up his pace.

Catri and I looked at each other, suddenly uncertain. I said, "Uncle Banris wanted to make offering for us this year."

"You told me," Catri said.

I had. I'd forgotten. So many things were going wrong. Papa had been missing for two years and was surely dead, and we had struggled on with that. But recently Mama had gotten sick with saku, which caused the sort of confusion and wandering that had taken Papa from us, and lately, she never remembered to eat. I overheard the yervi who'd come to treat her sickness tell Uncle Banris that she would probably not live to see the next season's offering. Uncle Banris, meanwhile, hung over Mama like a blue-cloaked version of Death, badgering her to marry him so her children would not be orphaned.

And poor Mama, so lost and confused most of the time, kept telling Banris that she could not marry him while Papa was still alive.

She had asked me, as the oldest of her seven children, to give our gifts to the nightlings that night in her stead.

We had little enough to give. With Mama so sick, with Papa dead—or mad and starving and wandering through the wilds, which meant dead—my brother Danrith and I were the working members of our family. Danrith was twelve and I was fourteen, so we were near enough to being adults that our work was acceptable for offerings. But we were not as quick about our work or as skilled as our parents had been.

Catri said, "Papa told me I could offer for myself tonight."

I brightened. I was afraid to do my first offering. I'd been

sure I'd be there alone, the youngest, the only one offering for the first time. But if Catri was going...

"Papa said he thought I'd be able to help you, and you'd be able to help me."

I would have hugged her father right then, had he not been helping the other men carry the village's heaviest bounty to the Treaty Stone.

"I have two bolts of fine winter wool," I told her. "The last of Mama's weaving, and the best of mine. I dyed both myself with madder, and they came out the most beautiful red. And we're giving a copy of the village daybook that Danrith transcribed, plus two bag-cheeses that I made."

"Danrith has excellent handwriting. And your cheeses are wonderful," Catri said.

She was right about Danrith's handwriting, but generous in mentioning my cheeses. They're good enough. They can be a little uneven in flavor and texture, and once in a while I make an error and completely ruin a batch. I'm far better at spinning and knitting and weaving. And dyeing. She didn't need to say anything about the weaving; we both knew I could have been a weaver were I not going to grow up to be a yihanni. I'm good with the flocks. I'm learning healing, too, and many of the other arts I'll have to know when I marry into a village that needs a yihanni.

But if our village needed a yihanni—and in just three months time, would I be called upon? I wasn't ready to be the yihanni, accountable for the village's magic. I wasn't ready to lose my wonderful mother, either.

Catri elbowed me, and I realized that I'd been frozen in place, staring at the setting sun. She pulled her family's crop wagon behind her. I saw one finished dress in it, made to a design the nightlings provided. "My offering," she said.

I looked at the dress in awe. The cloth had not come from the village, but from the nightlings themselves. It was beautiful, shimmery stuff, finer than the finest silks I'd ever seen. Catri had made the cloth into a simple dress, but the plain cut of the material only showed off her gorgeous stitching, and the careful way she'd pieced colors together so that they flowed into and out of each other. It was the most beautiful dress I'd ever seen, prettier even than the velvet-and-silk dress Mama has in her cedar chest. She'd married Papa in that dress, and attended the coronation of the Maeresh in the great city of Grandhaven. She would probably be buried in that dress, I thought, and suddenly I shivered.

We dragged the wagon past the Millard house, and past Old Gentimy, widowed as long as I'd been alive, who was lugging last fall's potatoes out of her root cellar to her wheelbarrow to take to the Treaty Stone. She's old and alone and poor. She can offer potatoes, and no one will punish her.

Hadgard the priest had slipped around us somehow, and was walking from window to window at our house, closing the shutters and painting a circle of vinegar and pine pitch on each one, muttering the blessing against the dark as he did so. I could hear Danrith on the other side, bolting each shutter into place as the priest finished.

I hurried in.

"Not much time left," Dan told me.

"I'm getting our offering now," I said, and ran into the kitchen, where I'd set everything aside earlier. The cloth and the cheeses were there. Dan's book was not.

My heart leapt like a startled lamb, and I checked the table, and under the table, and in the folds of my two bolts of cloth. Nothing.

The missing book would be Dan's fault, I knew. Or at least I

hoped. So I gathered up everything on the table and on my way past him said, "Bring the daybook out to Catri's wagon, and hurry. She and I are going together, and the sun is close to the horizon."

He had the grace to look chagrined. "I forgot to put it back. I added extra," he said, and ran up the stairs to the room that had been Papa's study, and that Uncle Banris had taken over, even though our house is not his house.

He ran down the stairs with it in his hand—a small, leather-bound book filled with Dan's careful writing. Columns of numbers—the counts of our herds and people, the produce the village sold, the items it bought, all gathered and brought to our house by the villagers, for Danrith kept Hillrush's counting just as Papa had trained him. He couldn't do the justice as Papa had, of course. Uncle Banris did that.

But Dan kept all the sums and trades, and understood the picture they painted, too.

After the offering, the nightlings would have a copy of those numbers. Why they would want them, I could not imagine. Papa, though, had included a copy of Hillrush's daybook in the first spring offering each year. So Danrith did the same.

With all our offering in the wagon, Catri and I ran to the edge of town, the wagon behind us banging and rattling over the ruts in the road. A bonfire burned in the firepit at the north edge of the Treaty Stone. The sun had not yet set, but the bonfire would tell the nightlings the offering waited. Once dark came, they would arrive and take it all away.

Hadgard had finished blessing the village's windows and doors, though he had probably trusted many of the houses to his assistants. There are fifty-four in the village, after all. More than three hundred people live in Hillrush, and they all count on the blessings, for the nightlings could slip through unblest windows and doors and take away children or adults.

He stood in the center of the Treaty Stone, waiting for Uncle Banris to arrive so that he could bless us and our offerings, and ask Spirit and the little gods for our protection through the night.

Lately, it seemed neither Spirit nor the little gods had much interest in keeping us and ours safe. After almost every offering, someone had gone missing—or sometimes several people; always boys and girls, or young men and women just arrived at adulthood.

But though we seemed to have lost the favor of our Spirit, still we prayed.

The village adults arrived as we did, dragging or carrying offerings, gathering around the low, flat circle of the Treaty Stone, waiting.

Catri and I stood back a bit, but those older and taller than us scooted us toward the center, toward the edge of the stone itself. The words of our treaty with the nightlings were carved into it. The treaty is long, and tedious to read, and the site carries the feeling of curse about it, so none of us lingers there.

Uncle Banris arrived, dressed in his finest clothing, and pushed his way through everyone to walk into the center of the stone, beside Hargard. Papa had once done that, I thought, though I had never seen it. And I could not imagine Papa ever having been so rude, or so overbearing. Banris raised his hand and said, "The Moon is full, and tonight will stand in the sky as witness to this remembrance of the peace we made with those who haunt the darkness. We, too, stand witness, that we keep within our bounds as the nightlings keep within theirs. That we bear no weapons against each other, or against the creatures of Night. That we give thanks for the mercy we are shown, and that we remember to show mercy in our turn."

No one said anything. They would have cheered for Papa, I thought, but everyone loved him. And his words would have been better.

Banris started to say something else, but one of the old farmers at the back said, "Would you talk 'til the sun sets, you fool? Let the priest speak his piece, and let us pitch our treasures and flee. We'll give thanks for nightling mercy when our bellies are less empty."

Catri and I heard cheers for that.

Hargard looked awkward and uncomfortable as he stepped forward. "Spirit with us, guard and guide us. Little gods, light the paths of our feet. See us safely home by dark, and safely here by next light."

Then he stepped off the Treaty Stone.

Mother Beechalt, who lived across the street from my house, and who was friends with Catri's parents and who had been friends with mine, said, "Go, girls, put your things in first and hurry home."

The nightlings take children and young men and women in preference to all others. Everyone understood, and they made way for us. I placed our household offerings on the center of the treaty, where Uncle Banris had just stood. A few women nodded approval at my cheeses, and murmured good words about the cloth. The men muttered gratitude that Oerin's boy Danrith had kept up the accounting of our village. Older girls than us whispered envy at Catri's beautiful dress.

We did not stay to see what else went on the pile, though. The sun sat fat and orange on the horizon, and the valley below us already lay in darkness. The nightlings would be there, perhaps looking up toward us. They would be coming up the hill soon.

We held hands and ran back to the path that would take her to her home and me to mine.

We hugged each other. “Be safe,” she whispered to me.

“You too.” And then I laughed. “We can sneak out at first light to see what they brought for us in return.

Nightling offerings are usually trinkets—beads or shiny bits of glass made to look like gemstones, fancy colored feathers. Never food, never cloth, never anything practical. But that it the way the treaty goes. We give what we have. They give what they have.

“Our first offering,” Catri said. “I thought it would be...different. That it would feel more important.”

I shrugged. “Meet me here first thing in the morning and we’ll go back to the stone. Maybe it will feel more important then.”

I did not tell her that Danrith and I had another adventure planned for Offering Night—one that made putting the offering on the Treaty Stone seem like nothing by comparison.

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