

## Chapter 1: The Apprentice

As luck would have it, Tamana Sorn was tending her garden when Braye Smitson's ball sailed in and landed with a leafy crash. Tamana could be fierce with trespassers. From the long silence that followed, she suspected the boy of weighing the impulse to flee. But this one poked his head through the gate.

Braye was skinny, a bit grubby around the edges like most nine-year-olds, with bright eyes that took in everything, and a cheeky smile.

Tamana stood at the far end of the path, her hands on her hips; her expression, as he approached, was both stern and amused. Small and sturdy, with wild black hair lightly seasoned

with gray, she wore a countrywoman's skirts, well above the ankles, and, over her skirts, a brown tunic with deep pockets. These were spilling over with leafy plants and flowers--and with seed pods clinging to her hair, she looked like a moving garden herself.

"I beg your pardon, Tamana Sorn," he said, "but I've lost a ball over your wall. I'm very sorry."

At least this one had manners. She glanced at the maze of raised beds and trellises, pots, barrels, and hedges, that made up her garden. Although summer had not yet ripened, and vegetable patches all over the village of Kenby were still thin and straggling, Tamana Sorn's garden grew lush and full. The ball was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you see where it landed?" she asked.

"No, but I'll find it. I always find things quickly."

"Do you now?" Tamana said, her interest deepening. "Well then, go to it!"

The boy scanned the garden, and she watched him relax, trying not to focus on anything; then suddenly he headed confidently toward the hedge. He retrieved the ball from a tub by a leafy bed of spinach and returned to Tamana Sorn. The ball had been completely hidden.

"Impressive," she said. "Do you find things often?"

"My Ma says I have sharp eyes. If anything's lost, she says, Braye, you go get it, you've got the sharpest eyes in this family."

"That's a useful talent," she said. "So you're Braye, Garvey's son. Your father's a good man. How old are you?"

"I'll be ten in the fall. Ma says I was born old, but my Da says no, I was born with a smart mouth, and there's a difference."

"There is indeed." She could see the boy didn't quite know how to take this. "But perhaps you could help me a moment. I've misplaced a necklace, of polished red beads it is. A pretty thing. Do you think you could find it?"

"Out here?" asked Braye, disbelievingly.

"Oh, no, in the house," she said.

He went to the cottage door with reluctance. Tamana Sorn could well understand it. Who knew what one would find in a witch's cottage? She had no illusions about what they called her behind her back. As the herb-woman of Kenby, the village folk treated her with respect. Although they welcomed her healing charms and spells in their homes in times of illness, they visited her garden cautiously. Sensing his nervousness, she stayed well away from the door. "Go ahead," she said. "I'll wait outside."

Her cottage contained just a single room dominated by the large hearth and a long work-table in the center, with shelves and more work-space against the walls. Bundles of herbs and dried flowers hung from the roof-beams. A narrow stair--barely more than a ladder--hugged the left wall and led to an open sleeping loft.

As she watched Braye looking around the room without moving, she knew he was trying to picture the red beads in his head. Polished beads on a string, knots between each bead for strength, kept in a soft leather pouch. Not clay beads, but polished stone. She had not described them in such detail. Yet the boy moved with assurance to a cluttered workbench and pulled out a small wooden box tucked behind a basket. He held it out to Tamana wordlessly.

She took the box and slowly opened it, exposing the leather pouch; she tipped the pouch over his hand and the necklace slipped out with little clicks. Braye looked at it wonderingly.

"Truth is," Tamana said, "you've been born with the ability to see through things."

She smiled. Braye thrust the necklace back at her. "Well, I'm sorry about the ball, I mean it landing in your garden. My Ma is pretty burned up when it lands in hers, though it's not half as nice as this...."

"Do you like gardens, then?"

"Sure." She could see he didn't care a fig for them, but knew better than to criticize a witch's garden to her face. He clearly wanted to go, but didn't dare. Tamana Sorn had not finished with him.

"Let me show you something."

Still clutching his ball, he followed her past flowering beds of yellow and purple crocus, when suddenly she crouched down and pointed to what at first looked like a dead leaf, curled and brown. He squatted next to her, and took a better look.

It was an insect, or once had been. Now it was a dried-out husk, intact but for a split along its underside. Monstrous in its way, a good two inches long, with huge, cupped eyes, pincers, and folded, patterned wings--and completely hollow.

"Somewhere," said Tamana Sorn, "the creature who wore this once is out in the world with a new, shiny, supple, green skin. This is all he has left behind." Braye gently poked it with a stick.

"It must have hurt like blazes to get unstuck from his old skin and crawl out," he said.

"If he'd stayed any longer it would have killed him. It was too small for him. Painful or not, he had to get free of it." She could see Braye digesting this.

"What's that flower?" he asked, pointing to the glowing, pearly blossoms cascading from a bush with feathery foliage.

"Mothbloom. Do you see why it's called that?"

"The petals are like moths' wings."

Eyes to see with and an imagination to take him farther: the boy showed possibilities. Perhaps she had found her apprentice. Tamana Sorn had no child of her own and she wished to pass on her store of herbcraft, of recipes and simple spells. But it was no easy matter to choose from among her neighbors in the small village of Kenby. They were ordinary folk: farmers, shepherds, craftspeople. She knew most of them, and before today had not stumbled upon a soul with the aptitude she required.

This boy had a gift that could be dangerous if not channeled properly, though in truth he'd likely create more problems for her than he solved. One way or another, his gift would assert itself, and in her village. A perilous thing to ignore, worse to suppress. She wondered how he got on at home. Tamana straightened, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Yes, Braye Smitson, you see very well. I could use some help here, once or twice a week to start. It would be worth your while." She straightened. "I'll talk to your parents."

#

Braye proved to be a difficult apprentice. Young and careless, he'd rather be running races with the other village boys than weeding a garden, even if it did belong to a witch.

But as the months passed the boy began to learn the names and properties of the plants that grew in Tamana Sorn's garden, for he did love to learn. Tamana showed him how to harvest different seeds, how to preserve leaves and flowers, when to handle a plant and when to leave it strictly alone. Mothbloom, she taught him, was best harvested at night, under the full moon; its flowers, steeped in a tea, or chewed if time pressed, sharpened one's night vision. Evercrown produced valuable scarlet berries in the fall that made a potent cough remedy, although its leaves were poisonous. Rue, carelessly handled, caused blisters.

But Tamana knew that Braye wondered when she would begin his real education. Sometimes he pestered her: when would he learn how to start a fire with a word, or walk through walls, or blast something, anything? His best friend had dared him to show what he had learned: surely he could cast a spell by now, just a small one to prove that he could do it? Tamana had merely laughed and told Braye to inform Derne Lorset that Tamana Sorn had sworn him to secrecy, for the work they did together was dangerous and not to be spoken of. But in truth, she'd taught him more gardening than plant-lore: how to sweep her walk and

clean her garden tools and stack her firewood, how to weed beds, bind up vines, and prune suckers.

One day, he cornered Tamana Sorn while they were layering garden waste and old leaves to enrich the soil. "When are you going to start?"

"Start what, lad?"

"Teaching me real magic."

Tamana smiled. "What do you think I've been teaching you?"

Braye made a face as he dumped more leaves on the pile.

"Gardening."

"What do you think planting a seed is?--the most powerful magic in the world."

"You don't have to know magic to plant a seed."

"Don't you?"

"That's not magic, it's just common sense."

She stopped and rummaged through the pile, and picked out a pair of maple seeds set in twin green wings. How could she explain what she held there, the whole massive tree contained in each seed, the power that went back, year before year, tree before tree, through ancient forests, back to the first maple and the first spring? And how to draw strength from that power, and use it to influence the world around you? Braye was no more ready to understand the circle of cruelty and creation, of love and death and healing, than he was likely to sprout wings and

build a nest on her thatched roof. He was only a boy, lately turned ten.

Tamana had started her own training at a much earlier age, but then, she'd lived with folk who lived and breathed their herbcraft. She'd taken to it like a bee to a hive. Whereas Braye--well, he came from solid, hardworking folk who were suspicious of too much education and trusted only what they could see. He had much to unlearn.

Yet she felt the need to move him along faster. She wondered at her own sense of urgency. Not that she foresaw some disaster that would take her early from her work. This awareness of hers--it did not smell of death, nor of crippling or wasting disease, nor of silence. No, she sensed that there would be a need for this boy--or, rather, that Braye Smitson would require all the training she could give him, in deadly peril of his life. And if she failed him the repercussions would be vast.

In her trade, one honored instinct.

So back to her dilemma: how to stuff a boy full of learning without driving him away--and without giving him more than he could handle? Then she remembered the puzzle tree.

It dominated the west corner of her garden, the only one of its kind in this part of the world, ancient and stubby, with small, tear-shaped leaves. Scratch the bark and you could smell

its sweet and spicy resin. Taste the bark--but no, surely it was too soon for that.

She spun the maple seeds into a blur, then put them into his open palm.

"Common sense, yes, planting takes that, and something more. You learn how the natural cycles of the world work, what a seed needs to become a plant, and what use that plant has, berry, leave, and root. Magic and the healing arts mean understanding and working with nature: birth and growth and death and rebirth, the turn of the seasons; and then magic takes it farther." Tamana sought to make it tangible for him. "Think of the way a mother's milk runs when her baby cries, the way leaves change color before they die. Why does a child look like his parents and grandparents? Why does a stream run downhill and not uphill? These are expressions of power. They obey certain laws. Understand how the world works, become conscious of its pulse working each and every second of every day, and only then you can learn to influence it." She pointed to a nearby cluster of fleshy, green, rosette-shaped plants. "What is this?"

"Houseleek," Braye replied in a dull voice.

"And what's it good for?"

"Insect bites, burns, aching joints." She could practically hear his thoughts: All this memorization. All these stupid plants.

"And how is it prepared?"

"Squeeze the juice directly on the skin, or add to oil to make an ointment."

"Good. And this?"

Braye brushed his hand against the next leafy herb.

"Betony. Bruised leaves are good for cleansing wounds...." He frowned as he tried to remember.

"And you can make a tea from its dried leaves for migraine or indigestion. Remember? That's what I gave your aunt last month."

She reached for a broad, round leaf, with distinctive brown veins. "Beggar's cap," she said. "It is said to increase generosity. The proper dosage is unknown--a very little goes a very long way. Many years ago, Prince Lokilian of Doriven used ground beggar's cap in his father's food in hopes of gaining an increased allowance. Unfortunately, the king's resulting generosity was not limited to his son. He gave away so much that in less than a year he bankrupted the kingdom."

Braye grinned. "Is that true?"

"Look at how high the taxes rose in Lokirian's reign. And stayed high under the next three kings. The treasury had been emptied. Haven't you learned any history? Of course it's true!"

"I haven't seen you use this," said Braye, pointing out a bushy plant, rather like a mass of green squirrel's tails on tall spikes.

"No, perhaps it's just as well. That's foxwort. Best picked in the early morning, before the heat of the day."

"What's it good for?"

Tamana Sorn picked up a basket with a sigh. "Love potions," she said. "But never foxwort alone--it is the combination of ingredients in proportion that makes the potion work. And I'll not make such a blend again."

"Why not?"

She hesitated before answering, weighing his age against the necessity to teach him well. "A young man once loved a girl, but she did not care for him. He came to me for a potion that would make her fall in love with him, and foolishly I gave it to him. I thought it a healing thing, him with his heart aching, her cold and lonely and unfeeling--but I was wrong, so wrong."

She was silent for a time. It would be good for him to know how damaging a mistake could be. She hadn't meant to do harm, yet harm had been done. A breeze shook the tops of the trees but she did not feel it. A few dead leaves rattled down. Finally, Braye asked, "Didn't it work?"

She roused and smoothed her apron as if to comfort herself. "Aye, it worked. Too well. It unbalanced the poor soul, and

drove away her lover. I should have known she had a right to her own heart. I should not have meddled." Tamana set down her basket and combed roughly through the harvested leaves, discarding any that were brown or spotted. She looked up at him sharply. "There's some in this village who've asked me to put a curse on their neighbors. Did you know? I won't do that either. If I did that even once, how long do you think I'd last here? No one would trust me--and rightly so."

She straightened and took him by the shoulders. "What we do, Braye, you and I, is for healing. Easing pain and good luck charms, sleeping potions and setting crooked bones straight--that's what we're about. And if you want to do the other things, say so at once and find yourself another teacher."

"No, mistress," said Braye, wide-eyed.

"There, lad. I'm sorry to get so fierce. That's enough for today."

#

One unusually cool and breezy morning, Tamana had Braye ready the outdoor firepit. Braye's father, a blacksmith, had long ago fashioned a tripod from which she could hang a kettle. Braye fetched water from the cistern while Tamana got a small fire going. Once the ingredients were properly shredded,

moistened, and mashed, she set him to stirring the mixture.

"Keep stirring, or it will burn."

"What is this stuff?" asked Braye. His eyes stung and watered.

"Dremmish. Don't stand downwind of that pot, for goodness sake! You'll be crying all morning!"

Braye shifted his position and rubbed his eyes with his forearm. "What's it for?"

"Years ago," said Tamana, "I had a series of nightmares, and they were always the same. I was being chased by monsters. I'd wake up just as they were about to pounce, and my heart would be racing and I'd be afraid to go back to sleep. Night after night after night."

"I searched my herbals and found a recipe for dremmish: it didn't give proportions, so I had to experiment. The hardest thing to find were the ash-onions--you know, the ones that spring up in scorched earth? That's what's getting in your eyes. And getting enough bayberries for the waxy base. I already had distilled pine vinegar on hand. By then I was so tired, I could barely stir the kettle." She glanced at Braye's spoon-hand, suspended in mid-air, and he gulped and resumed stirring the mess, which had grown thick and shiny, like pale green pearls, and smelled incredibly foul.

"So, what happened when you tried it?"

"I didn't even wait for nightfall. I rubbed a little of the paste on my temples and went to bed. It had a faint pine scent, very soothing. That's when you know it's cooked through--when the scent changes. Anyway, I fell asleep immediately.

"In my dream, instead of running through a landscape, being chased by monsters, I was walking along a city street. No monsters at all. But at every turn, I saw an enormous tortoise. I would walk some more, turn a corner, and there would be the same tortoise. At the top of a flight of stairs, in doorways, at the base of a fountain. Finally, I asked it what it was doing there..."

"What did it say?"

Tamana shook her head. "What's important is that the dremmish slowed down the dream. No one chased me any more. I could stop being so frightened and figure out what it meant. Once I did that, the nightmares stopped."

Braye fairly danced with impatience. "But you've left out the best part! What did the tortoise say?"

"It told me I should learn how to ride, so I could outrun the monsters." Tamana shrugged. "To this day I have no idea what that means. There were no horses in my dreams. But the nightmares stopped."

She leaned over the kettle and sniffed. "There, the scent's turning. Can you smell the difference? The pine vinegar's taken hold. Give me that spoon, if you will, and go fetch the jars."

Inside the cottage, a basket holding a fresh set of small, wide-mouthed earthenware jars with carved wooden stoppers lay, clean and ready, on the workbench. As he grasped the basket, Braye noticed the bone flute that normally hung over the workbench on a thin black cord was missing. It had caught his eye long before because of the carvings, bulls-eyes and dot patterns and bands around the barrel of the flute. But Tamana Sorn had forbidden him to touch it, and never took it down herself. Had it fallen through a gap between the workbench and the patched wall? He peered into the shadows beneath the workbench. Sure enough, it lay on the floor. He crawled beneath and emerged, nose twitching with dust, flute in hand. It was small, really, not much bigger than a whistle. He wondered what kind of bone it was made of, and what kind of sound it made. He was about to try it out when Tamana called.

"What's keeping you, child? This can't wait."

He slipped the cord over his head and thrust the flute under his shirt, picked up the basket, and returned to Tamana and her dremmish. She started packing the jars with shiny green paste. While she was occupied, he tried to surreptitiously check out the flute. But Tamana didn't miss a trick.

"Where'd you get that?"

"I found it."

"Where?"

"On the floor. Is it really made of bone? I've never heard you play it."

"So it is. Give it here, lad, it's not a toy."

Just like Tamana, Braye thought, to keep him from having any fun. All he wanted to do was to hear what the thing sounded like. He could probably get a tune out of it, though he was not musical like his brothers. Reluctantly, he pulled the cord up over his head. Tamana held out her hand.

Before he handed it over, he quickly put the flute to his lips and blew--a short blast, just to show he could.

He'd expected a toot or a shrill whistle, not this mournful call: low, wild, and piercing all at once--much deeper than a flute this size should permit.

Tamana and Braye stared at each other as the note lingered and died. A command trembled on the air. She snatched the flute from him with a scowl.

As if in answer, a stand of pale, tasseled plants by the cottage door began to quiver. They made a hissing sound, if hissing could have seven distinct notes.

"Wonderful," said Tamana in a voice that suggested the opposite.

"What is it?"

"We're about to have company. The windrussels are warning us: hillfolk are near."

Hillfolk! Braye had heard many tales of Tanagal, the land beneath the hills, but he had never met any of its people. He wondered that Tamana seemed more annoyed than excited.

A small hawk dropped down out of the sky and landed before them: a kestrel, with a neat, round head, sharp-angled wings, and a short tail tipped with black. The windrussels' warning faded to silence. The kestrel screeched once, then shivered and rippled and turned into a full-sized man. The stranger's coloring was the same as the hawk's, right down to his clothes, which sported a subtle brown and gray feather pattern with black and white bands at his shoulders. His movements were quick, his eyes sharp. He bowed to Tamana.

"I am Tirilon: here, Tamana Sorn, in answer to your summons."

"You summoned him?" asked Braye.

"I must beg your pardon," said Tamana to the stranger. "It was an error."

Tirilon cocked his head. "I don't understand. You used the flute--"

"I used it," Braye said. Tamana put a warning hand on his shoulder.

"There is no need to trouble yourself. As you see, a child's mischief called you here, nothing more."

"Then you have no message for the Queen?"

Braye glanced at Tamana, wide-eyed. "You know a Queen?"

The hand on his shoulder squeezed sharply. Braye squirmed but understood he was to keep silent. He watched the adults with fascination.

"Tirilon, there's no need to disturb her--"

"But I have my instructions. 'If she summons you,' said the Queen, 'you are to give her whatever aid she requires, even if she asks for me to come to her.'"

"And now I know you are as good as your word. But it stops here, Tirilon, do you understand?"

"Oh, my word has nothing to do with it, Tamana Sorn. I am bound to the flute, and so to your service. It is the Queen's will."

"Is that some kind of punishment?" Braye asked in awe.

"Braye!"

Tirilon studied Braye for a long moment, as if he'd suddenly found him more interesting. Braye cheerfully studied him right back. This was the first Tangalian he'd ever met, and he intended to make the most of it.

At first glance, Tirilon seemed human enough. If he hadn't changed from hawk to man right before them, Braye might not have

given him a second look. But now he perceived a difference: Tirilon moved as if he were at more home in his skin than any Kenby villager.

Tamana's hand gripped his shoulder hard. "You must forgive him. He has not been apprenticed long, and has yet to learn manners."

"A punishment: why do you say that?" asked Tirilon, bending towards the boy with an intent gaze. "It is a privilege to serve Tamana Sorn."

At this, Braye's eyes grew very wide.

"Close your mouth, Braye, before someone falls in," said Tamana.

Tirilon straightened.

"Shall I take him with me?" he asked.

"What?"

"The boy. Shall I bring him to Queen Maire? You know how she loves children."

Go with one of the hillfolk? Go to Tanagal?

On the one hand, it meant adventure, magic, a chance to see the world. Perhaps Tirilon would teach him how to how to fly. It would be more fun than stirring smelly messes in Tamana Sorn's garden. He could just imagine his friends' expressions when he came back full of tales about the hidden realm. If he came back-for it must be admitted that in the stories not all who travel

with the hillfolk ever return. Braye went cold at the thought of his family waiting for him year after year with no word.

But he didn't want the stranger to think he was scared, so he lifted his chin and said, "That's funny. I thought the hillfolk didn't have children anymore."

"Exactly why you'd be so very welcome," said Tirilon.

Tamana's hand now felt protective, as if it kept him rooted to this spot. A calm settled over him: he knew very well that Tamana would not let him go.

"I think not," she said, with a fierceness in her quiet answer, thought Braye, and he was glad of it.

"You know as well as I do, Tamana Sorn, that not every boy could have sounded that note."

"And you know that the Queen has respected my privacy and left me alone. I don't think she'd be at all pleased to see you threaten me."

"Threaten you? How?"

"By taking my apprentice. His parents live down the road. How would I explain his disappearance? How could I obtain a replacement, having lost the first? Really, Tirilon, you have a strange idea of what it means to be bound to my service if it means you disrupt my settled life."

He made the faintest of bows. "I beg your pardon, Tamana Sorn. I was thinking of pleasing the Queen and forgetting my instructions."

"If I have need of you, I will call," said Tamana. "And I will ensure the flute is not misused again." Braye flushed.

Tirilon grinned and nodded. Addressing Braye, he said, "Pity. Another time, young one." Then he shifted into hawk shape with the same uncanny ripple, and burst into flight. His route was soon obscured by the trees.

Braye rubbed life back into his shoulder, sore where Tamana had gripped him, and followed her to see if any of the long-ignored dremmish could be salvaged.

"Tamana Sorn," he began as she grimly scraped the burnt ointment out of the kettle, "I didn't mean to make trouble. I'm really sorry."

She sighed and counted the filled and stoppered jars. "Only seven! Ah, well, we'll have another go at it next week, if I can find more ash-onions." She had soot on her face and burnt dremmish on her hands. It had been odd to see Tirilon bowing to his teacher with his "at your service" and his fancy manners. And she'd seemed to take it in stride. That was the strangest thing of all.

"I know you're sorry, Braye. I'd just hoped to keep from attracting their attention for a little while longer. And, Braye, when I say 'don't touch'--"

Braye assured her he wouldn't, ever again.

Tamana leaned closer and lowered her voice.

"Because that was no idle threat, you see. The hillfolk have taken children in the past. And I can't protect you if you mess with things you have no business touching. Promise me you won't. Promise me."

The iron in her voice scared him. Braye ducked his head and whispered, "Yes, Tamana Sorn. I promise."

"Good. Now finish cleaning this pot. Whatever you do, don't get this stuff in your eyes. You'll be blind for a month, and only able to see in your dreams."

And Braye was most careful as he scrubbed out the iron kettle for Tamana Sorn.

## Chapter 2: Three Hearts

Tamana did not see Tirilon again until one evening the next summer, when she was surprised by the sound of windrussles dancing and trembling in the still air.

She seized a light shawl and slipped a packet of herbs (she kept by the door for such occasions) into her pocket. The summer night was pleasantly cool, and would likely grow cooler. Braye had gone home hours before. The good people of Kenby had finished up their last chores and settled in for the night, so no one would notice her errand. Just as well. The villagers did not approve of the folk from under the hills.

But Tamana indulged her curiosity where hillfolk were concerned, although experience had taught her to treat them warily.

She found them at the bottom of the lane, slipping silently between the trees, not easy to spot even with a trained eye: three hillfolk on foot, walking comfortably through the darkness without lantern or torch. When traveling outside their realm they often passed for ordinary men and women. Yet they possessed something--a grace, a presence--unmistakably Tanagalian. There were other clues. In unguarded moments, their eyes took on the colors of leaves and sky and deep forest pools and the ocean at night.

"What news?" asked Tamana, stepping into their path.

They gathered round her with expressions of delight. Their fine, unstained clothes seemed more fit for court than country travel, contrasting sharply with her plain, workaday linens.

"Tamana Sorn! You are out late!"

Tamana shrugged. "But close to home. Why are you so far afield, Tirilon?" For it was the same fellow who'd answered the call of the bone flute in the spring.

"Ah," he said, "we've had a sad time of it." His eyes gleamed in the darkness: in truth, he seemed more eager than sad. He looked like a young man, though she knew he was centuries old.

"Sad is right," said one of his companions, shaking her head. Russet was her name. A little fox rested in her arms with sleepy eyes. "And all for nothing."

"I don't understand," said Tamana.

"Nothing came of it, after all," said Russet's cousin, called Lurianne, with a hint of satisfaction. "And we had such high hopes."

Tamana shook her head. "My dear folk, what are you talking about?"

Russet said, "Jarossy was supposed to have a child."

"A baby." Lurianne made the word sound delicious, ridiculous, and dangerous, all at the same time.

Tirilon said, "By a human mother, of course. In the usual way. Russet, you don't know how to explain things properly. You forget to mention the most basic facts."

"The usual way?" Tamana asked. This was anything but usual. Tales sometimes hinted at alliances with humans that produced children with odd gifts and curious ways. And tales spoke also of changeling children left behind in exchange for human infants taken under the hills. Tales, Tamana knew all too well, which were misleading.

"Everything looked promising," said Tirilon. "The omens were good."

"The baby was alive," said Russet. The fox yawned. Tamana reached out to scratch its neck. The fox leaned towards her with canine gratitude.

Lurianne broke in: "Not for long."

Tamana, confused, repeated, "I don't understand."

Russet hushed them all with an impatient gesture. The little fox squirmed in her arms. "We were there, you see, to welcome Jarossy's child into the world. I don't know how many years it's been since--well, even with a human mother--but it didn't come out alive."

"Strangled on its cord," said Lurianne as if she were describing something delicious.

"Oh, no!" cried Tamana.

"Oh, no, indeed. All that way, all of us, and for what? Jarossy was deeply disappointed."

"He seemed angry to me," said Tirilon.

"Well, that, too."

Tamana said, "And you couldn't help?"

"There are boundaries," said Russet. "Surely you know that. We could not interfere."

"Did you try?"

The hillfolk looked at her, obviously puzzled at the edge in her voice. "The boundaries are quite distinct," said Russet.

"We are powerless between conception and birth. I thought you knew that."

Tamana made an effort at calm. These were hillfolk, after all, without human concerns. They had a different view of life and death, of time and change, and they found the human familiarity with death baffling and rather distasteful. There was no point in blaming them.

"What of its mother?" she asked.

"Oh, a sickly-looking thing," said Lurianne. "I can't imagine what Jarossy ever saw in her. I'm sure that's over."

"Surely he stayed to comfort the mother of their child!"

They looked at her uncomprehendingly. "What comfort could there be? Besides, there was no child, just a poor little corpse," said Russet.

Lurianne said, "She should be comforting him. You humans have too many children as it is. Jarossy may not sire another child for a century or more."

"That's not how my people see it," said Tamana. "But where was this? I don't know of anyone due to give birth right about now, unless their time came way too early. Is she nearby?"

"Too far for you to manage," said Lurianne. "It would take you a week at least. Your folk travel so slowly."

"But, Tamana Sorn," began Tirilon, taking her arm, "why don't you do some traveling of your own? Come back with us to

Tanagal! You know you're not free of it. Once you've lived in the hidden realm, you will always hear its call."

"Yes, do come with us!" said Russet. "I could show you plants in the inner valleys that you've never seen, with properties you've never imagined. Berries that give speech to the birds that eat them, so there's a winged riot of conversation until the branches are stripped clean for the year. Roots that can bind a man to another's service, come what may, until death. There's a pale blue flower I know: put the blossom in your mouth and you can stay under water without having to breathe."

Tamana took the bait. "What's it called?"

Russet laughed. "I don't make a study of such things. Perhaps it hasn't got one. You could be the first to name it: you're the herbalist! Come and see for yourself."

Tamana sighed, stopped and pulled her arm free. They were at least a mile away from the village. If she didn't take care, she'd be in Tanagal by sunrise. But she had no intention of passing under the hills. She would not be snared so easily. "I cannot accept your kind offer," she said carefully. "I am needed here."

"I don't believe those peasants know who they've got living among them," said Tirilon. "How long are you going to nurse their little illnesses, and watch them die, one by one? I've

never understood your fascination with these people. How long are you going to remain in exile?"

"The Queen will be disappointed if you do not come," said Lurianne in the darkness. It sounded like a threat.

Tamana stiffened. "Did she send you? Is that what this is about?"

"Of course not. You came to us, remember?"

It was true, she'd heard the windrussels and sought them out, but the hillfolk set many traps and this might be one of them. She needed to stop dreaming of flowering meadows and fragrant hedges in the land beneath the hills: they were using that longing against her. Tamana shook her head slowly and sent her awareness down through the soles of her feet into the earth beneath, the springy, rich, forest soil, black as the night around them. She sensed the living forest surrounding her, sap coursing from root to twig, leaves unfurling, home to a host of creatures. She drew strength from her connection to all these things, and repeated, "I will not go with you!"

They laughed, and entreated her to change her mind. What had she to leave but a tiny cottage and ignorant neighbors? Tanagal, its Queen, the summer lands were waiting.

Lurianne stood close behind her and said in her ear, "Living in the outer world, you have suffered many hurts--they can all be healed in the clear, clean streams of Tanagal. Only

you know what pains they will wash away. You know what I say to be true."

Tamana closed her eyes. Lurianne did not lie. If she followed them now, if Tamana passed through the gate and entered the hidden realm, she might leave much of her scarred and battered self behind. She could begin again, be what she might have been, but for the pains of scratching out a life out in the world.

Unlike many of her kin, she had never known famine; but she had known fear, had seen the intimate cruelties of men and women alike, and had crossed a battlefield where, two weeks later, the victors had still not yet bothered to bury the defeated.

She had lost too much already. Subtract the experiences of a lifetime, good or bad, and what frail shadow of a self would be left? She would not willingly have chosen pain, but she could not be other than what she was. She would honor the choices she'd made long ago. She thrust her hands into her pockets in a gesture of self-comfort, and her right hand closed upon the herb packet she'd prepared. She brought it to her nose and inhaled. Parsley, catmint, mugwort, and hallicorn, blended to clear a mind fogged by hillfolk snares and the longings of her traitorous heart.

"Stinking weeds!" exclaimed Lurianne, stepping back and covering her nose and mouth.

For the third time, Tamana said, "I will not go with you." Three refusals--enough to loosen any hold they put on her. The last one had not been easy.

Tirilon rested his hands on her shoulders with an exaggerated gentleness, and kissed her softly on the lips. He tasted of thyme. "You'll regret this," he said.

But Russet looked at her with mocking eyes, and said, "Remember this, Tamana Sorn: A woman has three hearts: one for her lover, one for her children, and the one she eats in secret."

And they were gone, as suddenly as a candle blown out.

The air seemed thick with cold, the darkness dull, without their presence. Clutching her shawl, Tamana turned her steps toward home.

#

Tamana no more understood Russet's words than she understood drought or desire or a mockingbird's song. It was an old Farlant saying, imprecise, suggestive.

A woman has three hearts: one for her lover, one for her children...

She puzzled over these things as she blundered back through the darkness to her cottage at the edge of the village. In the

dark she was unsure of her footing, and frequently tripped over roots or lurched into bushes. If she'd given it a moment's forethought, she could have brought some dried mothbloom petals to help her see in the dark. But no, the moment she'd heard the windrussels, like a fool she'd grabbed her shawl and gone running after the hillfolk. At least she'd remembered the herb packet. She stubbed her toe again and swore.

Three hearts: her own undivided heart challenged the old saying. As she currently kept no lover, and had never borne a child, she supposed all she had left were her secrets. Whether it was her own heart she was supposed to consume, or that of another, remained unclear. Old sayings were notoriously unhelpful.

But what secrets did she guard? There was her training-- recipes and spells gathered over twenty-five years. She had always been drawn to gardens, no matter what her condition in life. Something about earth, and things growing and receding through the changing seasons, spoke to her as nothing else did.

There was her past, of which she never spoke, not even to the friends among her neighbors in Kenby. Tamana had simply turned up one day and started the work of a healer and herbalist in exchange for help rebuilding a tumbledown cottage at the edge of the village. Kenby had needed her, and did not begrudge payment for herb teas that soothed fevers and dulled pain, for

charms that kept plows sharp despite thin, rocky soil, or for spells that made thatched roofs snug and waterproof through the winter.

Sometimes she felt and acted older than her thirty-five years. Young enough to have a child of her own, but lonely enough these past few years to ensure that it wouldn't happen. Her lovers had gone long ago, for she did not give her heart easily, and it only got harder as she grew older.

And there were the secrets she kept for other people, the dead and the living: the whispered confession of a man afraid he was about to die, the irregular parentage of a few children, mistakes made and choices remembered with regret--her own and others'. Tamana Sorn was good at secrets.

But was the old saying about secrets, or about secret longings?

Tirilon's silence about Braye had not escaped her. She was grateful for his discretion, though she wondered how far it extended. Surely he had reported back to the Queen about Tamana's precocious apprentice. And the result of that was anyone's guess. Well, all she could do was keep her head low and an eye out for trouble.

As she approached the village, she avoided the one dusty street with its mixture of houses and workshops, and took the footpath running along the back gardens instead, which

overlooked the Connat River valley, east towards the moor country. Either way was just as dark.

The people of Kenby and the other villages of the west seldom spoke of it, but they were the uneasy neighbors of the folk who lived under the hills, who were seldom named directly. One did not needlessly seek the attention of those who lived in Tanagal.

Once hillfolk and humans had moved freely between the two realms. Now the hillfolk were, at best, discounted; and at worst, dreaded.

For the most part, the hillfolk kept to themselves, and the villagers, with willful blindness, paid them no mind, except during the Sattenella--when, on the longest night of the year, the gates of Tanagal were open and no person counted himself safe abroad that night. Then all the people of the Farlant Isles, from the great port-city of Doriven, to town and village and lonely farm alike, barred their doors and built their fires high. No one went to bed on Sattenella night. They told stories until dawn: stories of quests and enchantments, ghosts and transformations, love stories and revenge tales, stories of peasants and princesses, of prophecies fulfilled and curses come home. That was when they told tales of Tanagal, stories so old that no one knew where they came from. A Queen ruled the country

under the hills, so their legends told, who was neither young nor old, but beautiful, changeless, and without pity.

But after the Sattenella, in the broad light of day, no one put much faith in the old stories. After all, no one in Kenby had ever seen Queen Maire--except, that is, for Tamana Sorn.

### Chapter 3: Puzzle-bread

"The time has come," said Tamana Sorn, "to speed up your training."

Braye looked up from his pages eagerly. "Good. I hate writing," he said.

"That's why I have you do so much of it," she replied, smiling.

Late fall had come, and the world, once green, had been bleached soft brown and grey. The evergreens seemed almost black against the wreckage of autumn, and tender plants blasted by frosts lay in ruins in the village gardens--in all the gardens, of course, except for Tamana Sorn's.

No longer as lush as they had been in spring and summer, the raised beds still held leaves of grey-green, blue-green, and the shiny deep greens of holly and evercrown. The summer kitchen stood empty, abandoned for the season. Tamana and Braye were often inside, blending herb and spice mixtures, or copying old recipes from a tattered book while a porridge simmered on the fire. This copying was Braye's task, for he needed practice with his letters and Tamana demanded perfection. An error in measurement in a sleeping potion, she told him, could cause coma or death. Misprinting "temin" for "timin" would replace a cure for hangover with a week of madness. Braye spoiled many sheets along the way.

He had come to like their quiet work together. Braye had discovered a taste for calm seldom satisfied at home among his six brothers and sisters. In fine weather he could get away outdoors, absorbing the sounds of field and forest and following the course of his own thoughts. But now that colder weather had settled in, he found Tamana's cottage a peaceful refuge.

"I have here bark of the puzzle tree," she said, "which has peculiar properties." She pulled a small handful of shredded red-brown bark from a clay jar and dropped it into a mortar, pushing it across the worktable to him.

"From that old tree in the back corner?" asked Braye.

"That's the one. It was the reason I settled in Kenby. They're extremely rare."

While he pummeled the bark, releasing an earthy scent, Tamana took a bit of old dough saved in a blue crock from her last batch of bread. She added flour, salt, water, and honey, kneading it with a steady push-and-tug that echoed the thousand loaves made by her hands over the years. The clotted mass gradually turned smooth and elastic, taking on a soft sheen.

"You know, this is true magic," she said.

"Making bread?"

"Certainly." She cut a small piece of dough and dropped it into the blue crock to save for the next loaf. "Flour and water, salt and honey, time and heat: and you get bread. It's as powerful as anything else we can do." Braye, looking doubtful, handed her the mortar, and Tamana dumped the ground puzzle bark onto the dough, working it in.

"You try," she said. "Push away with the heel of your hand. That's right. Then pull it over and give it a quarter turn."

He felt clumsy at first, but soon got into the rhythm of it. Push-pull-turn. "I'm doing it!"

"All right, now pat it into a ball." She set the dough in a deep bowl to rise, covering it with a towel and placing it carefully near but not too near the fireplace. "As I said, we need to take things a step further." Tamana carefully wiped out

the mortar. "Remember I told you once you could see through things?"

"I remember." It seemed an eternity ago, green spring in Tamana Sorn's garden and a lost ball.

"That's a rare gift. But it must be trained carefully. The bark of the puzzle tree can sharpen your gift--" she cupped her ear "--as doing this can sharpen your hearing."

"I'd see better?"

"In a way. 'See' is a funny word. We use it to mean both vision and understanding. It's different for each person. We'll have to see how it works on you."

When the dough had risen, been punched down, shaped, and had risen again, Tamana baked it in a flat-lidded pot that stood on its own three little feet among the ashes of her fire. She shoveled embers right on top of the lid, so heat came from both above and below. An hour or so later, when the cottage filled with the wonderful aroma of fresh-baked bread, she dusted off the lid and opened the pot. A crusty round of bread emerged, and she set it on the table to cool. It made Braye almost dizzy with hunger, to see it there, inviolate, dark and spicy with puzzle bark.

"There you go. As lovely a loaf you could ask for, and nicely browned."

"It smells good! Can I have a piece now?" he said, reaching for the bread.

"Only if you want to burn yourself." Braye snatched his hand away. "It needs to cool, then you can have a slice. One, mind you: any more might be dangerous."

And later, when he had a thick wedge still warm and fresh, he asked with his mouth full, "What'll it do? Will it make me different?"

"You tell me if you think anything's different. Come back tomorrow afternoon."

#

The bread had no immediate effect on Braye Smitson. "What did you expect, visions?" asked Tamana.

"Well, something," replied Braye. He'd secretly hoped he could change into a hawk like Tirilon, and fly away over the hills.

Tamana smiled as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. "Give it time," she said.

Tamana continued to feed him the puzzle-bread whenever he turned up, and he relished its spicy taste, whether baked in big rounds, sliced and spread with butter, or shaped into oval rolls

that slipped easily into his pockets. He stopped by her cottage almost every day now.

When he was not with Tamana, Braye did chores at home and saw his friends whenever he could. But things began to unsettle him. Like the time his father said to hand him a crucible in the forge. It looked fine but felt wrong, he told his Da: sure enough, when the metal was heated a hairline crack opened up and spoiled the work. Or the bright, cloudless morning when he told his Ma not to wash the linens, for it would be pouring rain by midafternoon. She told him a warm day like this was rare enough in early December and not to be wasted--she mightn't have another washday 'til spring. Not an hour after his sisters spread the bedclothes over sweet-smelling hedges to dry, the skies opened up.

He didn't like how his parents looked at him after that: curious and considering. And watchful.

That winter, Braye developed the habit of solitary rambles through the valley along the Connat river, then up the hillsides where the sheep farmers kept their herds in summer, and into the forest to the west of Kenby. He never got lost. Braye found he had become very much aware of living things around him even during the cold, barren months. He knew where the frogs slept under the mud, and where bears were hibernating; he sensed how

the trees slept, waiting for spring, and when their sap began to run.

One day when he explored a shady ravine, he saw a large, white bird, long-necked, with black rings around its eyes and grey-tipped feathers. It sat on a fallen tree and looked right at him as if considering whether or not to speak. Braye halted, barely daring to breathe.

The bird clattered its long, tapered beak, bobbed its head up and down, then began to sing.

They sweep the floors here every day  
No friendly speck of earth may stay  
No tree or flower or leaf I see  
Just hard gray stone and cold gray sea

Its voice was thin and cold and sorrowful. Braye swallowed hard. Whether the bird sang human words or some property of the puzzle bread allowed him to understand bird language, he never knew. But he caught hold of himself and tried to pay more attention to the words.

My window looks not to the land  
To some my prison must seem grand  
This tower's death to one like me

Kept hidden in captivity

Where oh where is the land I love?

Where the ones that I dream of?

No tree or flower or leaf I see

Just hard gray stone and cold gray sea

The white bird pulled a loose feather from its wing and let it fall to the soft black earth. Braye wondered if he should speak, and if so, what he should say. But he was spared when the bird began to sing again:

My baby's time is drawing near

I won't survive her birth I fear

For little comfort will there be

In rough attendants given me

Oh come you close, birds of the air

And tell my story if you dare:

They'll throw my stillborn child and me

From cold gray stone into cold gray sea

His eyes filled with tears: was the song a recounting of the white bird's own history, or someone else's? It was the

saddest thing he had ever heard. He sniffed--. The bird fixed him with a suspicious eye, then leapt from its perch with a great flash of white wings, and flew up the ravine, legs trailing, until Braye could see it no more.

He scrambled to the fallen log and found a white feather, grey-tipped, on the ground. The quill gleamed gold even in the dim light of the ravine. Braye walked home that night wrapped in dream.

He described the bird to Tamana the next morning, but he couldn't remember more than a scattering of words from its song. When he showed the golden quill to Tamana, she put it aside for safekeeping. "Tannagen," she said. "No doubt about it."

"I've never heard of tannagen."

"They're very shy. They seldom venture this side of the hills. If you've seen a tannagen, you can be sure that it's because it wanted you to see it." She smiled as she set out ink and sand, paper, ordinary quills, and a little sharpening knife for the day's copying. "It's an omen of change. You're beginning to see more clearly."

But I don't want things to change! he wanted to cry. He'd never told Tamana about the crucible or the washing. Or the time he knew that his father lied to his mother about getting home late. No one had doubted him, but Braye could hear the lie in his voice, like seeing a cloud suddenly block the sun. He didn't

know what to do. He didn't want to become different from his family, from his friends.

He felt Tamana's eyes on him. "What?" he asked crossly.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." He bent over the book and studied the page without reading a word. Already they treated him as if he had become someone else. His parents were cautious around him; his older brothers ignored him; his sisters rarely teased him any more. He hid things better from his friends, but knew eventually they would find him out.

"Are you sure? You seem--"

"I'm fine!" he said angrily.

"All right, then," she said. "Let's look at this page on lavender. The flowering stems, when dried, hold their sweet scent long past the day of harvest...."

Yet he did not refuse a slice of warm puzzle-bread that day.