



Fantasy

BROWNBIRD'S LUCK

Book I of the Land Behind the Veil



Kriss Erickson

Sleep softly now, my little ones,
Sleep softly through the night.
And dream about the unicorns
Of silver and gold and white.

The Golden Haired Brothers know the way
The elves have gone; where the brownbird
flies,

Follow *Lifeforce* to the lands Without
Then will unicorns truly will be wise.

Sleep softly now, my little ones.
Sleep softly through the night.
And dream about the unicorns
Of silver and gold and white.

— Lullaby sung by elf refugees

Brownbird's Luck

Book I of The Land Behind the Veil

by Kriss Erickson



[AKW Books](#)
[Washington](#)

This is a work of fiction.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

Brownbird's Luck

Copyright © 2009 by Kriss Erickson. All rights reserved.

Cover Design by AKW Books

Cover Art by Janet Farthing. Used under creative commons license.

An AKW Ebook

Published by Kalar/Wade Media

PO Box 1975

Elma, WA 98541

www.akwbooks.com

Produced in the United States of America

The name "AKW Books" and the AKW logo are trademarks belonging to Kalar/Wade Media, LLC

To my son, Jason, whose love of animals and belief in miracles encouraged me to write this book.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	6
CHAPTER 1: BROWNBIRD'S LUCK.....	7
CHAPTER 2: DARK TO LIGHT, LIGHT TO DARK.....	27

Chapter 1: Brownbird's Luck

Deila Weaver balanced on one foot then the other swinging a wooden bucket between her legs, while Gran stirred a large iron pot of oats on the cast-iron stove.

"Hurry, Gran! Molly's waiting!"

"Hurry yerself!" Gran chided.

She half-turned, letting a rivulet of gooey oats run down the wooden spoon's handle.

"You're dripping on the floor, Gran" Deila said.

Her voice soared high as a brownbird in her impatience. Impatience that would bring a scolding, which would bring more impatience. She curled her small pink lips into a smile and pecked Gran's cheek. Gran smiled over her lopsided shoulders at her granddaughter as she wrung the spoon clean on her stained linen apron, her blue eyes too cloudy to see more than a vague outline of her granddaughter.

Deila grabbed a linen rag off a cane-backed chair and scrubbed the floor clean. Taking time to clean every spill made her grit her teeth, but if Da found the kitchen dirty, his hand would connect with her head.

"I've got to get this mash to the barn or I'll be late for my lessons," she said as she scooped the steaming mash into the bucket.

"Molly will be hungry after delivering that fine strong colt last night."

Gran's wrinkled face puckered like burlap as she pursed her lips, waiting.

Deila giggled and turned her cheek to accept Gran's kiss. Outside, she cupped her hand over her brow and looked toward the rising sun that gilded the flax and gave the gray barn an orange cast.

The unpainted, natural wood barn, knot-holed and aged, looked identical to other barns on the flatlands. The harvests had been poor for many seasons, so no one had the money to paint or rebuild aging barns.

Deila hurried along the short stone path behind the farmhouse and cut across a corner of the kitchen garden. A glint of red and yellow peeking from beneath the cabbages distracted her. She bent to pick the primroses, leaving plenty of stems. Her long fingers quickly wove the flowers into a necklace.

"A necklace of red and yellow primroses strengthens the blood, so the old stories say."

She dangled the necklace in front of her, examining her work.

"This will fit over the colt's neck, to give it strength and health."

She put the necklace over her head temporarily, picked up the bucket, and walked toward the barn. The morning was a bit cool for May, but the air was clear. A harsh sound

disturbed the morning stillness. Deila smiled as she recognize it.

Twitch-twitter-twitch!

Then silence except for the scuff of her feet on the dusty ground for a few breaths. Then, *Twitch-twitter-twitch!*

Deila pushed back her lank, wheat brown hair so she could see more clearly. A flax stalk swayed then sprang upright. A brown shape streaked into the sky.

"A brownbird!" Deila cried, hugging herself with excitement. "The primroses finally opened and the brownbird's back, hunting crickets in the field. This'll bring luck to Molly's colt for sure!"

As Deila watched the thrushlike bird with the sienna colored back and the umber spotted creamy belly pirouetting in the lightening sky, she thought "brownbird" too plain a name for the slender bird that the flatlanders called lucky.

The brownbird's label as lucky started ten summers earlier when there had been no rain for months and the fields were so dry the soil puffed around the farmers' feet like the facial powder Belden city ladies used.

One day Deila's Da, Skalle, had come in from the fields, his sandy hair and worn blue overalls white with dust.

"Saw a bird today," he'd grunted as he spooned stew into his mouth.

Deila smiled as she remembered Da's face, pale as flour, more alive than it had been in years.

"It wasn't much of a bird — just a drab brown thing. Didn't sing, like the larks. Sounded like a broom sweeping the kitchen floor. But when it flew across the big mountain, I swear it took a bit of snow from the top and turned it into a cloud."

Deila chuckled as she remembered Da, telling a tale of luck, when he'd said luck was plain foolishness.

"Where's the cloud?" she'd teased.

Da had grabbed her hand and led her out the back door. Gran was already outside, wrinkles smoothing as she tilted her head into the moist breeze. Deila gasped when she saw the whole sky was gray. Soon rain fell, soothing the dry land. The flax and the kitchen garden were saved.

Ever since, rain had fallen when the brownbird appeared. The flatland farmers soon decided that the brownbird's luck extended beyond the weather. When it chirped outside a sickroom the patient recovered. They left offerings of fruit or flax seeds to supplement the drab brown bird's diet of crickets. Soon it became impossible to tell if the brownbird came to bring rain or to dine on delicacies.

Only one brownbird was ever seen. Never two or a flock. Just one.

Deila waved at it as she stood at the barn door, wondering if there really was just one brownbird?

"Gran says you're a friendly bird," she called. "Here's a bit of mash for you."

The brownbird landed on a flax stalk and tilted its head, then took off, dipping a wing as if to return her wave. Its dark body silhouetted against the great white bulk of Mount Spire. The slender projection jutting from the mountain's top looked like a finger, pointing to the flatlands. The slab of rock was so long that if it fell, it would crush the fields below it.

Deila thought that Mount Ire's slopes should be brown after so many years of little rain. But no matter how dry the fields became, the Mount remained covered with snow, glaring white against the brown fields. Farmers threw their straw hats to the ground in disgust as they watched rain clouds form again and again over the Mount. They'd long since ceased hoping that the Mount would draw moisture to their farms. Instead, the Mount taunted them, calling rain to itself without letting any fall on the thirsty flatlands.

Molly neighed as Deila entered the barn. Oswald, the orange and white barn cat, wove in and out of her legs, hoping for a tidbit, as she passed the stall where Tansy, the red and white Guernsey cow waited to be milked. As she bent to pet the cat, Molly neighed again. A

note of alarm in her neigh sent Deila running down the narrow barn aisle, the bucket of mash bumping against the wall.

"What's wrong, Molly?" she cried. "Are you hungry?"

She hung the bucket on a bent nail and clucked her tongue. Molly looked up, shook her head and neighed again, pawing the clean straw on the floor of her stall.

"Are you trying to get your foal up?" Deila asked.

Wait. The foal had been feeding when she'd left late last night to bury the afterbirth. Could it be sleeping in the straw? She opened the stall gate and stepped inside.

"Where's your foal, girl?" The back of the stall had a door that opened into the corral but that was locked to keep out drafts. Deila went on hands and knees, digging at the straw, careful to avoid Molly's big hooves. No colt.

"That's impossible!" she cried.

Her finger touched a sticky substance. She looked down. Saw a drop of red on the straw. She looked toward the locked stall door. Saw another, and another. She dipped a finger into the first droplet and held the rusty-colored smear beneath her nose.

Salty. Like blood. The drops led toward the corral. She clipped a rope to Molly's halter to keep the mare inside. Who knows what she'd

find outside? Taking a deep breath, she unbarred the door.

The corral looked empty. Freshly raked, just as she'd left it the night before.

Wait. What was that gray lump in the corner beside the fence? For a moment she thought it was an old tapestry that Gran had woven, that Da used as a horse blanket. But the angles were too stiff for flax fibers woven in to linen. She walked closer, focusing on a point jutting out from the lumpy object.

The point was an ear. A colt's ear.

Her stomach roiled and she closed her eyes, leaning against the side of the barn. It couldn't be.

But it had to be something.

She forced her eyes open. Forced her swirling emotions to still. Forced herself to think.

Molly's colt had been gray, like this lumpy object. The colt was missing from the stall. She shivered, wrapping her arms around her ribs to still her quivering body.

She wanted to run—away from the barn and the horror of her discovery. She wanted to close her eyes, become a little tot again, and run to Gran. Maybe that wasn't such a childish idea. Surely her confidant and comforter would confirm her grisly discovery. But no. She was a teenager now, nearly fourteen. Old enough to handle this.

She hugged herself again, calming her inner trembling as best she could. Gran was blind.

She couldn't see the body. If someone — or something — had harmed Molly's colt and bolted the door behind them, Gran wouldn't be able to help.

Deila took a deep breath and approached the still form, letting it out in a whoosh of nausea as she saw that it really was Molly's colt.

The colt was so still. She didn't need to touch him to see that he was dead.

His head was tucked beneath his ribcage and his legs were askew as if someone—or something—had flattened him. She gagged then covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the smell that came from the remains.

The strong rotten smell didn't make sense, either. The colt had been alive last night. He couldn't have been dead more than a few hours. Yet the carcass reeked like it had lain in the fields for a week. One more piece didn't fit. Where were the flies? The stench was strong enough to have attracted dozens of flies.

Deila had seen death before; a premature lamb, a chicken worried by a raccoon. But nothing like this.

She reached a hand toward the carcass, doubly glad she'd tied Molly in her stall before she'd gone outside. The gray coat was so thickly matted with blood that the hindquarters and chest looked black. The ground around the body was dotted with bits of

black—something. Had the colt's blood somehow hardened and turned pebbly when it hit the ground?

She tapped one of the colt's legs with the toe of her boot and jumped back as the body flopped like an old rug, skidding several inches along the pebbly ground. The body was far too light. Wild fear again tempted her to run to Gran in a blind panic. She swallowed it and knelt, running her fingers over the colt's body as gently as if she was giving him his first brushing. This wasn't the stiffness of rigor mortis. It was as if. . .

Deila stood and nudged the colt's body again, harder. The hide jumped, the head flopping from beneath the ribcage. She squealed, jumping back.

It wasn't a colt's body at all. It was an empty hide with holes where the eyes had been. And those black specks piled around the body — they were the flies. Hundreds of dead flies.

She was running, leaping the fence, charging up the stone walk, fear urging her on. Nearly blind from the tears that cleansed her eyes of the grisly scene. Was this what Gran's milky eyes saw?

Coughing to clear her lungs of the rotten smell, hating herself for running, she neared the bright blue cottage. She always ran when something scared her. Gran said her energy was unsettled and maybe she was right. Cour-

age seemed unreachable when she most needed to be brave. Fear was a powerful beast, too large to defeat, too strong to deny.

Something dark moved in front of her. It was tall and slender and she hit it head on, knocking herself flat.

"Whoa, girl! No need to rush! The lessons can wait a minute or two."

Strong, long-fingered hands lifted her to her feet and a calm voice helped her eyes to focus.

"Oh, Mr. Hiles! It was awful! The colt — "

As Deila's tutor, Mr. Hiles was the smartest man she knew. Seeing how upset she was, he squatted beside her, his oddly pointed ears catching her rushing words.

"What's this about a colt?"

Then he remembered.

"Oh!" he chortled. "Molly's had her colt. Was it the fine gray foal old Dark Weaver predicted?"

Deila snuffled, then nodded.

"Gran's always right about those things. But now it's not fine. It's — "

"Whoa, now! Take it easy. Maybe you'd best show me."

Deila drug Mr. Hiles through the field pulled him into the corral behind the barn. She pointed to the gray bundle and stood back as he examined it.

"What a terrible thing," he said, shaking his head in sorrow.

He slid his slender hands beneath the body and gently lifted the foal, bobbing it up and down to feel how light it was. Deila shuddered again when the foal's flopping head made a whuffing, hollow sound.

"Something's taken everything but the skin!" Mr. Hiles said.

He sighed and lowered the body to the ground, then studied the dirt in the corral.

"Come here, Deila."

"I don't want to see it again."

She blocked the grisly sight with her hand, hoping her revulsion would excuse her from obeying his request.

"But you do want to understand what happened, as I've taught you, don't you?"

Deila nodded, wishing Mr. Hiles was wrong. But she did want to understand, grisly as this discovery was.

Her tutor always seemed to show up at the right time. When Da had balked at sending her to the Flatlander school because Rivermaster Madruff had provided the money for it, Mr. Hiles had happened along; a traveling tutor crossing the fields below Mount Spire.

Deila hadn't blamed Da for keeping her from the Flatlander school. The Rivermaster had dammed the river mouth that supplied water to the creeks that flowed through Skalle's land when Skalle refused to sell him the bit where the river's headlands flowed,

cutting the Weaver farm off from the natural water supply.

She'd been a little surprised that Da had agreed to pay for her schooling, tight as he was with money. But she was glad to learn from Mr. Hiles. He'd taught her to think things through, not just memorize words and figures. Despite her horror at discovering the remains of Molly's foal, which her tutor's presence had eased a little, she was curious.

She lowered her hands and focused on where he pointed. There were tracks in the dirt. Cloven hoof prints. Bigger than a sheep's, smaller and more pointed than a cow's.

"These tell the story," Mr. Hiles said.

Deila squatted to study them.

"Whatever it was, it dragged the foal out of the barn, somehow. Though that part still doesn't make sense to me—the barn door was locked. It stopped there."

She pointed to the middle of the corral.

"The foal wasn't dead. It struggled — " she pointed to a tangle of tiny hoof prints mixed with the bigger split hoof prints. "Then the bigger animal planted its feet right there and ..." Deila stopped, half-turned toward the barn, one hand pointing left.

"And?" Mr. Hiles prompted.

"This sounds odd, but the way the split-hooves are planted so deep over there, it's as if the beast shook the foal like a cat shakes a mouse and broke its neck. Then I guess it ate

the insides, somehow." She shuddered and stepped back.

"Very good!"

Mr. Hiles clapped once and put an arm around Deila's shoulders. Then his face grew somber.

"I've seen this before. On the Jones's farm, two sheep were found no more than fleece and bone last Saturday morning."

"But only wild cats and bush wolves eat foals and sheep. This foal was locked in Molly's stall. How did the creature get it out, past Molly? How did it lock the stall again?"

"There are tales being told after dinner has settled and the hearth fire burns low, about a creature dark as ink that trots the fields at night."

"Trots?" Deila gulped as fear began squeezing the air from her lungs again. The mystery of a hoofed killer was more frightening than a pack of bush wolves or even a rogue dog. Mr. Hiles' steady voice kept her from running.

"Yes. Many have heard hoof beats, long after the farm animals are in their barns, but no one has seen the creature that is said to steal not only the life from its prey, but take their life essence — the Lifeforce — as well."

"What is it?" Deila murmured, almost to afraid to ask.

Mr. Hiles patted her shoulder to steady her before continuing.

"Some say it's a giant goat, others say it's a black horse. Whatever it is must be part ghost, for it got Nellie Gardner's best heifer a month ago, and everybody knew Nellie was fond enough of that little cow to lock it in the barn each night."

"So it's gotten into locked barns before," Deila mused. "But horses don't have split-hooves, so how could it be a horse?"

"I'm not sure," Mr. Hiles said.

Deila shook her head. There weren't many things her tutor was unsure of. He'd always had a canny sense of intuition that made the knowledge he'd learned at Belden University and from traveling the world somehow more complete. She smiled a little as she caught her teacher's brown eyes with her hazel blue ones. She was used to stooping to talk to Gran, and looking down a bit so she'd not disrespect Da. She could look Mr. Hiles straight in the eye, even when puzzling through a creepy situation.

"I don't believe this creature is a horse, or a goat. I believe — "

"Here! What's this nonsense?"

Skalle's rough voice interrupted Mr. Hiles at the most interesting point, as usual.

"Look, Da! Look what happened to Molly's foal!" Deila pointed as Skalle bent over the gray carcass.

He straightened, grunted, and scratched himself just under his right buttock as he did

when he was thinking. He turned suddenly, a knobby finger pointing at Mr. Hiles.

"Ye'd better not be fillin' my daughter's head with nonsense, or I'll let ye go!"

"Da! He was just telling me what happened to the colt."

"Near as I can figure, ye forgot to lock the door, and a bush wolf got it while ye were buryin' the afterbirth."

"Am I to understand you made a thirteen-year old girl perform such a gruesome task?"

"Ye'll not use that hoity-toity tone with me!" Skalle snapped.

"Da, I did lock the door. I had to unlock it to find the foal."

"I'll not hear another lyin' word out of yer mouth, girl! Yer carelessness lost us the last foal Molly's likely to have. We've no more money to breed her again."

"She was too old, anyway," Deila grumbled.

"What's that?" Skalle snapped. "I'll not have your sass!"

Skalle lifted a hand and Deila flinched to avoid the blow, but Mr. Hiles stepped between them.

"Deila is a good girl. She's my best student. If she says she locked the door, I believe her."

Skalle lowered his hand and scratched his buttock, thinking. Slowly a smile crept over his stubbled face.

"We'll breed Molly one last time. I'll use the coin I was gonna pay ye at the end of the sea-

son as the breedin' fee, Hiles. Deila knows all the readin' and figurin' she needs to run a farm, anyhow."

Mr. Hiles looked at him for a second, then nodded.

"If that's what you wish."

"No!" Deila cried. "Don't go. There's still so much I need to learn."

Deila clung to her tutor's hand and focused all of her emotional energy into her eyes, sending it to him as if it was Lifeforce, begging him not to go.

Mr. Hiles placed a hand on each of her shoulders.

"You will learn, Deila. Your teachers are all around you."

He swept a hand toward the fields.

"You've taught that there's a lesson in everything I see," Deila said, stepping back and lowering her head to hide the tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. "But I liked learning about huge orange jungle cats with black stipes and exotic flowers—orchids — that make vanilla."

Mr. Hiles fingered the primrose necklace that still hung from Deila's neck, admiring the simple flowers' bright colors.

"You don't need any more exotic knowledge, Delia. Look at this necklace. It isn't the flowers alone that give this necklace power. It's the essence of yourself that you added that is the true magic. Do you know that, Deila?"

She looked at the necklace through tear-blurred eyes and tried to understand. All she saw were crushed petals.

"Ye best be off, Hiles!" Skalle snapped. "Ye know how I feel 'bout talkin' magic to me girl!"

Mr. Hiles straightened and nodded to Skalle. He smiled at Deila.

"Ask Dark Weaver what killed the foal."

A flash of brown caught his attention — the brownbird flitting playfully in fields.

"And close the shutters tight before you go to bed tonight. There's a storm coming."

Deila wanted to say goodbye but her throat clotted with tears, so she waved as he left. Then she whirled, anger overtaking sorrow.

"He was my only friend, besides Gran."

Skalle grunted, prodding the dead foal with a cracked leather boot.

"I'd best bury this mess. Prairie wolves come back to their kills. Don't think this'll get ye outa doin' chores. Go milk Tansy and fetch water. An' gather the eggs."

Deila shook the mangled primrose necklace as she shuffled into the barn.

"You were supposed to bring luck! But if what Mr. Hiles said is right—and it was really my essence that made you magic—was I supposed to bring the luck?"

Twitter-twitch-twitter! The sound came from the barn rafters.

"And you're supposed to bring luck when you land in a field. Is that your special magic? Hmph! They should call you the bad-luck bird!"

She ripped the fragile necklace in half and threw the pieces at the brownbird. The brownbird chee-cheed and flew back to the fields. Deila sighed and set the milk bucket beneath Tansy's udder.

"Why does Da always get so cross?" she muttered to the cow as she milked. "I know it's not his fault. He's sad, that's all. Gran says he wasn't this way when Ma was alive. It's partly my fault Ma died. She got that fever while she was recovering from birthing me. I wonder why her life energy was so low?"

Molly mooed around a mouthful of hay in sympathy.

"He can't help it if he misses her," Deila went on, smoothing Molly's forelock with one hand. "It doesn't help that the farm hasn't been doing well, with the dry spells we've had and no creeks to water the fields. I'd be grumpy too if I had to drive the wagon ten miles each way to fetch water."

Oswald meowed a greeting as she lay her head against Tansy's warm side. He sat behind Deila and to one side, hoping for a drink. Even in her dismay over Molly's foal, Deila remembered to send a stream of warm milk toward the cat. She laughed as he caught the nourishing liquid in his mouth, not seeming

to mind that it ran down his chin and dripped on his white bib.

"I'm glad whatever got Molly's foal didn't get you, Oswald, or Tansy, or Molly."

She sighed, pushing her bangs out of her eyes.

"Da said the fields used to be so rich the flax grew overnight. Do you remember that?"

Tansy mooed and grabbed another mouthful of hay.

"Of course you do. You ate nothing but alfalfa then. Da used to hire the other farmers' boys to help harvest the flax. After harvest, Da used to have all the neighbors out for roasted steers and corn. The other farmers thought Da was crazy to grow flax, since it's finicky and blights easier than wheat. But when they saw the fine linen and tapestries Gran made from it, they stopped talking about Da's uncommon ways."

Tansy flicked her tail in Deila's face.

"Sorry — I guess some of those steers were your sons. Still, everyone loved him, then. Even when he painted our house blue. He said it didn't matter that ours was the only blue house on the flatlands, or that the other farmers thought he should have stuck with white. He said the blue reminded him of Ma's eyes. Do you remember Ma's eyes, Tansy?"

Tansy coughed around the dry hay.

"That dusty hay makes you thirsty, huh? I'll fetch your water as soon as we've got your

milk. You used to be able to swim in the creek right behind the barn, remember, Tansy? Before the Rivermaster built the dam and cut off the water. You could drink as much as you wanted. Now Da has to drive the cart to the creek at the far edge of the property, near the Moors and fill barrels he sets beside the barn and behind the house."

Tansy moomed again and stomped a front hoof.

"Yes, it's still tough. Maybe the Rivermaster really does want to force the farmers to sell their land, like Da says." Deila rubbed dust off her face and sighed. "Well, you're done."

Oswald followed her around the barn as she finished her chores. Deila had just finished collecting the eggs when Skalle opened Molly's stall and threw a harness over her back.

"You're not going to make her plow, after she just had a foal!" Deila said. "You've said a mare needs to rest for at least week after having a foal."

"I see no foal."

Skalle glared at her.

Deila drew back, fear chilling her heart. She'd seen that look, usually immediately before his hand swung at her head.

"I'll help Gran with the stew," she mumbled and hurried toward the cottage.

Chapter 2: Dark to Light, Light to Dark

Deila slammed the back door of the cottage with enough force to make Gran jump. Normally, the old woman could sense energy — her granddaughter's or anyone else's — coming her way well enough to prepare a few seconds ahead, but not this time.

"He fired Mr. Hiles!" she blurted as she stomped into the kitchen. "And he harnessed Molly to plow the fields," Deila said.

Gran lifted a lopsided shoulder into a shrug without turning from the sink pump where she was washing potatoes for the evening stew.

"Gran?"

Deila ran to the greasewood table beside the sink and shook it to get her grandmother's attention.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard ye, girl. My ears have always been sharper than my eyes. Besides, ye were yelling loud enough fer me to hear ye clear across the fields."

"Well, why didn't you say anything?"

In answer, Gran shrugged again, lifting her shorter leg onto a wood block for balance and feeling for the kitchen knife she'd laid on the table beside the sink to cut the potatoes.

Deila opened her mouth to voice her frustration. Mr. Hiles was gone. Da blamed her for Molly's colt's death. And now Gran wasn't showing her the sympathy she'd hoped for.

"Why doesn't anyone want to listen to me today?" she said, sighing.

Gran shook the knife in her direction, shaking it at her like a school marm shaking a ruler at a recalcitrant student.

"Why doona ye listen? Ye know better than to come crashin' in here, complainin' 'bout yer Da. Ye doona agree with him, true?"

"True," Deila mumbled.

"So, do ye think that gives ye the right to holler about him? What do ye think that'll bring ye?"

"I... I don't know."

"Remember what I've taught ye. Be careful of the things ye plant in yer life. They tend to grow, sometimes into things ye doona intend."

Deila sighed in frustration. But she had to admit that Gran was right. Her angry words wouldn't bring back Mr. Hiles, or make Da bring Molly in from the fields. Risking having Da angry at her was foolish, plain and simple. And Gran never complained, though her damaged back that had twisted her hips into such an awkward angle that her right shoulder was two inches higher than her left, which also left her right leg two inches shorter, must cause her pain.

Deila thought about what Gran had said as she dug through the vegetable box on the floor beside the table and brought out carrots and onions for the stew. Despite her admission that Gran was right, her fingers still trembled with anger as she pulled a kitchen knife from its hook on the wall and sliced a bright orange carrot.

"He's said that a horse shouldn't work for a week after foaling," she mumbled.

The sharp knife thunked through the carrot and stuck in the cutting board.

"Ye know that, girl, but yer Da sometimes forgets when he's angry. Just as ye do. Ye nearly took off your finger just then."

Deila worked the knife out of the cutting board and resumed slicing, more carefully.

"What about the foal? He was born gray, as you said, and now he's dead. Da said a bush wolf killed him. But it couldn't have been a bush wolf! Those split-hoof tracks were big enough for Tansy to have made them."

Gran turned her milky gaze toward Deila.

"Are ye sure it wasn't Tansy?"

Her eyes couldn't twinkle to make her meaning clear, but her failed eyesight hadn't diminished her ability to produce an impish smile.

"Oh, Gran! How can you joke at a time like this?"

She flung her hands into the air in exasperation. She needed Gran to help her stop Da from hurting Molly, not make light of it.

"You can see things no one else can. Don't act as thick as Da!"

Gran half-turned, pointing the index fingernail she grew long to help her spin flax.

"Ye'll not speak of yer Da with disrespect."

"But I don't understand him! Sometimes he's kind, and wise, like when he said Mr. Hiles could tutor me."

"Having a tutor didn't make ye any friends. The other children were scared off by yer smarts."

"Learning from Mr. Hiles about so many things in the world made up for that, mostly. And I had Molly, and Tansy, and Oswald."

Gran cackled, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead. The humid afternoon warmth had made her wiry bangs stick to her skin.

"Farm animals can't take the place of real friends. Ye know that."

As if he'd been listening, Oswald sauntered into the kitchen waving his erect tail and meowing for a treat. Deila picked up a small cube of mutton from the wooden bowl on the table and dropped it on the floor. She scratched his back and smiled as he arched into her caress.

"Whether animals can take the place of friends or not, sometimes Da shows he has a

heart. Other times his eyes are so cold it feels as if he doesn't know me."

Gran's nimble fingers found the bowl of mutton and scooped it into the iron stew pot hanging in the hearth, a few steps from the greasewood table. Next, she felt around on the wooden cutting board until her hands found the pile of vegetables Deila had chopped. She added them into pot.

"Is that it, then?" Deila asked as she cleaned the knife and cutting board at the kitchen pump, an ingenious adaptation Skalle had made by connecting pipe to the biggest water barrel, running it beneath the ground and attaching it to a hand-powered pump at the kitchen sink. Deila still had to be careful how much water she used but using the pump was much better than relying on buckets of water toted from the barrels for cooking and cleaning.

"No more wisdom today," Gran agreed.

"We're done early. Tell me a tale?" Deila urged, softening her voice and reaching for her grandmother's hand.

"That'll take my mind off Molly's foal and Da firing Mr. Hiles."

She sighed, missing her tutor already.

"I wish I knew what Mr. Hiles meant about a storm."

"Ye'll know soon enough," Gran said, picking up her greasewood walking stick and moving into the hallway behind the kitchen.

"I'll tell ye a tale if ye help string my loom."

Deila followed Gran down the hall, through the sitting room, then left to the weaving and dyeing room.

"Is this for your special project?" she asked, fingering neatly wound bundles of gold, white, green and blue linen threads. "These thread bundles are colored with the special dyes you made last week."

"Aye, and that linen's from the finest flax we grew last season," Gran answered.

"Let me see what you're weaving."

Deila moved toward a draped frame leaning against the west wall of the room.

"Get away, girl! This weaving mustn't be seen until its time."

Gran felt along the wall to the long, low table where dozens of piles of linen threads, spun from the beaten flax, lay in neat rows.

Deila sat on a three-legged stool and watched her Gran become Dark Weaver. Her blind grandmother had earned that name for her talent of weaving intricate tapestries through her sense of touch, and through what she called her "third eye."

"I see through here," she'd explain, tapping her forehead, when people stared in disbelief at her completed works, "and through the energy of the thread."

"No matter how many times I see you lay the colors in order, Gran, it still looks like magic to me."

"Don't let Da hear ye speak of magic," Gran said, raising a gnarled forefinger in warning.

"I won't. I know that he thinks magic is just superstition ..."

"But ye don't mind hearing of it, eh?" Gran cackled.

"Oh, Gran! You're in such a silly mood today! Of course I love your tales. Especially the ones about magic."

Deila was silent for a moment, then leaned forward, whispering.

"Mr. Hiles said you'd know what killed Molly's foal."

Gran handed Deila four bundles of threads, beaten gold, pearly white, emerald green, and beryl blue. "String these on the lap loom and I'll tell ye."

Deila sighed, a little disappointed that Gran wouldn't show her the special project she'd been weaving, but prickling with anticipation about which tale Gran would tell.

"You're using the lap loom to piece the special weaving so I won't see it!"

She knew the complaint had failed when Gran flashed her a warning frown.

"Okay, I'm ready to string these. What order?"

"Dark to light," Gran said.

"Dark to light, light to dark. That's the way of things. Tell me, girl, what ye know of the great white mountain we call Mount Spire."

"Mr. Hiles said it's twice as big around as it is tall — and he said it's taller than any other mountain on this side of the sea of Yo. He said many people have tried to climb Mount Spire, some alone, some in teams, some with dogs. He said one man even tried using elephants from the southern flats of Honora, but even those weren't strong enough to make it to Neverslip Pass. They froze before they were halfway up."

She gazed at the fields through the small, glassed window as she thought of all of the people who'd tried to reach the other side of Mount Spire.

"There must be something really wonderful behind that mountain, for so many people to risk their lives."

"Aye, lass, there is. The Mount hides a land that's green all year, and beasts that haven't been seen by man nor woman since the Earliest Dawns.

"That's what the spire's for — so them that lives behind the Mount can keep an eye on us."

Deila finished the emerald green thread and started on the beryl blue.

"What does Mount Spire have to do with Molly's foal?"

"In the days of the Earliest Dawns, when my grandmother's grandmother was a lass, Mount Spire was but a hill, dusted with snow in winter. Not so wide or so tall as it is now. It

was rounded on top, without the odd finger-shaped spire that hangs from its peak. The Mount wasn't even named in those days, for it didn't stand out from the other hills. In those days two Great Races lived across these flatlands."

Deila smiled, "The tall, slender elves with hair in shades of gold, and the unicorns of silver and gold and white."

"Aye."

Gran sighed and she looked at the ceiling above Deila's head as if she was seeing the scene with her mind's eye.

"The Great Races were good to all, and gentle. The elves brought bounty outta the land by lovin' it well. 'Twas said they held fertility in their fingers. 'Twas said that the rocks they dug from their flowerbeds were silver and gold, not iron and granite like ours. Their crops grew without tendin'. The flatlands were lush and green in the times of the Earliest Dawns," Gran sighed, mopping her forehead with a linen rag. "Rain fell when it was needed, never too much or too little.

"Their flocks were daisy lambs that sprung from plants with velvet-green leaves and huge white and yellow flowers with vines connectin' 'em so they couldn't stray. They needed no ovens, for breadstones baked in the earth around their fields. They trained pigs to scent the bread so they could dig it up. Their fowl were pod ducks that popped from fleshy

plants at the edge of ponds and seas. Their fish had glistening orange-gold scales and voices sweeter than a nightingale's. Singin' fish, they called 'em, since they swam to the surface at night to sing the young elves to sleep. Every morn a night lark woke 'em with its sweet warble.

"When the first mortals arrived from the east, tired and hungry from their travels, the elves welcomed 'em. Fed 'em, showed 'em how to bend willow branches into shelters.

"But mortals couldn'a make the crops grow the way the elves did. The breadstones wouldn'a bake fer 'em. The unicorns brought special rains from the sky to help their crops, but they wouldn'a let the mortals come close."

"Why was that?" Deila asked, though she already knew the answer.

"'Twas the energy, girl! The elves spoke to the lambs an the breadstones, and the earth, too, with their hearts, their minds—"

"Their Lifeforce," Deila finished.

"Aye, and that was something that the elves couldn'a explain to the mortals. Oh, they tried, but the mortals flat didna get it. The mortals just thought the elves had given 'em the worst land. So, they decided to take elves' land. They pushed the gentle people away usin' guns and swords. When unicorns grazed in their fields, they chased 'em off with dogs.

"The elves and unicorns had no heart for warrin' with other races. They lived by con-

nectin' their energy with that of those around them. They couldn'a figure out why the mortals couldn'a understand.

"So they moved on, to the west. If mortals wanted their land they could have it. The mortals soon found out that the magic was gone from the land."

"Or so they thought," Deila murmured.

"Aye, or so they thought. If they could'a figured out how to connect with the land like the elves and unicorns had, the daisy lambs and breadstones woulda grown for them, too. Instead, they had to work hard to get anything to grow—even easy crops like lettuce seemed to fight 'em. And alla stones they took outa the ground were just rock—not gold, silver or even bread. The daisy lambs shriveled to ordinary plantain. The pod ducks wilted, leavin' only reeds and the singing fish became plain ol' carp. No mortal ear has heard the warbling song of the night lark since.

"Do ye know why, lass?"

"Something about energy—and how the elves and unicorns understood the land and its creatures differently than the mortals did."

"True enough! Though ye need to unnerstan' a heap more 'bout energy before much longer. Ye see, lass, we get outa the land what we put into it. That's why the elves an' unicorns couldn'a teach the mortals how to grow the daisy lambs an' breadstones an' such.

“Anyway, the mortals were starvin’. So they chased the elves again. Pushed ‘em offa their thrivin’ fields again. And soon had to work hard to grow a bit of food.”

“Again,” Deila interrupted. “All because the mortals couldn’t understand how to connect with the land as the elves did.”

Gran patted her leg.

“Aye, lass. Again and again. Yer Da had a bit of a way with the land, ye know. He’s still got a bit of it, buried deep where few can see.”

“I know he used to. I guess I can see that he still does—the flax still grows for him. But I don’t see what this has to do with Molly’s foal!” Deila said.

She’d finished threading the beaten gold flax threads and was idly stroking the pearly white.

“I’m gettin’ to it, girl. Put the white on, and mind ye, pull it tight!”

Deila shook her head, amazed that Gran knew she’d finished threading the first three colors. Gran’s ability to know what was going on without being able to see always caused a glimmer of wonder to spring up from her heart.

“The unicorns carried the elves away, across the flatlands, movin’ faster than a hundred galloping horses. When the Great Races came up against the Sea of Yo, they couldn’a go no farther. Before the flatlanders caught up, the unicorns marked off a space big

enough fer them to live. The stood onna foot-hills of the mountains that ye see inna distance.

“The silverhorned guards, goldenhorned warriors and quicksilverhorned royal unicorns stamped their hooves to activate the silver, gold and white lights of their powers. The thunder of their hooves pounding the ground made the hills soar, ‘til they became the Rebuff Range. They pointed their horns to the sky, pullin’ power from the clouds to form ice and snow on the mountaintops. They piled the ice so high that no mortal could cross it. That’s how Mount Spire and the mountains that flank it, came to be.

“There ought’a been peace, once the Great Races were behind the Mount. And so there was, until one unicorn, a prince who wanted to be King, betrayed the creatures he was to protect. He did the worst thing he coulda done.”

“Worse than what the flatlanders did?”

“Aye,” Gran sighed, settling the lap loom across her knees and picking up a bundle of white thread.

“He stole Lifeforce—the life essence of Brodantia’s creatures. He thought he knew a lot, but he didn’a know that takin’ power by force allus hurts them that wield it. Still, the stolen energy made ‘im almost as powerful as the unicorn King. He wasn’t caught until he stole Lifeforce from his Brother Race.”

“He stole Lifeforce from-from the elves?”

“Aye.”

Gran’s voice sounded sad as she tilted the lap loom and reached for a bundle of silver thread.

“When he did that, his coat turned from white to jet black. A terrible battle was fought between the dark unicorn and the unicorn king. The king won but he and the prince were sore wounded. The king banished the dark unicorn outside the protected land of Brodantia, and put in place a magic shield so no darkness could come through. That shield is right there where ye can see it every day, along the ridges of Mount Spire. Do ye know what I’m sayin, lass?”

“The black prince — he’s the one that killed Molly’s foal?” Deila said, a shudder running up her spine.

“Aye. He trots the plains at night. It’s said his hunger for blood and fresh, young flesh is never sated.”

Deila shook her head.

“A black unicorn. A *bad* unicorn,” she muttered. “Da would never believe that.”

Gran straightened, her twisted back crack-cracking. She placed the lap loom on the table and cranked open the window. She smiled at the fields, her wiry gray hair tossing about in the brisk afternoon breeze.

“There’ll be a storm tonight.”

Deila looked at the clear sky and raised her eyebrows.

"That's what Mr. Hiles said. He said to shutter the windows before we go to sleep. I don't see how a storm could form from such a clear sky."

"Doona ferget what ye saw this morn'," Gran said, patting her shoulder.

"The brownbird? I guess that means rain, clouds or no clouds."

Gran shook her head, gripping Deila's elbow to help her stand.

"Ye saw more'n the brownbird. Ye saw magic. Brownbird's rain won't come tonight. Shutter yer windows if you like, girl, but then come sit by your old Gran on the front porch and watch the show."