

# THE HEALERS' APPRENTICE



by Renata Hopkins

## I THE ROOM

In a time before our time, a great stone castle stood on a hill. In one of the castle's many rooms, a group of children were gathered. A girl named Mara stood at the back. Today she would learn if she would become the apprentice. Today she would learn her future.

The healers came forward and tied a cloth bag to the leather belt worn around each child's waist. "These bags contain a sample of what you seek," said Lonan, the eldest healer. "We shall see who among you has paid attention to your lessons. Only one apprentice will be chosen."

Bran glanced at Mara and smirked. He came from a long line of healers and was certain he'd follow in their footsteps. Unlike Mara. Her mother worked in the kitchen, her father in the stables.

The healers recited a short blessing. Then it was time to go. "Remember," said Lonan. "Each child must find a certain plant. Each child must complete the task alone. Each child must return by sunset. And remember, too, that we have ways of knowing if these rules are broken."



## II THE BAG

Mara waited until she was outside the castle walls before opening her bag. There, she untied the cord and looked inside. Mara was filled with relief at what she saw. She had seen this plant many times.

"Rowan trees and red thread leave the witches all in dread," she whispered to herself. The healers used the red berries of the rowan tree to treat various ailments. Some used its twigs to ward off evil spirits.

"You've a long walk ahead of you," said a voice at Mara's shoulder. Bran.

"Then I won't waste my time talking," Mara retorted. He was right – the rowan trees were high in the hills, half a day's journey from the castle at least.

"Don't worry," Bran said. "There's plenty of work for those who fail. You'd make a good maid – and an even better pig-mucker." He laughed at the look on Mara's face, then turned and disappeared into the forest.

## III THE BOAR

The further Mara travelled, the more her confidence grew. She passed many herbs, and she knew them all. There was meadowsweet for pain and fever, comfrey for healing wounds, plantain for stings. Mara began to imagine a future in which she was famed for her skills. People would travel from far and wide to ...

A squeal broke her trance, and a wild boar emerged from the bushes. Its tusks were monstrous. Mara felt for her knife as the animal grunted, lowered its head, and charged. She darted aside, leaping for the nearest tree. Her hands closed around a branch, but it was narrow – and as her legs swung up, the branch snapped. She twisted as she fell, landing like a cat on the rocky track. Mara sprang upright, holding the knife, but the boar had only charged because its path was blocked. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared.



## IV THE TREE

By the time Mara reached the hill where the rowan trees grew, her legs ached. She did not stop to rest until she had gathered twigs, bark, *and* berries from a rowan tree. Then she collapsed. She leant against a tree to drink her water and eat the hazelnuts she'd collected along the way. High above, a falcon soared across the valley. Mara wished she had wings to fly home. Only the thought of Bran's smug face got her back on her feet.

## V THE ADDER

On the way home, Mara sang to keep herself company. She hadn't gone far when she suddenly stopped dead. Someone had joined in with her song. The sound came again, only it wasn't singing but a groan of pain, coming from the woods below. Mara left the high path. Cautiously, she walked into the shade of the trees.

"Hello?" she called. "Who's there?"

"Over here," came the faint reply.

The hair prickled on the back of Mara's neck. She'd heard tales of the banshees who haunted these woods – but the voice had sounded like a child's. Mara walked deeper into the shadows. A boy lay curled up on the ground.

"Bran!" Mara cried, rushing to his side. Bran's breath came in gasps, and his lower leg was red and swollen, two tidy puncture marks in the middle.

"An adder," Bran panted. "I felt the bite and saw it slide away."

The snake's poison would make Bran gravely ill. He needed the healers and their medicine. Yet Mara hesitated. She would never make it home before sunset, not if she helped Bran.

Mara reached for her water skin. She needed a moment to think.

It was rare for an adder's bite to kill. And did she really want to sacrifice her one chance because of Bran? *He would not help me*, Mara told herself. *He would leave me to the wolves and the bears if it meant he'd win.*

The boy guessed her thoughts. "Help me, Mara. Please. I don't want to stay here alone. I might die."

Mara said nothing. She had worked hard to get this far, and Bran hadn't. He took everything for granted – and he had never once shown her any kindness. Quite the opposite. From the very beginning, he'd made it clear he was somehow superior.

It was this last thought that helped Mara make up her mind. Bran *wasn't* better than her – but if she went on alone, then Mara would be *no better than Bran*. And that would be a fatal mistake.

Mara stood. She began to look for a strong, forked stick to make a crutch.



## VI HOME

They did not talk much on the journey home. They did not have the strength. But when the sun finally slipped behind the hills, Bran spoke. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “You could have made it without me.”

This was true, but Mara would not cry. “That’s OK,” she said. “I like pigs and their muck. They’re much simpler than people.”

A few hours later, Mara saw the lights of a search party. She called out, and it was not so long before they were found.

The next thing Mara knew it was morning and she was in her own bed. Lonan stood over her.

“Bran!” She tried to sit up, but Lonan stayed her with a hand.

“He is quite all right. He is being tended by a healer.”

Lonan passed her a cup, and Mara took a sip, pulling a face at the bitterness. “A tonic, for calming the nerves,” he said. “When you are better, you will learn to make it. That – and many other things.”

“But I returned after sunset. I failed.”

Lonan waved a hand as if shooing away a fly. “Sometimes it is best to break the rules.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You chose to help someone in need, though you knew the cost. That is a true sign of your calling.”

Mara looked at her teacher. Before now, he had always seemed so stern, frightening even. But now Lonan was smiling. His eyes were full of the magic and secrets they would soon share.

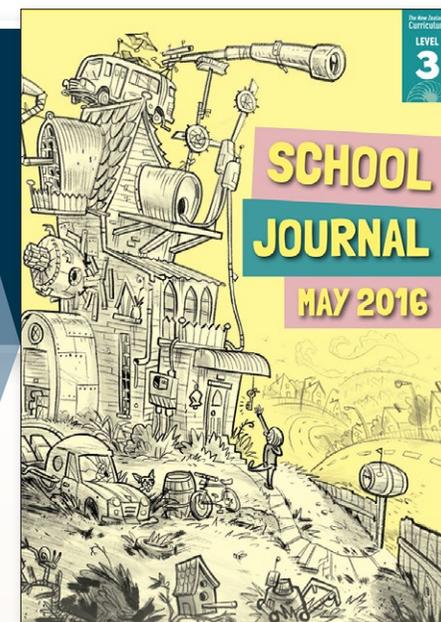
Mara smiled back. She was ready to learn.



illustrations by Angela Keoghan

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