



PART I: TURBANSK

Summer crowds of apricots occlude the sky
Small perfumed suns that fall onto the grass

Birds bicker in the branches and the branches

shake
And showers glaze the fallen fruits, a dew of
glass

And so they bruise and blacken to a cloying
stench
A feast for flies, although this too will pass

All sweetness gleams but briefly from the
shade
Such webs as weave our selvings do not last

And even our corruption is a tiny thing
A sour breath that fades into the past

from the *Inwa* of Lorica of Turbansk

1: THE WHITE CROW

A drop of sweat trickled slowly down Hem's temple. He wiped it away and reached for another mango.

It was so hot. Even in the shady refuge of the mango tree the air pressed around him like a damp blanket. There wasn't the faintest whisper of a breeze: the leaves hung utterly still. As if to make up for the wind's inaction, the cicadas were louder than Hem had ever heard them. He couldn't see any from where he was, perched half-way up the tree on a broad branch which divided to make a comfortable seat, but their shrilling was loud enough to hurt his ears.

He leaned back against the trunk and let the sweet flesh of the fruit dissolve on his tongue. These mangos were certainly the high point of the day. Not, he thought to himself sardonically, that it had been much of a day. He should have been in the Turbansk School, chanting some idiotic Bard song or drowsing through a boring lecture on

the Balance. Instead, he had had a furious argument with his Mentor about something he couldn't now remember and had run away.

He had wandered about the winding alleys behind the School, hot and bored and thirsty, until he spotted a seductive glint of orange fruit behind a high wall. A vine offered him a ladder, and he climbed warily into a walled garden, a lush oasis of greenery planted with fruit trees and flowering oleanders and climbing roses and jasmine. At the far end was a cloister which led into a grand house, and Hem scanned it swiftly for any occupants before making a dash for the fountain which fell back into a mosaic-floored pond in the centre of the garden. He plunged his head under the water, soaking himself in the delicious coolness, and drank his fill.

Then, shaking his head like a dog, he surveyed the fruit trees. There was a fig, a pomegranate and two orange trees as well as the mango, the biggest of all them. He noted with regret that the oranges were still green, and then swung himself easily into the mango tree and started plundering its fruit, cutting the tough skin with a clasp knife and throwing the large pits onto the ground below him, until his fingers were sticky with juice.

After he had eaten his fill he stared idly through the leaves at the blue of the sky, which paled almost to white at the zenith. Finally he wiped his hands carefully on his trousers, dragged something out his pocket and smoothed it out on his leg. It was a letter, written on parchment in a shaky script. Hem couldn't decipher it, but Saliman, his guardian, had read it out to him that morning and then, seeing the look on Hem's face, had given him the letter as a keepsake.

To Hem and Saliman, greetings! the letter read. Cadvan and I arrived in Thorold safely, as you may know, if the bird reached you. We are both much better than when we last saw you. I was very seasick on my way here, Cadvan and I had to fight an ondril, which was very big, but we got here safely. Nerili has given us haven, and you will have heard the rest of the news from the emissary. I hope

you have arrived in Turbansk with no harm, and that Hem finds the fruits are as big as the birds said they were. I think of you all the time and miss you sorely. With all the love in my heart, Maerad.

Already they were being chased by monsters: Hem knew that an ondril was a kind of giant snake that lived in the ocean. Cadvan was possibly even braver than Saliman, and Maerad (in Hem's eyes at least) was braver still: but they were only two, and the Dark so many, and everywhere. And where was Thorold, after all? Somewhere over the sea, Saliman had told him, and showed him a shape on a map: but Hem had never even seen the sea and had only the vaguest idea of distance. It meant nothing to him.

Hem stared at the letter as if the sheer intensity of his gaze could unriddle its meanings, but all it did was make the page swim and blur. The only word he could make out was "Maerad". And what had Maerad not written down, what other dangers was she facing? The letter was already days old: was she still alive?

Very suddenly, as if it burned him, Hem crumpled the letter up and shoved it back into his pocket.

Unbidden into his mind came the memory of when he had first seen Maerad, when she had opened his tiny refuge under the bed in the Pilanel caravan and he had looked up, terrified, expecting a knife flashing down to slash him to ribbons, and instead found himself staring into his own sister's astonished eyes. Only he hadn't known she was his sister, then. That had come later... He remembered Maerad as he had last seen her in Norloch, standing in the doorway of Nelac's house as he and Saliman rode away, her face white with sorrow and exhaustion, her black hair tossing in the wind. Hem bit his lip, almost hard enough to draw blood. He was not a boy who wept easily, but his chest felt hot with grief. He missed Maerad more than he could say, even to himself.

Maerad was the one person in the world he felt at home with. In the short period they had been together his nightmares had stopped for the first time in his life. Even

before she knew he was her brother, she had taken him in her arms and stroked his face when the bad dreams came. Even now it seemed amazing; Hem would have hit anyone else who took such liberties with his closed fist. He had trusted Maerad from the start: he sensed her gentleness, and underneath that, her loneliness and sadness. But more than anything else, Maerad accepted him just as he was, and didn't want him to be anything else. Maerad, he thought painfully, loved him.

Now Maerad was so far away that she might as well not exist at all. And here all anybody could talk about was the war. It lay inside every conversation, like a fat evil worm. It might kill Maerad, it might kill him. They might never see each other again.

Hem puffed his cheeks and blew out a big breath, as if trying to expel his morbid thoughts. There was Saliman, of course. Saliman was everything Hem would have liked to be himself: tall, handsome, strong, generous, brave, funny... Hem had adored him, with a passion akin to hero-worship, from the first time he had seen him. It had seemed like a miracle when Saliman had offered to be his guardian and to bring him to Turbansk, the great city of the south, to go to School there and learn how to be a Bard.

Since he had first gained the Speech and had been able to speak to birds, Hem had dreamed of coming to the south, where, the birds had told him, grew trees full of bright fruits as big as his own head. And now, here he was. He lived in a grand Bardhouse with Saliman, and had as much to eat as he wanted, and dressed in fine clothes, rather than the rags he had been used to. But although he now sat in a tree surrounded by the sweet fruit he had once dreamed of as an impossible plenitude, happiness seemed as far beyond him as ever.

For one thing, coming to Turbansk had meant that he had to part with Maerad. The unfairness of this struck deep, although even at his most surly Hem knew it wasn't anyone's fault. And he had found that he didn't like the School much. He wasn't used to having to sit still and

concentrate, and he took the criticisms of his mentors badly, however kindly they were given. They also insisted on calling him Cai, which was the name he had been given as a baby, before he had been kidnapped by Hulls and placed in the orphanage where he had spent most of his childhood. He constantly forgot that it was his name, so he kept getting into trouble for ignoring his teachers, when really he hadn't realised they were speaking to him.

Hem brooded on the injustice of the Bards for a while, unconsciously plucking and eating another mango. It wasn't his fault that he didn't know anything. Nobody seemed to understand how hard reading and writing was for him, and when he stumbled over a word the scornful looks of the seven-year-olds with whom he did scripting classes scorched his pride.

But the core of Hem's discontent was that he was lonely. Saliman, the only person in Turbansk he trusted, was often away, or occupied with Bard business. And these days Saliman was often abstracted even when they did have time to speak together. Hem was the only northern child in the School, and his pale olive face stood out among the black-skinned Turbansk children, who thought him rough and strange. He had already been in several fights, and now they avoided him because he fought dirtily: he had no qualms about biting or gouging eyes or pulling hair. He didn't speak the Suderain language, which limited his communications to the Speech and (Hem considered with chagrin, throwing the huge pip so it rattled through the leaves) it was impossible to lie in the Speech, it twisted your words around. It was proving to be a right nuisance. Though, luckily perhaps, it also meant the other students did not understand his Annaren curses and insults.

He thought of a class the day before, when he had been so bored he felt dizzy. Forgetting to stop himself, he had yawned uninhibitedly. The mentor Urbika, who was chanting the First Song of Making in the Speech, paused mid-line and fixed Hem with a piercing eye. It was a look comprised of irony, irritation and compassion in equal parts, but Hem was oblivious to its subtleties. He was too

busy picking bad temperedly at his sandals.

"Minor Bard Cai, do the great mysteries of the Making bore you, perchance?" she inquired. The other children tittered, and turned to stare at Hem, who only slowly realised that Urbika was speaking to him. He looked up, and realised the whole class was staring at him, bubbling with suppressed mirth.

"Er, yes, - I mean, no, yes, it does," he said, suddenly flustered, and burning with humiliation. Urbika had given him a long look, silenced the class with another and said nothing more about it; but Hem brooded over that trivial incident for the rest of the day. Nobody laughed at him, nobody. One day he'd make them pay for it...

A noise of which he had been half-aware now forced itself into the forefront of Hem's reverie. Some kind of ruckus was going on underneath his feet. He looked down through the leaves and saw a brawl of feathers on the ground, six or seven crows attacking something in their midst. Consumed by curiosity, he dropped from the branch to the ground right next to the fight. The crows were so intent on their business that they didn't even notice him. He saw now that they were savagely pecking a white bird which had obviously given up on any idea of escape and was now trying vainly to hide its head under its wing. Blood spotted its feathers where the crows had torn its skin.

Filled with a swift anger, Hem lifted his hand and cried out in the Speech, *Der ni, mulchar!* Begone, carrion!

A blue bolt of lightning leapt from his fingers and hit the attacking crows, which screeched in surprise and dismay and flapped off in a stench of scorched feathers. Their victim lay on the grass surrounded by tufts of white feathers with blood at their tips, its eyes closed, its breast heaving. Very gently Hem picked it up, feeling its body trembling in his hands. He involuntarily drew in his breath at the bird's lightness: underneath the feathers its body was so small, a mere scrap of life.

Are you hurt, little one? he asked, in the Speech.

At the sound of his voice the bird opened its eyes, and then almost immediately shut them again. Hem regretted he hadn't taken notice of the noise sooner, because it was likely now the bird would die of shock. He cradled it against his chest, cupping his hands around its head to create a darkness which at least might make the creature feel less afraid. Though no doubt it was past fear.

He was thinking that it was probably time he left the garden when an angry cry came from the cloisters behind him. He started, and looked around wildly for a means of escape. A very large man in long green robes was running swiftly towards him, shouting in Suderain. The only quick way out was to swarm up the mango tree and drop down the other side of the wall, but Hem was hampered by the bird, and he didn't want to jolt it by moving quickly. He assessed his chances, cursing, and decided he had no choice but to stand his ground.

When the man reached him, panting hard with both exertion and anger, he drew back his hand to cuff Hem across his head. The boy flinched and steeled himself for the blow: but the man stopped with his hand still high in the air and stared at him in astonishment and what seemed to be rising anger. Then came a flood of questions, of which Hem understood little, apart from the word *Djella*, which he knew meant Bard. Hem realised that the reason he hadn't been summarily punished was that the man had recognised the distinctive robes of a student at Turbansk School. He smiled as ingratiatingly as he could, and said, every time the man paused for breath, "*Saliman Turbansk de.*"

The man gave Hem a sceptical look, and then grabbed him painfully by his earlobe and pulled him into the house. Hem concentrated on not falling over and hurting the bird he had rescued. He was propelled swiftly through wide hallways and shaded rooms smelling of sandalwood in which he caught glimpses of rich colours, glints of gold and crimson and azure, and finally through a large atrium. At the far end the man opened a huge bronze door

and stepped out into the blinding sunlight of the street. For a moment Hem thought with relief that was the end of it, but the man still had an unrelenting grip on his ear. He was marched humiliatingly through the streets until they reached Saliman's house, which was thankfully not very far away. There his captor tolled the brass bell and waited stolidly until the door was answered.

The bewildered minor Bard who answered the door was blasted with a flood of Suderain. She spread her hands to stop the flow, looking sharply at Hem, and appeared to invite the man in. The man shook his head, and she fled to find Saliman. Hem and his captor stood outside in the heat in complete silence for some time. Hem passed the wait staring at the front doorstep, his teeth set against the pain in his ear. The bird in his hands was still alive; he could feel its heart fluttering against his palm.

At last Saliman came to the door. When he saw Hem his eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

"Hem!" he said. "What have you been doing? Alimbar el Nad! Greetings!"

The man, his sense of grievance exacerbated by the wait, poured out his complaint. Saliman answered him in Suderain, and Hem stopped trying to follow the conversation. At least Alimbar had let go of him. He stood patiently, rubbing his ear with his free hand. It seemed Saliman was trying to invite Alimbar inside, but that Alimbar was insisting that he would not enter. After a few more exchanges the man seemed a little mollified, and finally he bowed to Saliman, who held open the door for him. Saliman turned to Hem and waved him in also, and his eyes were hard.

"You," he said in Annaren, "I will deal with later. I want you to go to your chamber, and to stay there."

Hem, who had been totally unfussed by Alimbar's anger, quailed before Saliman's. He nodded meekly and scurried off.

Back in his chamber, Hem carefully put the bird down on his bed. It gave a small squawk and then lay with its eyes shut, its breast heaving. Hem, who was familiar with birds, was puzzled: it was of some kind he did not know. It looked like a crow, but its plumage was white. It was obviously a young bird, only just losing its baby fluff to adult feathers; its tail and wing feathers were stubby and short, and it had a scrawny, half-made look about it.

Gently Hem examined its injuries. He couldn't see any great damage, apart from a couple of savage tears in the flesh of its body and neck, but there could be internal hurts that he couldn't see. No bones seemed to be broken, and it wasn't bleeding freely any more. What worried him most of all was the shock; birds could easily die of such things. He looked around his room, and saw the chest in which he kept his spare clothes. He summarily threw his clothes onto the bed, spread a cloth he used for drying himself on the bottom of the chest, and gently placed the bird inside.

There, little one, he murmured in the Speech. You are safe now.

The bird made a soft peep, as if thanking him, and he closed the lid so it would feel safe in the dark. Then he worried that it might not have enough air, and stuffed a shirt under the chest's lid so it wouldn't close completely.

If it was alive in an hour, he thought to himself, it would have a chance. In two hours, more of a chance. If it was alive tomorrow, it would definitely live.

It would need water. He had a jug and a cup on his worktable, but no dish to put water in for the bird. He could get one easily enough from the kitchen, but he didn't dare leave his chamber; if Saliman arrived and Hem was not there, he would be even angrier with him. He would have to wait until Saliman turned up.

He sat and fidgeted on his bed, wondering how Saliman

would punish him for his latest escapade. Would he be thrown out of the Bardhouse? Hem uneasily considered the possibility: in his mind, it seemed quite likely. When he thought about it, there weren't a lot of reasons for Saliman to keep him there; none of the other minor Bards liked him much, and he was always getting into trouble, and he wasn't exactly shining in his classes...

Within a short time, Hem's fear had turned into a certainty. Where could he go, if he didn't live with Saliman? He would have to live on the streets. Perhaps he could get a job in the marketplace as a caller, carrying the goods for sale and telling of their virtues, he could be good at that... and then he remembered he couldn't speak Suderain. He would have to be a thief, then. He was good at stealing things. Though it would be more difficult now than when he was a small boy; he was tall now, and in Turbansk his paler skin meant that he had lost the ability to go unnoticed in a crowd. He would head north then, and find Maerad - he could steal things along the way to feed himself. The only thing was, he would miss Saliman.

And the other thing was Cadvan, Maerad's mentor. Hem admired Cadvan much as he did Saliman, but he found Cadvan much more forbidding. He remembered very well how stern the Bard could be. If Hem did find Maerad, he would find Cadvan as well, and Cadvan would likely be very cross with him...but on the other hand, Maerad would speak up for him. Then all three of them could go on an adventure together.

Hem brooded on his new future for a while, concocting an enjoyable fantasy in which his own heroic acts featured prominently, and then remembered the bird. It had been very quiet, and he was sure it must have already died. But it was now standing up, and when he opened the chest it scuffled into a corner, trying to hide. Hem made some soothing noises, but didn't attempt to speak to it or lift it up. He noted that its beak wasn't gaping with thirst, which relieved his mind, and he gently shut the lid again.

It seemed ages before he heard steps in the corridor and a knock on the door. There was a pause, while Hem braced

himself for a round telling off and wondered why the door remained shut, and then Saliman said, "Hem? May I come in?"

Hem still wasn't used to these courtesies. "Yes, yes, come in," he said breathlessly, as he scrambled for the door and opened it.

Saliman stood in the corridor dressed in the red robes of a Turbansk Bard. His long black hair was tied back from his face in an intricate pattern of braids, and a golden brooch in the shape of a sunburst was pinned on his shoulder. He looked, Hem thought, glancing nervously at his dark face, not quite so cross as he might; surely that was the ghost of a smile haunting his lips? But maybe not...

Saliman was in fact looking in astonishment at the mess of clothes piled on Hem's bed. "I hope, Hem, that you are not thinking of running away?" he said, picking up a blue tunic.

Hem gulped. "No," he said. "I...I had to put the bird somewhere."

Saliman turned to face him, his face expressionless. "Bird?" he said.

"It was hurt. And they need a dark place, so they're not frightened. So I..." He faltered and stopped. Perhaps putting injured birds in clothes chests was not allowed in Bardhouses.

"Yes?"

"So I put it in the chest..." He gestured vaguely towards the other side of the room. "But I took all my clothes out first. So they wouldn't be dirtied. I didn't think it would be wrong," he added hastily, putting on his most virtuous expression, although whether his clothes remained clean wasn't something that ever bothered Hem. "I just wanted to help the bird."

Saliman stood very still, looking searchingly at Hem. Then he sat down on Hem's bed and rested his brow in his hands in a gesture of despair that made Hem grin despite himself, although he took care to straighten his face when Saliman looked up.

"Hem," he said at last. "Do you have any idea whose garden you entered today?"

Hem shook his head.

"I have just had a very long and very boring conversation with Alimbar el Nad. He is a Vizier of the Ernan of Turbansk, and is fifth in authority to the Ernan herself. It seems that he found you in his private courtyard, which he keeps expressly for his own use. Not even his servants are allowed there. And yet you seem more worried about whether or not your clothes are soiled..." He shook his head. "What were you doing there?"

Hem studied his feet closely. He wasn't going to admit that he was stealing mangoes if no one had accused him; he would be thrown out for sure. Saliman sighed heavily and stood up.

"After a great many courtesies and sweetmeats, and after offering to place the spell of bounty on his house, a most exhausting and complicated charm, I may add, and also the promise that I would whip you soundly, I managed to soothe him. Alimbar is a hasty and impatient man, quick to take offence - and to give it, truth be told. I had to swallow my pride at least three times, and that goes hard for Saliman of Turbansk. But you almost caused a most difficult friction between the School of Turbansk and the Court, and it could not be worse timed."

Hem stared at the floor until his eyes burned, only half comprehending what Saliman was saying.

"Hem," Saliman continued gravely. "I am very angry with you, and I ought to punish you. But, to be honest, I don't believe it would make anything better than it is. So I will

not be whipping you. Although perhaps that is merely to save what little shreds of my pride remain."

"So you're not going to send me away?" Despite himself, Hem's voice wavered.

Saliman looked surprised. "Send you away? Whether you stay here or not is your decision, Hem, not mine. No, I would not send you away."

Hem gave an involuntary sigh of relief. He was not afraid of being whipped, although no one had hit him since he had met Maerad, and perhaps he had lost some of his old toughness. But now Saliman was standing with his back to him, looking out of the window. He was silent for a long time, and Hem began to feel ashamed of himself.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, when the silence had stretched out too long.

"But are you, Hem?" asked Saliman, turning around. "Are you really sorry? It is not enough to say so, and then to do the same thing again."

Now Saliman's face was very serious, and a fluttering started in Hem's stomach. When Saliman was happy with him Hem felt exultant, but his displeasure hurt more than any whipping. It wasn't because Hem was frightened of him, although Saliman was one of the few human beings he wholeheartedly respected. There was an unsettling power in Saliman's dark gaze, which seemed to see without prejudice or fear through any dissembling.

"Well?" Saliman's voice was gentle, but within it was a strength like steel.

"I am sorry," said Hem, a little more clearly. "I don't mean to cause trouble."

Saliman sighed again, and sat back down on the bed, patting the cushions beside him. "Sit down, Hem. Tell me, are you very unhappy?"

Hem blinked at the unexpectedness of the question. He had not spoken to Saliman about his feelings. He opened his mouth to answer, and then shut it again.

"Urbika tells me you are not making friends," said Saliman. "And she says you are struggling with the Suderain language, which can't help."

Despite himself, Hem blushed. He didn't like the thought that people were observing him like that. He struggled with himself. He had longed for the chance to pour out his heart to Saliman, to tell him all his troubles. Saliman would understand his constant nightmares, his fears, the difficulties he had talking to people, how he hated the other minor Bards. He knew that Saliman would not judge him. But now the chance had come, it was as if his jaws were sewn together with wire.

"I miss Maerad," he said at last.

"That, alas, is a wound I cannot heal," said Saliman gently. "Although I can perhaps help with other things."

There was another long silence, while Hem sat scowling and speechless.

"Well," said Saliman, when it was clear that Hem would not volunteer anything further. "Perhaps we should look at this bird of yours."

Hem brightened up at the change of subject, and opened the chest. The bird cowered in the corner, staring at them unblinkingly. Saliman picked it up carefully, whispering to it in the Speech, and it relaxed into his hand.

"Do you think it will be all right?" asked Hem, watching Saliman anxiously.

"I think it has sustained no great hurt," said Saliman. He examined the bird closely, murmuring in the Speech as he did so. As he did, he began to glow faintly with a strange

inner light. Hem, who had now seen a few Bards using their Gift, knew he was making a healing charm, and relaxed. He felt a strange affinity with this tatty, abused bird, and he was relieved that it was getting the proper treatment. He could do healing, but he wasn't confident about his ability.

After a short time Saliman had finished, and he coaxed the bird onto Hem's wrist, where it perched, perfectly tame, as if it were a falcon. Its feet felt cold against his skin, and its claws dug in with a surprising strength. Hem chirped at it, and then said, in the Speech, *Are you all right, Little One?*

Better, said the bird. *Hungry!* And it made an interrogative noise very close to the wheezing gasp of a baby bird asking for food.

"It's scarce more than a nestling!" Saliman said, smiling. "But what is it?"

"I thought you might know," said Hem eagerly. "It looks kind of like a crow..."

"Yes, but it's white." Saliman regarded it with his head cocked to one side. "How did you find it?"

"Well, I was sitting in the mango tree when..." Hem stopped.

Saliman glanced at him ironically. "I had assumed that you were raiding Alimbar's fruit trees," he said. "Very expensive fruit it is, too. And then?"

Hem blushed for his slip, and told the full story of how he had found the bird. Saliman listened attentively, and then stroked the bird's head. "An outcast, eh?" he said. "Perhaps it will not want to go back to its kin, where it will be persecuted. I think it is a crow, who was so poorly used because it is unlike the others. Crows will do that. You may have found a companion, Hem." He stood up. "I'll leave you to decide whether you want to look after a crow. I have many things to do, and I am now running

grievously late."

He walked to the door, and turned around. "I haven't forgotten your trespass," he said. "We'll say no more for today. But I will do some thinking, and I think that you ought to, as well." Then he left.

Hem nodded abstractedly; his attention was all turned to the bird. It now looked very perky, but it was, he thought, rather scruffy. It would look better when all its adult feathers had grown and it didn't have greyish fluff poking through them, which gave it a kind of ragamuffin look.

So, he said. Do you want to stay with me? I can look after you.

Feed me? said the bird.

Yes, I'll feed you. And keep those others away. You'll be safer.

The bird ruffled its feathers, stuck out its tail and soiled the floor.

But you'll have to do that outside, Hem added, thinking with dismay of Saliman's rather stern housemaster. *Because people will get cross with me.*

The bird turned its head, fixing Hem with one of its eyes.

I stay, it said.

So what is your name? asked Hem.

Name?

What do they call you?

I was not given a name, said the crow. *The flock would not name me, when my wing feathers came, because I am wrongcoloured. I have no name.*

You have to have a name, said Hem. He thought for a moment, and remembered the word for "bird" that had been used by the Pilanel people he had briefly known.
How about Irc?

Irc? The bird bobbed up and down comically on his wrist.
Irc! I have a name! Irc! It soiled the floor again.

I told you, said Hem. *You'll have to do that outside.*

Feed me? Hungry!

All right Irc, Hem said, sighing, but only with pretended impatience. *I'll feed you.*

2: WOUNDS

IT wasn't very surprising that Hem had not learned much of the Suderain language. He had only recently arrived in Turbansk, after a two-week journey south with Saliman all the way from Norloch, the chief citadel of Annar. They had fled the city as the it trembled on the brink of civil war, and Maerad and Cadvan had stayed behind, planning to escape that night and head north on a quest for the Treesong. Nobody really knew what the Treesong was, but Hem, with the certainty of his twelve years, had perfect faith that Maerad would return triumphant, having not only discovered what the Treesong was, but having saved the world from the Dark as well. For wasn't that what the old prophecies had said she would do?

That night, as he and Saliman galloped through the moonlit fields of the Carmallachan in the Vale of Norloch, Hem looked back over his shoulder and saw the towers of the ancient citadel in flame, with a great smoke spiralling upwards and obscuring the stars. When at last they had stopped, Hem had passed the night in despair, sure that Maerad and Cadvan must be dead. Saliman had consoled him, saying that Maerad and Cadvan were sure to have escaped, that there were secret passages which even Enkir did not know. Hem just swallowed and hoped. Beneath his boundless faith in Maerad's abilities was a dreadful fear that he would never see her again.

He didn't fully understand what had happened in Norloch, but Saliman explained that Enkir, the First Bard, and therefore the most important Bard in Annar, had revealed himself as a traitor against the Light. Moreover, Enkir had destroyed Hem's family: it was Enkir who had overseen the sack of Pellinor ten years before, when Hem's father had been murdered and his mother and Maerad sold into slavery. Hem himself had been kidnapped by the Black Bards, the Hulls, under Enkir's orders, and put into an orphanage: a miserable prison where he had lived most of

his short life with the other unwanted children of Edinur.

Many of Hem's nightmares were about the orphanage; he would dream that he was still there, in a dank, pitch-black room crammed with children of all ages lying three or four to each stinking pallet, freezing cold in winter and sweltering in summer. It was never quiet: children whimpered and muttered and screamed all night, even in their sleep. Babies were put in with the rest of the children, and very few of them survived, although the older children tried to care for them. Hem had many memories of small blue corpses being taken out in the mornings. Sometimes what the children did to each other was worse than the neglect and careless brutality of the adults who ran the place: there was a vicious hierarchy among the orphans, reinforced by beatings and taunts, and any weakness was quickly identified and exploited. There was never enough food, and the children often sickened and died from the illnesses which raged rapidly through the crowded buildings. Only the tough survived; and luckily Hem was tough.

He had been taken out of the orphanage by a Hull, who brought him to a fine house where, for the first time he could remember, Hem slept in clean sheets and had enough to eat. But he was still afraid: the people in the house were sinister and cold, and he found out later they were all Hulls. They had tried to make him become one of them, tempting him with their immortality. They showed him that Hulls did not die: even if stabbed through the heart, a Hull would stand up again, smiling, the wound instantly closed over. But a horrified instinct in Hem rebelled against their persuasions, which although softly spoken, with fair and reasonable words, caused icy chills to run down his spine.

Finally, at the dark of the moon, the Hulls tried to make Hem a Black Bard by force. Although he did his best to forget it, he remembered that night with a horrible clarity, and it too figured in his nightmares. The Hulls had ordered him to kill a boy, a boy he knew from the orphanage. When he had refused, despite their worst threats, they killed the child themselves, forcing Hem to

watch, and burned his body in an ensorcelled fire. Hem was then locked in his room without food and left alone, too frightened even to sob in the darkness.

The next day the Hulls had been out on some foul errand, and by chance Hem was rescued by two Pilanel men who were robbing the house. The Pilanel had been kind to him, taking him as one of their own because of his olive skin and Pilanel features; but the Hulls had tracked them down in the wilderness and mercilessly slaughtered the family who had cared for him. Hem, hidden in the Pilanel caravan, had heard everything.

That was something else he had nightmares about.

After he had lain for hours in his cramped hiding place, too terrified to venture out, Maerad and Cadvan found him. He had then discovered that not all Bards were Hulls, as he had thought. Finding that he had a sister, someone who belonged to him, someone who without question wrapped her warm arms around him when he cried out and trembled in his black dreams, was the most important thing that had happened to him in his whole life. When he had been forced to leave her behind, he had felt as if his heart had been cut in two. It was a loss he tried not to think about, because it hurt him too much.

Meeting Saliman was the second most important thing that had happened to him. Despite his anxieties about Maerad, the ride to Turbansk with Saliman had been his first taste of real freedom. The weather had stayed fine for most of the way, and although they feared pursuit from Norloch, he and Saliman had encountered no dangers. After Hem's body had made the first painful adjustments to horseback, for riding made his legs so stiff that he thought he would walk with bowed legs for the rest of his life, the journey had been an unalloyed pleasure.

Hem often wished he could ride again with Saliman through the mountains of Osidh Am, his favourite part of the whole journey. They had camped at night by still pools in the fragrant forests of larch and fir, and Hem would lie back by the fire looking up at the bright stars through the

branches high above him. During the day they often surprised small herds of deer, which would leap up almost under the horses' feet to crash away through the bracken, and sometimes they brushed past bushes full of butterflies, which would start up in a cloud of bright colours about their heads.

There were no other people for leagues, and a great peace began to rise in Hem's heart. It was the happiest he had ever been. On the other hand, his first sight of Turbansk, which was, Saliman told him, the most ancient city in Edil-Amarandh, had been bewildering and overwhelming.

They had arrived at first light on a summer's day, just before the dawn bell. The Great Bell of Turbansk, three times the height of a man, hung in a high belfry under a gilt cupola above the West Gate, one tower in that city of many towers which glowed like an opulent mirage on the shores of the Lamarsan Sea. It was struck every day at the exact moment that the sun's disc appeared over the horizon.

As it rang over the city, it seemed to Hem as if the sound itself was made of light. Sunlight and bellnote spilt simultaneously over market and tower, house and hall and hovel, picking out the glittering domes of the School and the Ernan and the Red Tower, flushing the stone walls pale pink or warm yellow. The sun flooded the city's broad squares and trickled into the narrow alleys of the poor quarters, where the walls were painted in fading greens or blues or reds and fresh washing was strung over the street from house to house like colourful flags. High above the city the tower windows flashed like huge diamonds, and on the great lake of Lamarsan a path of dazzling gold flared across the water.

In the markets, which teemed with people hours before dawn, the flaming torches faded in the sudden increase of light and the world flooded with colour. The dew sparkled on the roses and jasmine and saffron in the flower stalls, and rainbows quivered over the scales of trout and salmon, and on the iridescent feathers of freshly killed ducks and pheasants as they lay on the marble benches of food

markets.

From the food and flower markets spread a labyrinth of alleys lined with stalls and tiny shops, which sold everything from plain brass lamps to curious enamelled fortune-telling boxes which were used to predict the positions of the stars, from robes of diaphanous silk to thick linen tunics, from rings and brooches to knives and saucepans. The tiny streets were packed with people: bakers walking with fresh loaves on trays balanced on their heads; donkeys and pack mules loaded down with huge panniers or sacks; farmers from the Fesse outside the city carrying baskets of dates or live ducks, their heads poking from the top; women in bright, embroidered robes, their fingers sparkling with rings; children squabbling and playing; and hawkers marching up and down, calling the virtues of their wares.

There was a whole street of spice sellers, who sat behind their counters with bowls of precious ground spices before them, saffron tendrils and cardamom and whole nutmegs and cinnamon sticks; and then you would turn the corner and find a street of shops full of songbirds and finches, fluttering in cages of copper wire; and then the next was full of stalls with copper braziers, that sold tiny tin cups of black coffee and sweet honey-filled cakes and hot bean pastries, and jugglers and minstrels plied their trades for the gossiping customers.

Hem stared amazed at the ordered chaos of Turbansk, his nostrils flaring. The streets were aromatic with spices from the hawker stalls and everyone, men and women, wore musky perfumes. As the heat of the day increased, the perfumes merged with other, earthier smells - rotting vegetables and sweat and waste - so that Hem felt faint, as if he were drugged in some sweet stupor and moved through a constantly changing hallucination.

The people of Turbansk took great pleasure in personal adornment: at first Hem thought everyone in Turbansk must be fabulously rich, for he saw no one who did not wear golden earrings or bracelets or some intricately fashioned brooch. Later he knew that those who were

poor wore trinkets of brass, with glass jewels; but to Hem they seemed no less beautiful than emeralds and gold. Nothing had prepared him for the rich colours and ceaseless movement, the countless men and women and children who moved with unerring grace through the teeming streets. To his astonishment, he saw no beggars: they were everywhere in Edinur. He turned and asked Saliman if they had been banished from the city, and Saliman laughed.

"Nay, Hem, here the Light does its work. No one goes hungry in Turbansk," he said.

Hem mulled over this in silence. "Then won't people get lazy?" he said at last.

Saliman gave him a sharp look. "What do you mean?"

"If they don't have to work for food, I mean."

Saliman stared ahead for a moment, as if revolving thoughts in his head. "If a person doesn't want to work, that is their loss," he said at last. "To make things, to care for what one loves, to earn one's place in the city, that is one of life's great pleasures. It is not a Bard's business to tell people what to do: if they are hungry and ask for food, we give them something good to eat. We have plenty, after all. Then they are able to think what they might do best. If their best is sitting in the gardens watching the carp in the pools, then so be it."

Hem blinked in surprise. It seemed wrong to him, simply to give food away for nothing.

The city of Hem's daydreams so far surpassed them that his expectations wavered like smoke and collapsed utterly. He scarcely remembered his first week there; it passed in a blur of unfamiliar voices and words and colours and smells: the fresh touch of linen sheets against his skin; the silken caress of his new robes; the tastes of the food, which flamed along his tongue, making him choke and gasp; the hundreds of faces he saw in the streets every day, each one

a stranger... Although Hem wasn't afraid, this sudden profusion of sensation induced something very like panic. In the midst of his confusion the only still point was Saliman, who, perceiving the chaos of Hem's mind, for that first week took him everywhere. Hem haunted Saliman's footsteps like a little dog, never less than three paces behind him, as if he were the one rock in a turbulent and threatening world.

But in seven days the world stopped whirling and settled down, and Hem began to find his bearings. He was instated into the School of Turbansk as a minor Bard and now wore on his breast a brooch in the shape of a golden sun, the token of a Bard of Turbansk. Saliman told him to keep the medallion of Pellinor, which he had owned since he was a baby, in a cloth bag that he hung around his neck; it did not mark him as a Bard of Pellinor, but it told of his heritage.

The Turbansk brooch, a gift from Saliman, pleased Hem much more than his lessons which, apart from swordcraft and unarmed combat, he found much more difficult than he had expected. The study bored him, even the studies in magery, and he was at best a mediocre student.

This puzzled Saliman, who believed Hem had a facility with magery. He had taught Hem a few techniques on their journey to Turbansk and, when he had time, showed him mageries that caught the boy's fancy. Hem was particularly adept with the charms to do with concealment, shadowmazing and glimveils, and had even mastered a disguising spell which was a speciality of Cadvan's, and which was particularly difficult. Saliman suspected this ability might have to do with his life in the orphanage, when he had been forced to keep his Barding powers hidden, as anyone suspected of witchspeak - which was what the ignorant termed the Speech - might be stoned to death. Yet in classes he acted the dullard, refusing to concentrate or focus his powers.

Shortly after their arrival in the Turbansk, to Hem's dismay, Saliman told Hem he had to leave Turbansk, and disappeared for a few days. This was when Hem began to

feel truly isolated. Saliman would not tell him where he was going or when he would be back, and despite Hem's pleadings would not take him with him. Hem felt it as a betrayal; a small betrayal, perhaps, but a betrayal nevertheless. Saliman came back for a day and then vanished again, and Hem began to feel more lonely than ever.

During Saliman's absences the Turbansk Bards were kind to him, but Hem found this almost as bewildering Turbansk itself. He simply wasn't used to being treated with courtesy. The first time a Bard gave him the bow of greeting he had flushed red with anger, believing that he was being mocked; but fortunately Saliman was present and took him aside, explaining that it was the custom, and that he was simply expected to bow back.

Most often his confusions erupted without warning into explosions of rage. Perhaps Hem's greatest difficulty was that he didn't speak Suderain, but that might have been overcome if he had not also suffered from a deep mistrust of almost everybody who attempted to speak to him. Within days his fellow students had dismissed him as surly and aggressive, and before long some were taunting him, provocations to which he always responded violently. By the time Hem rescued Irc, he had punched three minor Bards hard enough to warrant visits to the School healer for both parties, and once had even used magery against a student, a practice so strictly forbidden in the School that Urbika had told him sternly that he would be thrown out altogether if he ever did such a thing again.

All this was in Saliman's mind as he contemplated his charge over the evening meal, a couple of weeks after Hem's escapade in Alimbar's garden. Hem was proving a more testing responsibility than he had expected, although he did not regret his decision. Underneath his exasperation, Saliman had grown to love this difficult, troubled boy, and he had a Truthteller's intuitive understanding of the contradictory emotions which were

tearing Hem apart. What he didn't know, he thought, was what to do about them.

Hem was on his best behaviour, and so was acting as if he were made of wood; in his nervousness he had already knocked over a full glass of wine. I am a healer, Saliman thought to himself, and counted great in that art in this city; but these wounds are beyond me. Perhaps only Maerad could heal them... He thought of Hem's pale-skinned sister, in her own way almost as damaged and lonely as Hem was, and sighed.

Saliman had arranged to eat alone with Hem that night, and Hem, conscious of his sins, was unusually tense and silent in the Bard's company. Only that morning he had endured yet another difficult interview with Urbika, who had patiently asked him why he felt obliged to use his single talent - that for unarmed combat - against his fellow students.

Hem had stood before her, silent and scowling. He could not tell her that it was because Chyafa, the minor Bard whom he had, shortly before, left with a black eye, had called him a dirty white hlaf. Chyafa was Hem's principal enemy in Turbansk: a strongly built, handsome boy with an air of superiority who dropped his taunts with an air of carelessness which only intensified their sting. To report the insult was to compound Hem's humiliation: Hem understood enough Suderain to know what hlaf meant. It was the word for carrion crow, which as an insult meant an ignorant barbarian, and it particularly hurt because it referred to Irc as well. A number of other children had laughed at Chyafa's witticism and Hem knew then, with a sense of furious helplessness, that it had become their nickname for him.

So he had said nothing, dumbly awaiting his punishment, and Urbika had pressed her lips tight with suppressed frustration. She was having a trying morning. Hem had been assigned the dawn duties for a week as a punishment, which meant waking before the first bell, shivering out of his bed in the dark hours before daylight to sweep out the Singing Hall and lay out the bowls and spoons for the other Bards, and then working in the kitchen, stirring

great cauldrons of dohl, the dried beans which were boiled with fermented milk and sweetened with honey for breakfast.

It was a mild punishment: privately Hem didn't mind these duties, since he liked Soron, who oversaw the kitchens. He was a fair-haired, heavily built Bard from Til Amon, and he had a trick of wordless, unpatronising kindness. He kept Hem supplied with meat for Irc, without Hem having to ask more than once, and gave him any sweetmeats left over from the previous evening, and never asked him questions about himself; which paradoxically meant that Hem was more chatty with Soron than with anyone except Saliman.

Hem knew that Saliman was very busy; he had only that morning returned from one of his mysterious trips. This probably meant that tonight's meal had been arranged because he wanted to say something particular. Hem feared, again, that he was to be sent away, that this last outrage had torn even Saliman's patience with him. He was so nervous that his appetite had disappeared, and he merely picked at the fresh fruits piled on the table, although among them were some of his favourites: mangoes (sent as a courtesy, Saliman told him ironically, from Alimbar's private garden), starfruit, pomegranates, figs, green melons and grapes.

Irc, who had been granted special dispensation to come, was perched on the back of Hem's chair. The bird had no such inhibitions, and gulped down the pieces of meat and fruit Hem fed him, wiping his beak on the boy's hair. He then gave a content baby-like cheep and moved to Hem's shoulder, where he crouched close against his neck. Abstractedly Hem reached up and scratched Irc's neck and the bird made little crooning noises, stretching out his head in bliss.

"Irc certainly looks well," said Saliman. "You have been taking good care of him, for certain."

"He likes me." Hem gave a small smile. "But only because I feed him."

"There is more to care than food," answered Saliman.
"Though I agree that is an important part of it."

"I've trained him not to do his droppings inside. Though it's taken a bit of persuasion," said Hem proudly. "Eh, Little One?" Irc gave a sleepy chirp.

"Well, I am very glad of that."

The conversation faltered again, and Saliman sat back, straightening his shoulders, and let out a long breath. "Well, Hem," he said. "There are a few things we must speak about together."

Hem looked up, unable to conceal his agitation. He had been waiting for Saliman to say something like this. "What are we going to do?" asked Saliman.

Hem cleared his throat. "Do? About what?"

"About you, of course."

There was a short silence while Hem mentally surveyed his catalogue of misdemeanours. "I don't know," he said forlornly.

"In normal circumstances, I would know what to do," said Saliman. "It would simply be a matter of time; you are not used to life as a Bard, and it is a difficult life to adjust to, even for those who come here without your troubles. But time, I fear, is what we do not possess."

Hem slouched down in his chair, scowling at the table. Did this mean that he was going to be thrown out?

"You know, Hem, that Turbansk is preparing for war."

Everyone knew that. Hem sat up straight again. "Yes," he said.

"I'm not entirely sure that you know what that means," said Saliman. "Which is why I wanted to talk to you tonight, although I should really be elsewhere. We have had terrible news today: the Iron Tower has marched on Baladh."

Hem nodded. Baladh, he knew, was one hundred and fifty leagues east of Turbansk. Like everyone else in the School, he had heard the news, which had arrived by bird courier that morning and spread through Turbansk like wildfire. The students had been whispering about it in the corridors, shocked and subdued, and a girl whose family lived in Baladh had started crying in one of the classes and had been taken away by Urbika.

"We know very little yet about what is happening there," said Saliman. "I am grieved; many friends live there, and I don't know how they are faring, or even if they are still alive. Baladh is a School almost as old as Turbansk, and as venerable in the Knowing and the Lore. If it falls, and I fear that it cannot stand, it will be a loss beyond calculation."

For a few moments the strain showed on Saliman's face and, for the first time that evening, Hem was jolted out of his self-absorption. He stared at the Bard with surprise; Saliman's eyes were bright with unshed tears. Hem couldn't find the words to say what stirred in his heart, and he merely stammered, before falling silent.

"Well," said Saliman at length, "We will find out soon enough. And if Baladh does fall, nothing but a few small towns and hamlets will stand between the armies of the Nameless One and Turbansk. It will not be long before we too shall be facing the same fate."

For a few moments Hem felt himself fill with a black dread: this was the stuff of his nightmares, but unimaginably multiplied.

"In two weeks or so, perhaps less, perhaps more, Turbansk will be assailed by the Black Army," Saliman continued. "I

know we cannot expect any help from the north. We will be lucky if he do not have an army marching on us from there as well, although I think Enkir still plays his double game. Most Bards in Annar do not know of dealing with the Dark, and will believe what he says and mistakenly follow him; and I doubt not that he moves against all the Seven Kingdoms, from Lirigon in the north to Suderain in the south. But all the kingdoms will resist, if that is what Enkir plans; and I think if he does move, it will be first against the western kingdoms, against Culain and Ileadh and Lanorial. So, no threat from the north; but no help either." Saliman's voice was quiet, as if he were speaking to himself, but Hem listened attentively.

"But will Turbansk really fall?" he asked, thinking of the power and pride of Turbansk, its thick walls and high towers, and its thousands of people. "It is stronger and bigger than Baladh, isn't it? Surely...?"

"Hem, I do not know if we shall prevail." Saliman smiled at him sadly. "It may be that I was born to see the last days of this city I love so well. Yes, we are mighty, and we are strong; but the force the Nameless One brings against us is the greatest seen since the Great Silence, when all Annar was conquered and the high cities of the Dhyllin cast to the ground. I fear that against the darkness that rises now there shall be no prevailing."

There was no arguing against the bleakness of Saliman's voice, and Hem, whose mouth was open to ask another question, said nothing. Saliman was silent for a time, lost in his thoughts, and then filled his glass again with wine.

"How do you know about the army?" Hem asked at last, to break the silence.

Saliman looked up, startled out of his abstraction. "I'm sorry Hem, I was thinking. Where do you think I have been these past weeks? I and others with me have been finding out what I can about this army. The army that marches on Baladh is more than even Turbansk can resist."

Hem looked at Saliman with renewed respect, and felt guilty for his hard thought about Saliman's absences. He had had no idea that Saliman was doing anything as dangerous as spying out the forces of the Nameless One.

"But, for all the hopelessness of our situation," Saliman continued, "we shall not despair. I do not think we will hold Turbansk, but that does not mean that we will give it up without a fight."

Although Saliman spoke quietly, a passion throbbed in his voice which sent a strange shiver went down Hem's spine, and he almost jumped up and shouted. But Saliman, who was not given to passionate utterance, visibly mastered himself, and smiled at Hem.

"Which brings me to you, Hem. I ask again, what shall we do? In a few days, all those who cannot fight, the old, the infirm, the children - and they include the younger students of Turbansk School - will be leaving for Car Amdridh, where there is more hope of holding out against the Black Army than there is here. Shall you go with them?"

"No!" It burst out of Hem before he could stop himself. "Not if you're not going! Don't send me away from you!"

Saliman stared gravely at Hem, and the boy looked down at the table, feeling foolish. It was as clear a declaration of love as any he had made in his life. But Saliman did not smile; his dark face was sad and thoughtful, and the gaze he cast on Hem was full of a strange tenderness.

"I have thought, for a number of reasons, that perhaps it would be better if you stayed with me," he said. "But it seemed also to me like a mad thought. Life will be very dangerous here, and to stay here is to risk your life. I will demand a lot of you, if you remain with me."

"I'll do anything you say," said Hem, his voice cracking with urgency. He most profoundly didn't want to be sent away with the students: he did not want to be banished

from Saliman's presence.

"I will need you to be older than you are," said Saliman. "I will need you to be larger than you think you are, to think beyond your own petty concerns. I know you are capable of it."

Hem thought again of his behaviour over the past weeks, and regretted it sincerely for the first time.

"I promise," he said. "I really do."

Saliman studied Hem coolly, as if weighing his value, and the boy blushed and bowed his head under the scrutiny. "I don't want you to make a rash choice, Hem," the Bard said at last. "I would not contemplate your staying if I thought it was certain you would be killed, but the risk, all the same, is very great, and it will be harder than you now think. I do not walk safe paths."

Hem looked up, and now the passion blazing within him was naked in his eyes. "I'll follow you anywhere," he said.

There was a pause, and then Saliman smiled, but it was not a joyous smile.

"Hem, my heart tells me that, like Maerad, you have some task in this struggle," he said. "I do not know what it is, but I believe it lies here, and not in Amdridh. And I think it is right that you stay here, as you wish. But it is not a decision I take without much misgiving."

There was a long silence while Hem struggled with a strange exhilaration. He knew he ought to feel afraid, that he did feel afraid, but Saliman's promise to keep him in Turbansk filled him with a buoyant light. Saliman, he thought, with a surprise which was almost painful, *trusted* him.

Irc, now wide awake, was bored by all the talk, and flapped onto the table to steal some food.

"That means Irc too, doesn't it?" said Hem, his eyes

shining. "I'm sure Irc can help? He could carry messages... and..."

Saliman grinned suddenly, and all the strain seemed suddenly to vanish from his face. "As long as he keeps his house manners," he said dryly. "He does not eat so much as you, for all his greed, so perhaps we can afford him."

Irc gulped down his pilfered food and, knowing they were speaking of him, cocked his head.

You be good, said Hem sternly in the Speech. *Yes?*

I good, said Irc, turning towards Hem and knocking over Saliman's glass, for the second time that night, with his tail.

Saliman rolled his eyes upwards, and started mopping the table with a cloth. Hem scrambled up to help him, radiant with an awkward joy he was unable to conceal. For the first time since his arrival in Turbansk, he didn't feel unwanted and in the way.

It was going to be all right, he thought. It was really going to be all right.

He was, of course, quite wrong.

3: THE SHADOW OF WAR

SURVIVORS from the siege of Baladh and the conquest of the Nazar Plains began to straggle into Turbansk over the next two weeks. First came a fleet of craft fleeing across the Lamarsan Sea, a motley collection ranging from tiny skin coracles to the long sailing dromonds, bearing as many as could be crammed inside them. A day or so later the remains of the mounted forces sent by Turbansk to reinforce the Baladh defence rode through the City Gate; they had been wildly routed, and little more than half of their original strength returned home.

Next came those who had been able to escape overland in the chaos of the battle. The first wave came on horseback, wild-eyed and gaunt, carrying many wounded with them; then families perched on wains drawn by exhausted horses and oxen, with thin, wide-eyed children who did not speak, and yet more hurt and dying; and lastly those on foot, filthy with the dust of the road, carrying children and others who could not walk because of hurt or age in makeshift sedans, or even on their backs.

By the time the first survivors arrived, the evacuation of Turbansk was all but complete. Those students at the School younger than seventeen were among the first to leave for Amdridh, many with loud protests; among the loudest were Chyafa's, who resented it mightily when he heard that Hem alone, among all the children his age, was to stay behind for the defence of the city. Hem enjoyed a sweet feeling of revenge when he saw Chyafa's gaze turned upon him with rancorous envy, but he found he did not feel the need, this time, to rise to his sneers. Hem merely smiled at his enemy and said nothing, and saw with satisfaction that it made him even more annoyed.

For days there was a stream of wains and carriages and

horses on the western road, carrying supplies and precious goods - the rarest and most irreplaceable scripts from the Library, treasures from the Turbansk palaces, the chief riches of every household - and all those who were not needed to defend the city. There were many grievous farewells; families were divided, fearing they would never meet again, parents from children, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters, lovers and old friends. Hem witnessed many despairing partings in his duties about the streets of Turbansk, and counted himself the luckier for staying.

And so Turbansk changed: there were few children playing in the streets, and then none, and the adults who made their ways through the city were solemn and preoccupied. Saliman's Bardhouse seemed empty, as only a few people remained there; he had been mentor to mostly younger students. Hem's chamber no longer echoed with the faint sounds of conversation and music and laughter which usually filtered through from its many rooms. He was unsettled by the quiet; it brought home what was happening in the city, and sparked a growing sense of foreboding.

And as the stream of people pouring out of Turbansk towards the west dwindled and then ceased, others came in from the east and filled the empty houses, pausing briefly before they too, those who were not too ill or exhausted to move, or who were not staying to defend Turbansk, took the long road west. Now there were also people from the villages and hamlets of the Balkir Plains between Turbansk and Baladh, fleeing from the advancing armies. The forces of the Nameless One were burning everything in their path, house and vine and orchard, and a faint black smudge was visible on the eastern horizon, turning the sunrise the colour of blood.

The Healing Houses were not large enough to house all the wounded from Baladh, and so the empty School was used as well, and Bards in white robes moved between rows of beds in the cloisters where only days before students had run and shouted and laughed. Hem was asked to help the healers, and he threw himself into the work with a good

will. Even Irc was pressed into service, and when he was not on his usual perch on Hem's shoulder, flapped around the buildings bearing scribbled notes or messages.

Hem saw a lot of grim sights. There were many people, including a dozen Baladh children, with terrible burns which had not been attended to properly in their flight, and they suffered terrible pain. The healers used a strong drug distilled from poppies and exerted all their Bardic arts to dull their agonies; but many of them died.

When Hem first saw the shocking burns, on a tiny girl who could not have been more than three years old, he thought his heart would burst with anger. She did not cry, but held hard to her mother, staring at her with black eyes full of a mute, unanswerable appeal. Even when she died, beyond the help of even the greatest healers of Turbansk, she still held on to her mother, and the woman's hand had to be gently untangled from the dead fingers, which grasped as tightly as a vice. It was then that Hem asked Oslar, the chief healer, what had happened to the burned children.

Oslar was an old man even by Bardic reckoning, his hair very white and his skin very black, and his strong face was lined with a deep and patient sadness. Hem reflected that he must have seen a lot of suffering in his long life. "She was caught by one of the worst weapons of the Dark," he said. "It was the dogsoldiers."

Hem had heard of dogsoldiers, but up until then they had been just a word.

"What are they?" he asked, although he knew that Oslar was needed elsewhere and did not have time to answer his questions.

"They are not human, and I do not know if they ever were," said the old Bard, speaking plainly and looking him in the eye, as one adult to another. "They are creatures of flesh and metal and fire, made by some foul sorcery in the forges of Dén Raven, and they do not know what mercy is. They have heads like dogs with muzzles of blue steel.

Their very bodies are weapons. They can shoot a liquid fire, which sticks to flesh and eats into it. It's the strange fire, how it sticks, that makes the burns so bad."

Oslar looked across at the other beds in that room, with their small victims, and Hem swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. "Now, Hem, I have work to do. Excuse me." Oslar nodded courteously, and Hem followed him with his eyes as he moved slowly from bed to bed. Hem knew the old Bard had slept scarce three hours in the past two nights, and yet he showed no sign of weariness.

He was grateful that his question had been answered, although the answer did not comfort him. Oslar, he thought to himself, was a very great man. Then he felt surprised at himself: he didn't usually think things like that.

As Hem ran around the School of Turbansk, bearing philtres from the herbalists or new dressings from the weavers, bringing a beaker of water to a woman too weak from childbed to walk or holding a broken arm for binding, his anger smouldered and grew bright. He hated what had been done so wantonly to these people with every fibre in his being. He was no stranger to rage, but for the first time his feeling was tempered by compassion, and he discovered a patience within himself that he had not known he possessed.

Perhaps it was the example of Oslar and the other healers, including his mentor Urbika, who had stayed with most of the other Bards and was herself a gifted healer. Even if he made a mistake, which was seldom, they never spoke a sharp word to him, no matter how little sleep they had, nor how overworked they were. And so Hem learned, in those few days, how to listen to the ill, how to anticipate their needs, how to run fast in soft shoes so he made no loud noises which might disturb those who slept. Before the scale of the suffering which now lay before him, his previous complaints seemed petty and insignificant. He was too busy, in any case, to worry too much about himself; his day was filled from dawn to dusk with countless tasks and errands, and Oslar himself began to

teach him some charms of healing for the less serious cases. He was so tired by nightfall that he never dreamed, and for the first time since he had been in Turbansk was not troubled by nightmares.

When Saliman told him one evening that the Bards were praising his work, and that Oslar had said that few minor Bards in his experience had shown such innate talent as Hem in the arts of caring for the sick, Hem accepted the praise, which was hard earned, with a new humility.

"Don't be offended if I say that I am surprised; I thought you would be too impatient for this work," said Saliman, with a smile which for Hem was ample reward for every hour he had spent in the Healing House. "Perhaps you will be a healer when you are grown. Every Bard has to find out how their Gift best expresses itself; for some, it is a hard road. But I think you might be lucky. Healing is one of the highest callings; and there is always need for healers, even in times of peace."

Hem pondered Saliman's words in silence. He could imagine himself as a healer. Perhaps one day he could be as good as Oslar.

"You'd have to work on your scripting, though," said Saliman, interrupting his reverie. "Imagine, say, if the herbalist made a love potion instead of a laxative because he couldn't read your instructions. The trouble you could cause!"

Hem grinned; Saliman was constantly nagging him to work on his writing, which was nearly illegible. Perhaps now he could see the point.

They were eating a quick meal before Saliman went out again to continue the endless work of preparing Turbansk for an assault. The food was plain but tasty: fresh fish from the lake baked with dates, and a mash of pulses. Outside Saliman's rooms, birds burred in the trees as they settled to their evening roosts, and a cool breeze bussed Hem's cheek. It was very peaceful. Hem suddenly wished,

with a furious longing, that he could have come to Turbansk in ordinary times.

Saliman had just told him of the first attacks on Turbansk, by raider ships sailing from the mouth of the Niken River across the Lamarsan Sea, and Hem had seen soldiers in the eating halls, on their way to harry the black fleets, or returning exhausted and grim-faced. No raider ships had yet reached Turbansk, and, Saliman told him, none would: the harbour defences were stout. But the raiders drew off Turbansk's strength, wearying their forces even before the main assault; and after the fall of Baladh, Saliman feared that a fleet of stolen ships would set out from Baladh Harbour to launch a major attack.

Because of the war, Saliman had not even had time to take Hem, as he had promised, to see the Lamar Falls in the Lamarsan Caves, the sacred heart of the Light in Turbansk, which he had said were one of the wonders of the world. If times had been different, perhaps they could have ridden there with Maerad ...but Hem quickly shut off his thoughts about his sister: they were too painful.

"Will there ever be peace again?" he asked, a little sadly.

"Of course there will be." Saliman leaned back and closed his eyes, and Hem could see how weary he actually was. The skin under his eyes was purple, as if it were bruised, and his face was drawn. Hem wondered how long it was since Saliman had slept; he was willing to warrant it was more than two days. "If not in my lifetime or yours, then in someone else's."

Hem, depressed by Saliman's answer, didn't answer, and Saliman opened one eye and stared at him. "Forgive me, Hem; I should not jest. I am so weary, and the storm has not even hit."

"You must rest," said Hem sternly, with his new authority as a healer.

Saliman smiled wanly. "We will be ready soon," he said.

"Then I will rest. For a short time."

Over the next few days the black smudge of smoke in the east grew closer and the Healing Houses began to empty. All the sick were to leave Turbansk, even the worst injured, although Hem saw the anxiety on the healers' faces as they were placed in the special wains which were to transport them. He knew they should not be moved, but he also understood that it was impossible for them to stay in Turbansk. Many healers went with them, to care for them on their long journey to Car Amdridh, although Oslar and Urbika were among those who stayed behind, and, very suddenly, there was very little for Hem to do. He spent a day in the Bardhouse, bored and lonely but too depressed to go out, feeling a sense of doom growing inside him. His patience seemed to have disappeared with his work at the Healing Houses, and he was even irritable with Irc. That evening he asked if he could stay with Saliman the next day.

"Perhaps I could help?" he said. "Irc was really useful in the Healing Houses, too..."

Saliman studied Hem's face. "It might be as boring as anything you are doing here," he said. "But yes, I should have thought of it myself. It is a little gloomy waiting alone for war to break over your head. Of course you can come."

So the next day Hem became Saliman's shadow, as he had in his first week in Turbansk, except this time the slender boy had a white bird on his shoulder. The Bards and captains and city consuls did not object, if they seldom took notice of him, and the sick panic which had begun to stir in Hem's stomach eased back slightly; when he looked at the faces of the men and women who talked so earnestly, at their determination and strength, he did not see how they would be defeated.

As a member of the First Circle of Bards, one of the ruling bodies of Turbansk, Saliman was in charge of many

aspects of the city's defence, and by the end of the day Hem began to understand why Saliman had been so tired. That day he went to several different meetings at the School and at the Ernan, the great palace which stretched gracefully under the shadow of the Red Tower, listening to reports from scouts and the captains who had been attacking the raiders on the Lamarsan Sea with fire boats, and conferring with the other leaders of Turbansk to co-ordinate strategy. If any of them thought it odd that Hem was present, they didn't say so.

Hem hadn't been inside the Ernan before, and was awed. Most of its riches had been stripped and sent away to Car Amdridh, but it still possessed a breath-taking grandeur which surpassed even Norloch. Norloch was a high tower of guard built into the living rock above the Norloch Harbour, tower above tower of white stone topped by the Crystal Hall of the Machelinor, and it spoke of majesty and authority. The Ernan was not a tower but an ancient palace, and it was built for pleasure. It had been added to and changed by successive rulers over countless centuries until it was the largest single building in the city, surrounded by wide gardens planted with perfumed trees and rare flowers.

The palace spiralled luxuriously inside high walls of stone, room after graceful room connected by archways or doors wrought of brass or iron in intricate grilles. The floors were of polished marble or mosaics of glazed tiles, depicting abstract patterns of flowers or stars. The rooms opened onto countless courtyards, each different: one contained nothing but white sand, carefully raked into patterns, with black stones placed carefully upon it to induce contemplation; another held a fountain and a lawn of a pungent herb which refreshed the mind when it was walked on; yet another was full of roses of every colour, spilling in artful disarray onto marble paving. Some chambers had large windows which opened onto wide terraces, from which the sun could be watched as it set across the Lamarsan Sea.

Hem walked through the endless maze of the palace, hearing his heels echo on the floors, his mouth open. He

had thought the School of Turbansk grand, but this made the School seem austere. Saliman saw his expression and chuckled.

"We give our rulers the same name as their dwelling," he said. "For the people of Turbansk, both palace and ruler embody the greatness of our city; and, perhaps, its folly. Some Ernan have taken this role too literally; the Bards and the people had to relieve one of his rule, when he became too expensive to maintain. And so we have this great palace, one of the glorious treasures of Edil-Amarandh."

"How do you not get lost?" asked Hem breathlessly. Saliman was walking very fast, and he had almost to run to keep up with him, Irc clinging to his shoulder and flapping to keep his balance. He feared getting left behind, because he thought he would never find his way out.

"I've been walking this palace since I was little older than you," said Saliman. "And that is a long time. I am sorry that I have no time to show you its marvels. There is no place like it in the world, and there never will be again... There are chambers here where the walls are decorated only with precious stones. There is a summer house built entirely of jasper, which was made five hundred years ago solely for the recitation of a certain poem by a famous poet of Turbansk. In the Garden of Helian there is a beautiful house of red marble which was made by the Ernan Helian a thousand years ago, so he could study the stars; Bards still use it for skywatching. On festival days the people of Turbansk can enter here, and they come in their thousands to marvel and to picnic in the gardens. And I suppose I feel the same pride in the Ernan's extravagant beauty as they do, although at times I wonder..." He trailed off.

Hem, dazzled by the splendours he was walking through, looked up questioningly.

Saliman shrugged his shoulders, smiling. "You will have noticed there are no corridors in this palace. In Annar, they build corridors; the Annarens like that kind of logic.

This palace is built as a series of spirals. Here it is more complicated and oblique to get anywhere."

Hem privately agreed; he was hopelessly lost. But Saliman was continuing, musing as if to himself.

"Though in all the Seven Kingdoms power is complex," he said. "It is so, even in Annar. Norloch is relatively simple, because only Bards rule there... Elsewhere there are two authorities, the Bards and the governing councils. And the Bards and the other authorities do not always agree on what is best to do."

Saliman halted for a second, and looked around the colonnaded hall through which they were now walking. "But often I think that Turbansk is the most complicated," he said. "The people of Turbansk are born with politics in their blood. Cadvan would not last two days here; he would lose his temper and offend all the consuls, and from then on his life would be misery." Saliman grinned, thinking of his old friend.

"Sometimes this is a good thing; it is far better that people talk than fight. But when something must be done quickly - well, it can make it more difficult. Our friend Alimbar, for example, despite our desperation, has been making my life more complicated than it need be, for reasons of his own. But we are very fortunate in our present Ernan, Har-Ytan."

Saliman stopped outside tall doors more impressive than any Hem had yet seen: they were of cedar burnished to a deep, rich polish, with great bosses wrought of gold in the shape of the sun entwined in flames of different colours, from deep red to white gold. Saliman looked down at Hem.

"Hem, you must be on your best behaviour here. And Irc too," he added in the Speech, looking sternly at the bird, who gave a faint cark and hid his head in Hem's hair.

"Just bow as I do, and say nothing."

Suddenly nervous, Hem gulped and nodded, and Saliman bowed his head to the two palace guards, who opened the

doors and admitted them.

Hem paused involuntarily at the threshold, blinking with dazzlement. Saliman was striding forward, so he rapidly collected himself and followed. He cast covert glances about the room, doing his best not to look as overwhelmed as he felt. The rest of the palace was, he realised, merely a rehearsal for the throne room.

The Ernan sat on a wide, low dais at the far end, on a throne of black enamelled wood carved in filigree patterns with a marvellous delicacy so that, despite its size - its back stretched high behind the Ernan - it gave a impression of weightlessness. Behind the throne, stretching up to the ceiling, was a giant golden sun like those embossed on the doors, which cast a golden glow about the whole room. The walls, which were pierced by long, narrow windows that ran from floor to ceiling, were faced with plain panels of dull gold punctuated by murals painted with an exquisite delicacy, each framed in the same black enamelled filigree of which the throne was made. They depicted, Saliman told Hem later, famous stories of Suderain: one was of the Battle of the Dagorlad Plains, in which the Ernan of Turbansk had held back the forces of the Nameless One in the days of the Great Silence; another was of the meeting of Alibredh and Nalimbar, who were fabled lovers, in the water gardens of Jerr-Niken.

Hem and Saliman walked towards the throne on a path of black onyx tiles which bisected a wide and shallow pool that stretched for the width of the throne room and half its length. The pool, filled with flowering waterlilies, was stepped in three shallow terraces, and water spilled over the lips of the higher levels into the lower pools so the room was filled with its constant music, and the lilies gave off a subtle perfume.

To Hem, it seemed to take a very long time to walk the length of the pool, and then across the plain expanse of polished black stone which stretched before the dais. About the throne were set several low stools, of the same marvellous filigree as the throne itself, on which sat five people. They turned and watched as Saliman and Hem

approached and Hem recognised, with a flutter in his stomach, Alimbar, whom he had last seen holding his ear outside the door of Saliman's house. He also recognised Juriken, the First Bard of Turbansk, and Il Hanedr, whom he knew was the captain of the city soldiers, the Guardians of the Sun. A tough-looking, thin woman, Har-Ytan's chief guard Menika, stood silently by her right shoulder in Turbansk battle gear, and another woman in formal robes sat nearby, her head bowed.

The Ernan sat very still on the throne, watching their progress. Hem dared a swift glance, although by this time he was so awed he scarcely knew where to direct his eyes. The Ernan was the most regal human being he had ever seen.

She must have been fully Saliman's height, and her body was at once voluptuous and strong; if she had been less tall, he might have thought her stout. She wore a close-fitting dress of silk dyed craftily in many shades of red and orange, which shimmered against her black skin as if she were sheathed in a living flame, and her long hair was braided in tiny plaits in the style of Turbansk, beaded with rubies and gold so it fell in a glittering fountain down her back. A huge ruby was bound to her brow, and on her breast she wore a torque of gold emblazoned with the sun. Her powerful arms were bare, apart from bands of plain gold about her wrists, and a naked sword lay across her lap, in token of war.

When they reached the dais, Saliman genuflected on one knee and bowed his head, and Hem hastily copied him, wishing he had half of Saliman's grace. He was glad that he had been told not to speak; his mouth had gone completely dry, and he was sure that if he had said anything it would have come out as a squeak.

To his amazement, the Ernan addressed them in the Speech; he found later that the Speech was used in the Suderain for all debates of high policy, and although she was not a Bard, Har-Ytan spoke it well. Her voice was deep and musical, and seemed to resonate through the entire throne room.

"You are tardy, Saliman," she said. "We have been waiting."

The hair prickled on Hem's neck. He hoped fervently that she did not blame him.

"Forgive me, Har-Ytan, Fountain of the Light," Saliman answered. "I was detained by other urgent tasks. And only the most urgent could keep me from your glorious presence."

The Ernan laughed, a melodious ripple of mirth which sent a strange shiver down Hem's back.

"Consider yourself merely rebuked, then. Welcome, Cai of Pellinor." Hem was startled that she knew his name, and then blushed at being addressed. "Sit down. There is much to discuss, and little time."

Hem scrambled to his feet and followed Saliman to the bench, hardly daring to look up from his feet. Irc was infected by his abashment and didn't even squeak when the movement almost tipped him off his perch on Hem's shoulder.

Hem was surprised, after the grandeur of their entrance, by the discussion which followed (it was a while before he remembered that the First Bard and the Ernan were, in fact, equal in authority over Turbansk). All formality was put aside, and a discussion of the current defence of Turbansk was conducted briskly, with reports from each present on the latest developments.

Il Hanedr, captain of the city guard, said that his scouts reported the Black Army was two days' march distant, preparing to assault the Il Dara Wall twenty leagues south of Turbansk, the last major barrier before the Black Army. The Wall was manned by some ten thousand archers and infantry, mainly from the regions around Baladh, and four ranks, six hundreds in each rank, of the Sun Guard. It was a giant construction made in the days of the Great Silence to resist the forces of the Nameless One, and Har-Ytan had

ordered this ancient wall rebuilt and extended five years' previously, when it became clear to her that an assault from Dén Raven was all but inevitable. It was a strong deterrent: a high double wall of granite with deep foundations, fortified with many towers. It stretched for a league across a strip of dry land which divided the Neera Marsh, and an invading army could be delayed there indefinitely, or be forced to march for leagues around the marshes.

"Imank is slower than we judged, then," said Juriken, raising his eyebrows.

"If he were not so concerned to burn everything in his path, they might be swifter," Il Hanedr answered. "But the destruction has bought us a little time, although we might count it dearly bought. We would not have had time to muster so many had he moved more quickly."

"Each small advantage we have is bought dearly," said Har-Ytan. "So must we use it well. Is there any point, think you, in harrying the army as it approaches the Wall?"

Both Il Hanedr and Juriken shook their heads. "Nay, it would cost us more than it gained," said Juriken. "It would be to send our fighters to almost certain death, and such are the forces arraigned against us, it would not slow them."

"There is nowhere they would not face death," said the Ernan.

Juriken hesitated, and nodded. "There is always hope," he said. But his expression was grim.

Hem heart froze, and he stole a secret look at Saliman. But now it was Saliman's turn to speak.

Hem now learned that Saliman was co-coordinating the shoreline defences. He said that the fleet of Black Army ships he feared was imminent from Baladh had not been sighted by his scouts.

"Perhaps the fireships we sent against the raiders have made their own argument against attack from the Lamarsan Sea," he said. "But I think that is too much to hope for. I cannot believe that Imank, the captain of the Black Army, does not plan an attack from the Lamarsan Sea; those fleeing Baladh were not able to destroy all the galleys they left behind, and it is not beyond their power to build more. I fear three score at least being sent against us. What seems most likely is that they plan to send the galleys at the same time as the Black Army, to block our harbour and draw off our forces. We will not be able to flee over the water, if we do not hold the passage. And I fear the caves will only serve for few."

There was a glum silence, and then the talk moved on to a general discussion. The city fortifications, Alimbar reported, were almost completed. Within the city were Alhadeans from Nazar and Cissians and Bilakeans from the plains between Turbansk and Baladh, as well as the remnants of Baladh's defence, all experienced at fighting back the incursions from Dén Raven which had become common over the past three centuries. They had retreated stubbornly before the advancing armies, harrying the outriding forces with some success, and had swelled the ranks of the Turbanskians by nearly twenty thousand. Juriken estimated that with the forces now at the Wall, the city had some two score thousand fighters, and supplies enough for all of them for three months, even if the harbour was closed off.

Hem brightened at the numbers; it seemed so many, more than he could imagine in one place. But Juriken was gloomy; he estimated the Black Army was ten times that size, and of that number, a large number was dogsoldiers. He was also uncertain about what kinds of sorceries Imank might be planning to use. After that, Hem noted that no one talked about victory; and he shifted uncomfortably on his seat.

Lastly spoke Lamar, a woman who had had listened silently and intently to the entire discussion. She was an emissary from Zimek, a large School to the south of

Turbansk.

Zimek, Hem learned to his shock, was to be abandoned, and all its peoples were now on their way to Car Amdridh. "Not all like it, naturally," said Lamar, her face sombre. "Many are angry at the thought of leaving their homes, and say we flee like cowards. But we all know our fate otherwise would be Baladh's, to be disembowelled by the Black Army as crows tear a carcass: we are strong, but not strong enough. This way, we choose when we leave, and what we take with us, although it breaks our hearts. We take all we can carry, and are burning all crops and stripping all orchards. There will be nothing for the army to pillage."

Juriken and Har-Ytan nodded. "How long before Zimek is emptied, then?" asked Har-Ytan.

"Two days, no more," Lamar answered. "And then it is done." While she had been speaking she had shown no emotion, but now her voice broke, and she covered her eyes. Har-Ytan reached out and pressed her hand gently.

"It is well done," she said quietly. "Alas, all our hearts will be riven, ere the end of this."

After the meeting in the Ernan Hem felt deeply exhausted, so Saliman sent him home and continued to the harbourside to speak to the ship captains who were now coming in from yet another raid against the raiders of the Black Army. He came back many hours later, and after greeting Hem went to bed without eating anything. Saliman did not stir from his chamber until late the next day.

The smoke rose in the east, closer again. But the defences of Turbansk were now ready.

That day Hem found himself at a loose end, and hungry. Saliman was nowhere to be seen. Instead of heading for the butteries, Hem wandered towards the marketplace of Turbansk, wondering if he might find Saliman there, near the harbour.

It was the first time Hem had been to the markets since Turbansk had begun to evacuate its population. Only two weeks earlier, they had been the bustling heart of Turbansk. The markets were where Hem most often went when he was feeling unhappy at the School; here he could lose himself in the crowds of people, wandering fascinated from stall to stall.

Closest to the School were the flower markets, an ancient cloistered hall of stone which was always cool, even in the harshest midday heat, because the stone was kept wet so the flowers would stay fresh. Next to them were the food markets, with their marble counters where stallholders displayed freshwater trout and bream and crays caught by the fishers of the Lamarsan Sea, or carefully piled mounds of luscious fruits and piles of greenery.

But now the markets were desolate and melancholy. The flower markets were completely closed, the stone tables empty, the windows shuttered and barred, and the noon sun struck back harshly from the suddenly naked walls. A few stray dogs nosed down the gutters of the alleys looking for scraps, and those people who walked through them mostly wore armour and strode purposefully, instead of sauntering, as the Turbansk people generally preferred, prepared always to be waylaid by an invitation to gossip over a cup of strong, sweet coffee.

Hem realised properly for the first time that those who remained in Turbansk did not expect it to withstand the coming attack. A small hope he had been nurturing in his heart shrivelled and died; despite Saliman's bleak words, despite what he had seen and heard from the survivors of Baladh in the Healing Houses, despite yesterday's conference at the Ernan, Hem had continued to believe

that perhaps all those who stayed in Turbansk did so because they thought they could defeat the forces of the Nameless One which now marched against them. But the empty markets told him more eloquently than any words that this was a fool's hope; the thousands of people who now prepared to defend Turbansk did not do so because they thought they would win.

Why did they stay, then? Hem continued his glum meandering, preoccupied with the question. Why did Hem stay? That one was easy: he did not want to be parted from Saliman. And why did Saliman stay?

Hem paused in the Street of Coffee Sellers and abstractedly bought a coffee from the single stall which remained open. As he handed over the copper coin, the stallholder said, in good Annaren, "So you are the young Bard in the Healing Houses?"

Startled out of his musings, Hem studied the man with interest. He was thickset, with the black skin of a Turbanskian. Deep laughter lines creased his eyes, and his teeth were very white and strong. A short sword hung from his waistband. Why was he staying? "Yes," he said. "How did you know?"

The stallholder laughed. "Word gets around," he said. "And everyone has heard of your bird. We do not like to use our children in war, and so I know of no others as young as you who will remain here. My daughter, Amira, was very angry when she heard about you. 'Father,' she said to me; 'you send me away, against my will, although I can fight, although I would give my life to save the city that I love: and yet there remains in Turbansk a foreign boy from Annar who is younger even than I.'"

Hem smiled, and the stall holder continued.

"I told her, it is the law: but it is also the law of my heart. And I told her that perhaps she will fight anyway in Amdridh, if things go ill here. It did not please her." He laughed, but Hem heard with surprise that there was no bitterness in his laughter.

"But you are staying," said Hem.

"Yes," he answered.

"And do you think we will save Turbansk?"

At first the stallholder didn't answer. Instead, he pressed a little honeyed sweetmeat into Hem's hand, waving off Hem's offer to pay. Hem put it in his pocket for later. Then the stallholder said: "All who remain here are afraid that we see the last days of our houses. The Bards and the Ernan do not feed us false hopes: they say, the Black Army is very great, and our forces cannot defeat them. Send all that is precious to you - your children, your valuables - to Car Amdridh, where they can be better defended. But they have called for all who can to stay and defend our city, to buy some time for those who flee, and to allow Amdridh to ready its defence and muster all its forces. We will not simply abandon Turbansk, the jewel of the Suderain, to the carrionfowl of the Dark. And perhaps we can deplete the army, so those behind us will have less work to do." He smiled grimly.

Hem studied the stallholder, wondering at his bravery. "What is your name?" he asked at last.

"Boran," said the stallholder. "And yours?"

"Hem."

"A thousand blessings on your cup, Hem," said Boran, giving him the traditional benediction before drinking.

"And on yours, Boran," said Hem. He said it in Suderain, as he had at least mastered that phrase, finished the coffee and handed the cup back to Boran. Then, thanking him, he continued his moody wandering, kicking a stone before his foot so it rattled on the cobbles.

4: ZELIKA

HEM wasn't taking much notice of his surroundings, so when someone shot out of one the side alleys and crashed into him he was taken completely by surprise. Irc flapped into the air, cawing in protest, and Hem was sent sprawling onto the ground. His first feeling was rage, and he grabbed blindly for his assailant, catching part of a cloak and holding it fast, even when a hard little fist hit him in the eye. He grabbed one arm and then another, and, panting with effort, wrestled his assailant to the ground.

He was sitting astride his foe, about to take revenge for what he thought would probably be a black eye, when he realised he was fighting a girl. She was glaring at him murderously, still struggling and spitting out imprecations. Hem's command of the Suderain language had improved considerably in his time in the Healing Houses, although it was still uncertain. Nevertheless, he understood enough to know that he was being called some very unflattering names.

He flushed, and would have responded in kind if he had not simultaneously noticed the ragged state of the girl's clothes and that she had been hurt; quite recently her lip had been split, and there was a nasty infected cut underneath her right eye. He swallowed his retort.

"I'm very sorry," he said, in careful Suderain. "I did not see you..."

The girl paused in her struggle to free herself and stared at him balefully.

"You should be more careful," Hem said.

"Let me go," said the girl.

Hem studied her curiously. She had the light brown skin of those who came from the eastern parts of the Suderain, and spoke with the accent of Baladh. She must have arrived late in Turbansk, and somehow missed the last wains which carried the children to Car Amdridh. He thought she must be about his own age. She had tangled black hair which spilled in loose curls around her face, and delicate features which were somewhat mitigated by the anger of her expression. She was filthy; her tattered cloak was so stained it was almost impossible to tell its original colour, and she carried a battered leather bag which clearly held all her few possessions.

"If you promise not to run away," Hem said. "I'm sorry, it was - " He didn't know the Suderain word for "accident". "I won't hurt you..."

The girl paused, and nodded. Hem, normally so distrustful of strangers, did not doubt for a moment that she would not keep her word. He carefully got off her, and she sat up, brushing herself down. Irc returned to Hem's shoulder and leant forward, his head cocked, examining the girl with unalloyed curiosity. She would not look at Hem, and sat next to him with an air of affronted dignity. Hem groped around in his mind for something to say, cursing his lack of Suderain.

He suddenly remembered the honeycake that Boran had given him, and he pulled it out of his pocket and offered it to her. It was a little crushed, but still mainly whole. The girl stared at him doubtfully, and then snatched the cake from his hand and devoured it in two bites. She was clearly starving.

"What are you doing here?" asked Hem, watching as she wiped her mouth. "You should be on your way to Car Amdridh."

"I hid," said the girl. She seemed a little mollified after his offering. "I want to fight the Black Ones." She drew a

knife from a sheath at her belt and pointed it at Hem; he could see that it was a cooking knife, sharp enough to cut bone, but not a fighting weapon. "I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me."

Such was the expression in her eyes, Hem had no difficulty in believing her; he felt glad that she had not been able to reach her knife in their struggle. He felt a strange mixture of astonishment, admiration and pity.

"No one can stop you," he said. "It's too late. The Black Army - " he waved his hands around, hunting the words - "the Black Army comes very soon." He pushed the point of the knife aside, and she slowly put it back in its sheath. "So - your name? I am Hem."

"Zelika," she said slowly. "Zelika of the House of Il Aran." She looked at Irc curiously. "What is that bird? It is not a falcon."

"He's my friend," said Hem. "His name is Irc." He looked at the girl again; now he could see the gauntness of her features, and he wondered when she had last had a good meal. "Are you hungry, Zelika?"

She paused, and then nodded.

"Come with me. I'll get you food."

Hem saw distrust and desire warring in Zelika's face, but hunger won. When she stood up, he saw that she was slight, but she carried herself with a pride which added a little illusory height.

He began to lead her through the streets towards the School buttry, thinking. Perhaps she could stay at Saliman's house; there were plenty of spare rooms, and he thought that Saliman would not mind. She could get some new clothes and have a wash, and Hem could see to the wound on her cheek, which was festering; he had some balm in his chamber.

"You are not from Turbansk," said the girl flatly, interrupting his thoughts.

"No, from Annar," answered Hem. "My Suderain not so good."

"My Annaren not so good, as well." Zelika spoke in Annaren, with an atrocious accent, and smiled. For a brief moment Hem saw two dimples in her cheeks, and a mischievous light danced in her eyes, vanishing as quickly as it appeared. He glanced at her curiously.

"So why do you stay here?" he asked. "Everyone says Turbansk is - we can't - " Stumped again by his lack of vocabulary, he trailed to a halt.

"I don't care if I die," said Zelika. "I want to kill as many of the Black Ones as I can before I do." Hem looked at her again, at the strange, utterly focused determination in her face; it was almost madness. He had never heard a human being say anything with more conviction, and something like fear constricted his heart.

"Why?" he asked, although he thought he knew the answer.

She gave him a unreadable glance, as if measuring his capacity to understand. "My mother, my father, my brothers, my sister, my aunts, my cousins, my uncles, my grandmother - " She drew her finger brutally across her throat, and her eyes blazed with hatred and grief, although her voice was flat and unemotional. "I saw it. My house was burned to the ground. I will avenge the House of Il Aren."

Hem said nothing: there was nothing to say.

"Why should I live?" said Zelika. "I have nothing to live for. I will fight them, and kill as many as I can."

"You need a better knife," said Hem.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

At the buttery, Soron gave Hem a plum and a small bowl of cold dohl without any questions, although he stared curiously at the girl. They sat at one end of the long table in the eating hall, and Hem watched as she ate.

"You should not eat quickly," he said. "You will be sick." He mimed vomiting. Zelika said nothing, but slowed down; she had been wolfing her food ravenously. When she had finished the bowl of dohl, she looked at Hem inquiringly. She obviously wanted more, but did not ask.

"How long since you ate?" he asked.

"I think...two, three days," said Zelika.

"No more now," Hem said sternly. "More, in a little while."

To his surprise, she did not argue with him. "I tried to take some bread from the market, but the man saw me and chased me. I ran and ran, that's why I ran into you."

"There are no crowds, and it makes stealing hard," said Hem.

"I never stole before," she said, with a disarming simplicity. "I don't know how."

Hem looked at Zelika more closely. He had taken her for an urchin, like the orphans he had known in his childhood, but it now occurred to him that she might be more gently born. He remembered her announcement of her name. Perhaps she was from one of the important families of Baladh. She fought well for a noble, he thought, remembering their scrap; in his short time at the School Hem had quickly worked out that students from wealthier families were much softer in a fight than those who came

from poorer houses.

"I should heal your cut," he said, with a trace of self-importance. He had dealt with many minor injuries at the Healing Houses. "Come with me."

Zelika followed him with a gratifying meekness to Saliman's house, and he took her first to the bathing room. "You should wash, first," he said. "I'll get clothes for you. Wait here." He ran to his chamber and emptied his chest, and returned with a tunic and treads.

Zelika was sitting on the bench in the bathing room, looking suddenly lost and exhausted.

"Do you want a bath?" Hem asked.

She nodded dumbly, but did not move. Hem wondered for a moment if she expected him to wash her; he did not feel up to that responsibility.

"I'll wait for you, there," he said firmly, pointing to the hallway, and went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

There was a short silence, and then he heard the rush of running water. Hem sat cross legged on the floor and composed himself to wait.

It wasn't long before Zelika emerged. She was wearing the clothes Hem had given her; they were slightly too big. Her hair had been washed and combed and hung in glossy ringlets down her back. Hem blinked, taken aback; she was much prettier than he had first realised.

He led her back to his chamber and dealt with the cuts on her face. They were not very serious, apart from the infection. He cleaned the pus out scrupulously and applied the healing balm, muttering healing charms in the Speech. Despite how much it must have hurt, Zelika did not make a sound.

As he finished his healing work, Hem heard the street doors open and close with a bang. Telling Zelika to wait in his chamber, he ran to see if it was Saliman: it was almost time for the noon bell, and he counted on the Bard returning home for the midday meal. It was Saliman: and before he had a chance to open his mouth in greeting, Hem breathlessly told him about Zelika.

"Is it all right that I brought her back here?" he asked anxiously. "I didn't know where else to take her. She wasn't hurt so badly that she needed the healers, and I cleaned her cuts myself..." Saliman eyebrows were drawn into a frown, and Hem trailed off into silence.

"Turbansk is no place for a child," said Saliman shortly. "She should not be here."

"I'm a child," said Hem, suddenly feeling angry. "And I'm here. And anyway, it's too late now, all the wains have gone."

There was a silence, and Saliman sighed. "We'll eat in my rooms. Everyone else is out," he said. "You may as well go and get her."

Zelika had come reluctantly to meet Saliman, and had at first sat silently, refusing to answer any questions, and concentrated on eating. Saliman had covertly studied her as she ate, turning over the little Hem had told him about her. When they had finished their meal, Saliman had said that she should leave for Car Amdridh that day; although all the wains had left, a messenger was preparing to ride that afternoon, and Zelika could ride with him.

Saliman's statement pulled Zelika out of her blank passivity. She refused flatly to go. When Saliman pressed her, she stood up, screaming curses, and threw her plate at him. Hem, greatly embarrassed, tried to calm her down, and finally she just sat mulishly, her lips pressed tightly

together, and refused to speak at all.

Saliman watched her tantrum in silence with his arms crossed. When she was finally quiet, he asked her if she really knew what it was she was facing, and how little hope there was of victory.

Zelika glared at him mutinously. "I know," she said.

"I doubt you understand fully," said Saliman, with a hard edge to his voice. "I shall explain."

All through the Great Silence, Saliman said, Turbansk had been assailed by forces from Dén Raven, but it had never been taken. Neither, as loomed large in the thoughts of everyone in the city, had Baladh fallen, nor the ancient fortified city of Jerr-Niken. But now Baladh lay in ruins, and the Black Army marched on territories it had never before invaded. Jerr-Niken had been sacked seven years before by Imank, the sorcerer-captain of Dén Raven. It was then that fears arose in the Suderain that the return of the Nameless One, long prophesied, was now a reality.

During the Great Silence, Imank had been the Nameless One's chief captain. A Hull of great power, a Bard who had traded his True Name for the secret of deathlessness, he had fled far to the South after the collapse of the Dark, and had not been heard of for centuries. The people of Dén Raven, freed from tyranny and enslavement, made treaties with the Suderain and Annar, and for some hundreds of years even used the Bardic system of dual government. For centuries all had seemed well, and little disturbed the peace.

But three hundred years before, in a sudden coup of unprecedented savagery, the Bards of Dén Raven, accused of spying by the then King, had been slaughtered or banished. Those few Bards who managed to escape to the Schools of the Suderain brought evil news with them: Imank had returned to Dén Raven. Adopting the guise of a wise and trusted counsellor, he had ingratiated himself with the King, poisoning his mind and encouraging his

greed and lust for domination; and when his power over the King was total, he had sprung his trap on the Bards. Thereafter, for two centuries, Dén Raven was ruled by a series of petty kings and despots controlled by Imank and his cohorts of Hulls, who returned out of exile from the unmapped areas south of the Agaban Desert.

Since Imank's return, very few outsiders had managed to penetrate Dén Raven, and the few who had brought grim reports. The entire realm had been transformed into a fortress, and the people of Dén Raven into a massive army. From birth to death every action of every person was overseen by the Eyes, Hulls who controlled the different regions and dispensed work and punishment. No rebellion - in word or thought or deed - was too small to be crushed mercilessly: merely to mutter a complaint was enough to merit torture in the dungeons of the Hulls, and to speak openly against the rulers was a death sentence.

"I have been there myself," said Saliman, and both Zelika and Hem looked up at him with wonder. "Merely to attempt to enter Dén Raven is to risk death and worse." He was silent for a time, his face overcast by dark memories. "I hope never to return there. It is little more than a huge prison. The Eyes of Sharma are powerful sorcerers, and they are greatly feared; and they have ways of watching, perversions of Barding, which are an evil even to think of. Much of the land is poisoned: there are places where nothing will grow, and strange forests which glow red at night. There are beasts running wild who do not understand the Speech but are grown dumb and strange; they have something wrong with their minds, and their forms are misshapen. The Nameless is ingenious in all his devices; I don't doubt these also serve his purposes."

As Saliman spoke, Hem could see in his mind the landscapes he was describing, and the boy shuddered. "The armies are fed by great farms, all tilled by slaves," continued Saliman. "The Eyes control all supplies; they live well enough, but the people fare poorly, and are given only enough to ensure they live. Those who win favour with the Hulls, of course, can do much better; some, the Grin, live in an obscene luxury and are themselves petty

tyrants. They are useful to the Nameless One, and so he suffers them to flourish... but nothing there is grown or made for pleasure or beauty, and even the leisures of the Grin are stamped with foulness and cruelty."

Saliman paused, and Hem swallowed, the queasy fear of his nightmares rising within him. The two children had listened in silence as Saliman spoke, Zelika frowning as she tried to keep up with Saliman's Annaren. They watched as Saliman poured himself a glass of water and drank before he continued.

"We always feared that Imank merely prepared for the return of the Nameless One," said Saliman. "For fifty years we have been certain that the Nameless was in Dén Raven, but no one in Annar would believe us. Wishful thinking clouded the judgement of most Bards; but I fear that was the least of it. A subtle corruption has wormed its way into the heart of many Annaren Schools, although I did not know what it was until I saw Enkir, the First Bard of Annar.

"Perhaps if we had marched on Dén Raven before it had become strong, when Imank was merely harrying small settlements south of Jerr-Niken, it might be a different story now. But when Jerr-Niken was sacked seven years ago it was already, I fear, too late. What is about to happen is the culmination of long planning by the Dark, and the Light is weaker than it has ever been. I fear all goes the Dark's way: the best we can do here is measure our retreat. The Nameless seeks to be sure this time: if the Dark conquers, then all Edil-Amarandh will be like Dén Raven, a place of tyranny and fear, and Song and Knowing and Light will vanish from this world, beyond our reckoning."

Hem thought of the bony hands and chill eyes of the Hulls who had taken him out of the orphanage, and wriggled uncomfortably. A vivid image of Maerad as he remembered her in Norloch, laughing at one of Saliman's absurd stories, crossed his inner eye. Maerad wasn't much taller than Zelika, and she was only a few years older than Hem himself. And she was supposed to cause the downfall

of all this terror and might? For the first time Hem's absolute faith in Maerad faltered: if even the strength of Turbansk did not suffice to hold back the Black Army, what could his sister do? He almost asked how Maerad was going to save them, but bit his tongue; he feared Saliman's answer would be comfortless.

"So this is what you choose to face, both of you," said Saliman, this time in Suderain and looking straightly at Zelika. "The main part of Imank's army now marches on Turbansk. I do not believe, though we fight to the last soldier, that the city will stand. Do you see why I say this is no place for children?"

Zelika leaned forward, spitting out her words. "The worst they can do is kill me," she said. "I'm not afraid."

"Zelika, there are worse things than death," Saliman said. His voice was calm, but it had a curious intensity.

"I know there are," said Zelika. For the briefest of moments, her eyes filled with a terrible, almost uncomprehending grief, before it was overwhelmed by blazing hatred. She jerked her thumb at Hem. "You let him stay; why not me?"

Saliman looked at both his young charges impatiently. "I have not time for this wrangling," he said. "And precious little energy. Not an hour since, I have word that the Black Army has reached the Il Dara Wall, and already they are hard pressed..." Hem suddenly understood, with a lurch in his stomach, Saliman's uncharacteristic curtness when he had returned home. "But you have won one point, Zelika: I will not burden any messenger with you."

"Good," said Zelika, her eyes snapping.

"Then tell me: what do you think you will do here?"

"I will fight. I will do anything," she answered. "I will kill the Black Ones. What will he do?" She pointed derisively at Hem, who was now deeply regretting he had brought

her home.

Saliman stifled a sigh. "Hem is a certain case..." he began.

"And so am I. Anyway, what makes you think Car Amdridh will be any safer?"

Zelika crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, seeming to think the argument was settled. Hem glanced at Saliman with alarm. To his surprise, Saliman gave him an amused look.

"I like this Zelika, for all her wildness," he said in the Speech. "She has been ill-used, and is in great pain, and for those and other reasons I dislike greatly her staying here; but within her there beats a brave heart. And she is right; it is likely she will be little safer in Car Amdridh, if Turbansk falls. The Dark reaches for its full power, and its arm is strong. I have not the will to gainsay her desire to stay here: not now, anyway. How many more strays are you planning on bringing home?"

Zelika, suspecting that Saliman was talking about her, looked from one to the other mistrustfully. Hem answered in his bad Suderain.

"No more," he said fervently.

Saliman answered in the same language, so Zelika could understand. "Then while we await our doom, she can teach you how to speak Suderain. Yes, Zelika? That can be the price of your meals." He smiled at her, and Zelika, uncertain at first whether he was mocking her, looked back blankly.

"So you will not send me away?" she said.

"It seems I cannot. So you might as well be useful." He held out his hand.

She stood up and clasped his hand solemnly, as if they were closing a bargain. "I'll teach him well," she said, with

what Hem thought was an ominous determination.

Hem cursed inwardly, and felt even sorrier he had taken pity on Zelika. He should, he thought, have left the girl in the street where he found her.

The following day Saliman took Hem and Zelika with him on his daily inspection of the city, telling them they should see for themselves how Turbansk would be defended. Hem was at once pleased to go and jealous that Zelika was also invited, for it diluted his delight in Saliman's company. Perhaps Zelika sensed this, for she remained almost completely silent, although her eyes glowed with savage pleasure when she examined the fortifications. The inspection took most of the morning, even though they went in haste on horseback from post to post, as Saliman wanted to report to Har-Ytan and the First Bard by noon.

Turbansk was protected by two high walls, the inner higher by six spans than the outer. They stood about thirty spans distant from each other, and were connected by wooden bridges which could be drawn back if necessary. The walls were topped with zigzag crenellations and behind the zigzags ran walkways which connected the many towers built along the walls. These were now manned by a light guard, but once the alarm went the towers would be bristling with archers and artillery. The huge West and North Gates, the weakest parts of the wall, were the most heavily fortified, with high towers either side and above. Before the outer wall was a deep moat, now filled with fire-sharpened stakes, that rose up to a palisade the height of a man, which itself drew up to the blank stone barrier of the first wall.

When Hem had first ridden into Turbansk, the space between the walls had been filled with flowering gardens and lawns. These had been ruthlessly uprooted and the entire area planted instead with stakes. All the towers had been strengthened and faced with iron, to protect them, Saliman said, from fire missiles. Hem blinked at the

transformation; it was as if the city had been stripped to its bones.

At Turbansk Harbour the fortifications had also been strengthened, the harbour's encircling walls built higher and also faced with iron. The harbour entrance was protected by a huge spiked chain, each link the size of a man, which could be raised or lowered from a mechanism within the harbour towers. The harbourside was the only place where the strange suspension of activity did not exist: although ranks of ships lay at the long quays, the shipwrights were still building more, and it hummed with industry.

"Haven't we enough ships?" asked Hem, looking with wonder at the activity: to his eye there seemed already enough ships to carry the whole population of Turbansk. Saliman paused and turned back; he was about to stride off to speak to the harbour captain.

"We have a great fleet, yes," he said. "Yet I judge we need more ships, and we will build as many as we have wood and time for. Just as in the armouries, Hem, if you go there, the smiths still work all day... If Turbansk falls, the only escape for most will be through the harbour: we have to protect those who flee and keep the passage open. So, you see, the task does not end, even after we are besieged. But all the major work is done."

It was indeed a mighty navy: there were scores of small fireships, to be sent under sails filled with magewinds against an invading fleet, and rows of fighting triremes, with three layers of decks for rowers, large triangular sails and wicked-looking rams at their front to hole and sink enemy ships. There were other, larger ships being built; Saliman said these were to carry people and goods, should the city fall. But Hem felt heartened: it seemed to him impossible that Turbansk could be taken, with such strength at its command.

Lastly Saliman took them to the watch at the top of the Red Tower, from which they could see over the walls at the Fesse of Turbansk. This sobered Hem up considerably. When he had last seen the Fesse, it had been a tilled

country of gentle and luxuriant beauty, filled with groves of dates and olives and green crops and gardens. Now he looked out upon what seemed to be wasteland: most of the trees had been cut down for shipbuilding, and the crops harvested or burned. The empty villages and hamlets looked completely desolate. No one moved in this bleak landscape, apart from a lone messenger riding the Bard Road east to the Il Dara Wall.

Saliman noticed his expression, and smiled with grim compassion.

"You are shocked, Hem?" he said.

Hem nodded, unable to for the moment to reply.

"Not the least of the grievous costs of war are what we are forced to do to ourselves, in order to survive," said Saliman. He looked thoughtfully at Zelika, who did not seem nearly as shocked as Hem. "I assure you, Zimek would look yet more grim than this, and remember that Baladh now lies in rubble. We sacrifice much, in the hope that by doing so we buy enough time for victory."

Hem looked at Saliman, a catch in his throat. "Do you mean, to give Maerad time to find the Treesong, and fulfil the prophecy?" he said.

Zelika looked up, baffled.

"Aye, among other things. Our hopes rest on something so slender we are yet to know what it is. It is the sheerest folly, yes? The Nameless would certainly believe so... But it is hope nevertheless, and hope I cleave to. Because I say to you Hem: if it were not for Maerad and Cadvan, we would now have no hope at all."

That afternoon, when they had returned to the Bard house and Saliman had gone on to the Ernan palace, Zelika asked

Hem who Maerad and Cadvan were. "What did Saliman mean, back at the Tower?" she asked, with an unusual shyness. She was speaking Annaren, a special dispensation for Hem, since she often refused to, and Hem knew this meant that she really wanted to know. He didn't answer for a time, wondering if he wished to share his sister with this strange, passionate, irritating girl.

"Don't tell me, then, if you don't trust me," Zelika said at last, shrugging her shoulders. "I don't care."

Hem felt a stab of contrition; he could see that under her bravado she was hurt.

"It's not that," he said. "Maerad is my sister and Cadvan is her friend, her mentor, I suppose. He's a great Bard, famous in Annar... he and Saliman are old friends. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell anyone what they are doing..."

"Your sister?" Zelika's eyes softened, and she looked at Hem with a new interest. "I didn't know you had a sister."

"I didn't know, for a long time," said Hem. He suddenly realised that Zelika knew even less about him than he did about her. "You see, I - " He stopped, suddenly stumped. He didn't know how to tell Zelika the story of his life, of the slaughter of his family in the sack of Pellinor, of the long, bleak years in the orphanage, his time with the Hulls and his rescue by Maerad and Cadvan. She looked at him inquiringly, and Hem, feeling a strange reluctance, began his tale. He had told his story to very few people, and to no one in Turbansk, since no one here had asked. It stirred up painful feelings he would rather leave sleeping inside him; but Zelika listened intently, without interrupting.

"I see: you have lost your family, like I have," said Zelika, when his telling stumbled to a halt. "Maybe that's why..."

"Why what?"

"Why - when you jumped on me in the street, when I

realised you weren't going to hurt me, I thought - "

Hem waited patiently; Zelika was staring at her hands, twisting her fingers together.

"It is hard, when you don't have the words!" she said, looking up. "I mean, the first thing I thought was that we had something in common. And that seemed a very strange thing to think, when you were sitting on my chest like a sack of yams." She smiled hesitantly, glancing shyly at Hem, and unexpectedly moved, he smiled back.

"And what did Saliman mean by - the Treesong, was it?"

"That's the bit I'm not sure I should tell," said Hem. "Maerad and Cadvan went north, to look for the Treesong. Nobody knows what it is. But you see, Maerad is the Chosen One, and the prophecies say that she will cast down the Nameless One in his next and worst rising. Which is now."

Zelika eye's widened in disbelief, and then she started laughing. "Your sister! Cast down the Nameless One!"

Stung, Hem scowled at the ground. He was sorry now he had said anything. "That's what Saliman says," he said. "And he says it's our only hope. That's what he meant at the Tower."

Zelika stared at him, her face serious again. "I'm sorry," she said. "It seems a very strange thing, that one girl should be able to do what all Turbansk and Baladh cannot. I don't think I can believe it."

Hem shrugged his shoulders. "You don't have to. It's the truth, all the same. Why would Saliman believe it, if it wasn't?"

"Maybe he has to," said Zelika. "Maybe if he didn't, he would be in despair."

Anger flashed in Hem at Zelika's doubt and he glared at

her, his fists clenched. "Saliman's no idiot," he said. "You should show some respect."

"I do respect Saliman," she answered, her face shadowed. "It's not that. But Hem, you know, I don't have any hope." She looked up, straight at Hem, and for once her eyes were not veiled. With his Bard-born perceptions, Hem saw for the first time the true extent of her inner devastation, and he breathed in sharply: it was almost too painful to bear. "I don't have any hope at all. Hope is not why I'm here." "What do you want, then?" asked Hem.

"Revenge," she said flatly. "Revenge and death. There isn't anything else."

After that conversation Hem felt a new closeness to Zelika, although that didn't mean that he found her any less annoying. As a teacher, she lived up to all his expectations; she was by far the most merciless he had yet endured. Saliman had instructed him, with an unusual sternness, that he was to work hard at his Suderain: and it was only his respect for Saliman which stopped him from rebelling, although it went hard for him.

Zelika took her pact with Saliman very seriously. They had lessons every morning, and the rest of the time Zelika would not permit Hem to speak anything but Suderain. She was very pedantic; she would make him repeat a word again and again until he said it absolutely correctly, which could go on indefinitely, and drilled him in the endless declensions of nouns and verbs until he thought his head would burst.

Then she would solemnly make him sit down and have a "conversation" with her. Hem found this part of the lesson more irritating than almost anything else, because it seemed ridiculous and false, and he could never think of anything to say. He began to amuse himself by talking the most absurd nonsense he could think of, and then by creatively abusing Zelika.

When she chose to exercise it, Zelika had admirable self-control; she limited herself for the most part to correcting his grammar and pronunciation. But she did slap him once, bursting into a storm of tears, when he called her a "skinny cat". Hem was puzzled: it was by no means the worst thing he had said to her. It was a long time afterwards that he found out that it was the insult her brothers had used, when they wished to tease her.

Irc was bored by the lessons, and provided some entertainment by flapping onto Zelika's head and trying to pull out her hair, or creeping underneath her chair and pecking her feet at inappropriate times. When he disgraced himself by soiling one of her sandals, which she subsequently put on, he was banished altogether. Hem was very regretful, especially after the sandal incident, which amused him vastly; but he did learn much more quickly if Irc was not there.

In fact, although he did not admit it to Zelika, Hem was grateful for the distraction; the lessons relieved his boredom and dissipated the fear which otherwise filled his thoughts. He did not regret at any time that he hadn't left with the other students, but this didn't stop him from feeling a deepening trepidation. Sometimes, as much as he dreaded its arrival, Hem wished the Black Army would hurry up, just to break the mounting suspense which filled Turbansk with a strange, dreadful glamour. It seemed as if the whole city trembled, holding its breath, on the edge of doom.