

# THE WORLD OF PELLINOR



## PART ONE: GILMAN'S COT

Speak to me, fair maid!  
Speak and do not go!  
What sorrows have your eyes inlaid  
With such black woe?

My dam is buried deep  
Dark are my father's halls  
And carrion fowl and wolves now keep  
Their ruined walls

*From The Lay of Andomian and Beruldh*

## 1: ESCAPE

FOR almost as long as she could remember, Maerad had been imprisoned behind walls. She was a slave in Gilman's Cot, and hers was the barest of existences: an endless cycle of drudgery and exhaustion and dull fear.

Gilman's Cot was a small mountain hamlet beyond the borders of the wide lands of the Inner Kingdom of Annar. It nestled at the nape of a bleak valley on the East side of the mountains of Annova, where the range split briefly and ran out, like two claws, from near the Northern end. Its virtue, as far as the Thane Gilman was concerned, was its isolation: here he could be tyrant of his domain, with nothing to check him.

It was a well-defended fortress, though no one came to attack. At the cot's back was the stone cliff of the Outwall, the precipice cutting sheer some thousand feet from the Landrost, the highest peak in that part of the range. Around the cot were walls of roughly dressed stone, rising to a height of thirty feet from a base twenty feet wide. They tapered to four feet at the top, enough room for two men to walk abreast. At the front were stout wooden gates which eight men or a wagon could enter with ease. The gates were barred at night and most days, except for hunts and when the hillmen came in their big wagons to trade goods, salted meat and cheeses and dried apples for swords and arrows and buckets and nails.

About a hundred and fifty souls lived there: the Thane Gilman and his wife, beaten to a shadow after bearing him twelve children, of which five still lived, and his henchmen and their women and bastards. The rest were slaves like Maerad, captured in raids in Gilman's youth, or bargained for at the gate, or simply born there. They lived in dormitories, long huts at the side of the cots, under the shadows of the walls.

The buildings were ancient, older even than Gilman guessed, the walls raised in forgotten times by grim Northern men to keep out wolves, and worse. Under Gilman, the walls were mostly used to keep people in. The small enclosed meadows were tilled and harvested by slave labour, his tables and cloths and cheeses and sour drinks were all made by slaves, and Gilman wanted none

running away. His many guards served to reinforce his tyranny, and, not inconsequentially, gratified his own opinion of his authority. Like many who ruled far vaster territories, Gilman was not above the pettiness of vanity.

If anyone did escape, there was nowhere to run to; their most likely fate was to be hunted down by untamed beasts in the forests that stretched below the mountains. And even to this isolated cot came rumours of stirrings in the outside world: whispers of unnamed shadows which haunted the forest deeps, or of forgotten evils which now woke and walked in the daylight world. Grim though Gilman's Cot was, these vague stories of horror worked as well as any wall, gainsaying any attempt to leave.

Maerad was still too young to have given up hope of escape, although as she approached adulthood, and began better to understand her own limitations, she understood it to be a childish dream. Freedom was a fantasy she gnawed obsessively in her few moments of leisure, like an old bone with just a trace of meat; and like all illusions, it left her hungrier than before, only more keenly aware of how her soul starved within her, its wings wasting with the despair of disuse.

The Springturn began like every other day of Maerad's life, with the iron clang of the dawn bell wrenching her from sleep. It dumped her on the rim of consciousness, sore and heavy and blind, and her dreams sank into the darkness of her mind, as if they had never been.

Yawning, she staggered out of the slaves' quarters to the courtyard well, her skin wincing at the icy air. She hunched her cloak around her shoulders, and, scarcely glancing at the dim shapes of the buildings around her, pumped some water and splashed it over her head. Gasping, she shook the water off her heavy hair, and her breath plumed in white swirls out of her nostrils and through her chattering teeth. Her limbs still felt like lead, her face was numb as a brick, but at least she was awake.

She was drying herself with her cloak when she heard a heavy step behind her. Maerad turned quick as a wild dog, her hackles bristling: but it was only Lothar, the huge, doltish man in charge of the buttery.

"Late night?" asked Lothar, sniggering.

Maerad turned contemptuously back to the well.

"You could hear the lords until cockcrow," he said. "And who took you last night?"

"Shut your muddy mouth, peabrain," she said shortly. "Or I'll put the evil eye on you." She turned to face him, glaring, and began to raise her arms. Lothar went pale and crossed his hands before his eyes. "Ward! Ward!" he cried. "I meant no harm, Maerad."

"Then keep your mouth from evil gossip," she hissed. "Get! Go!"

Lothar scuttled off, and Maerad permitted herself a grim smile before she savoured a precious minute to herself. The cot was only just stirring; it was before cockcrow, and there were still a few moments to the summons bell. Most of the slaves huddled greedily into their little patches of sleep-warmth, reluctant to leave until the very last second.

Maerad leaned back and breathed in hard, gazing up at the distant stars, tiny points of frosty fire high over the mountains. She searched as she always did for the dawn star Ilion, burning brightly over the Eastern horizon, and sniffed a new freshness in the early air. *It's the beginning of spring*, she thought. Despite her tiredness, her spirits lifted. Then she looked down at her callused hands and sighed. *But not for me; I'm already withering. What will become of me?*

She stared at the miserable dwellings around her with a dull hatred. Apart from the Thane's quarters and the Great Hall, which were better maintained than most, the cot consisted of dirt-floored stone hovels, roofed with rotting wooden shingles. Many were crumbling under their age and had been badly patched with clay and straw poultices, giving them an odd, diseased appearance. They stank of rotting middens and human filth and despair. From inside the dormitory Maerad could hear the high, thin cry of a sick child, and someone else shouting angrily, and then the dry sob of a woman. *What will become of me?* she asked herself again, uselessly; and then the clang of the summons bell broke into her thoughts and she shook herself and tramped to the commonroom for her meagre breakfast of thin grey porridge, and to be assigned her tasks for the day.

That morning Maerad was sent to the milchyard, Lothar's section. She grimaced at her bad luck. She would have to deal with him all day after she had slighted him, and today she was especially tired. Last night had been one of the Thane Gilman's riots, a special gathering to mark the first spring hunt, and his men had

come back hungry, wild haired, spattered with blood, quarrelsome, shouting for beer and voka and roast meats and music. For Gilman it was one of the high points of the year, and the work of all the slaves was doubled for the day. Maerad had worked an extra shift in the kitchen, turning and basting the deer carcasses on the iron spits. Then, because she was the only musician in the cot, she had sat in the Great Hall all night playing the ballads she found so tedious: tales of the slaughter of deer and the valour of men and dogs; and later, drinking songs, and the bawdies, which Maerad hated most of all.

The Great Hall was a grand name for what was really a large barn roughly crossbeamed, with a blackened hole in the roof to let out the smoke from the great fire that always burned in the middle of the floor. Maerad sat with her lyre in a corner, blank-faced to hide her contempt, while twenty men seated at a long, roughly hewn wooden table set against the wall tore meat from bones with their bare hands and drank themselves insensible on the voka, a harsh, eye-stinging spirit distilled from turnips and swedes. They hadn't bothered to wash, and their acrid smell and the woodsmoke made her eyes water. No one tried to paw her, to her infinite relief; but even so, the hot red eyes of the men made her feel filthy. As the night wore on the hall grew hotter and stuffier, and Maerad felt dizzy with the reek and her tiredness. She played badly, something she seldom did even in such circumstances, but nobody noticed.

The riot finished shortly before dawn, when the last drunken thug crashed face down on the long table and snored among the rest, who lay dribbling on their hands or fallen in their own vomit. Then at last, trembling with weariness, Maerad picked up her lyre and left the hall, stumbling between sleeping dogs, tossed bones and filth, spilt voka and snoring bodies to the sweet air outside. She stank, but she was so exhausted she had simply made her way to the women slave quarters and slipped onto her meagre straw pallet for a bare hour of sleep.

In the cowbyre she leant her forehead into the warm flanks of a dark-eyed cow, who stood patiently chewing cud as she kneaded her full udder. The milk splashed rhythmically into the pail. Maerad was on the brink of sleep when suddenly the cow almost kicked her and then tried to rear. Maerad started awake, rescuing the pail - spilt milk was not worth a beating - and tried to calm the animal. Normally a word would do, but the creature kept snorting and stamping, pulling the chains that held her hind leg and head as if she was distressed or frightened.

Maerad's hair prickled on the back of her neck. She had a strange, taut feeling, as if there was about to be a storm and the air was crackling with electricity. She looked around the byre.

A man stood there, not ten feet away, a man she had never seen before. For a moment shock stopped her breath. The man was tall, and his stern face was shadowed by a dark, roughly woven woollen hood. In the dim light from the doorway, she could see the outline of an aquiline nose and a glitter of eyes. She stood up and reached for a rushlight, uncertain whether to shout for help.

"Who are you?" she said sharply.

The man was silent.

She began to feel afraid. "Who are you?" she asked again. Was it a Wer out of the mountains? A ghost? "Avaunt, black spirit!"

"Nay," he said at last. "Nay, I am no black spirit. No Wer in a man's skin. No. Forgive me." He sighed heavily. "I am tired, and I am wounded. I am not quite - myself."

He smiled, but it was more like a wince, and as the rushlight fell past his hood and illuminated his features, Maerad saw that he was grey with exhaustion. His face was arresting: it seemed neither young nor old, the countenance of a man of perhaps about thirty five years, but somehow with the authority of age. He was high cheekboned, with a firm mouth and large, deepset eyes. He held her gaze. "And who are you, young witchmaiden? It takes sharp eyes to see the likes of me, although perhaps my art fails me. Name yourself."

"Who are you, to ask me?" said Maerad pugnaciously. It occurred to her, with a pang of surprise, that she didn't feel afraid; although, she thought in that split second, she ought to be.

The man looked hard at her, searching her face. He staggered slightly, and corrected himself, and then smiled again, as if in apology.

"I am Cadvan, of the School of Lirigon," he said. "Now, mistress, how do they name you?"

"Maerad," she said, almost whispering. She felt suddenly at a complete loss, confused by his politeness.

"Maerad of the Mountains?" the stranger said, with a wry smile.

"Of... of Gilman's fastness," she said haltingly. And then with a rush - "I'm a slave here..."

"A slave?"

Steps sounded outside and Lothar's bulk darkened the door. "Where's that milk? What are you doing there, have you lost your wits? Are you looking for the whip? If the butter doesn't turn, we'll know who to blame..."

He was not pleased with her, after her rebuff that morning. But again Maerad caught her breath in shock. Although the stranger stood plain in his sight, Lothar seemed to look right through him.

"I'm - I'm sorry," she stammered. "The cattle are restless..."

She sat on her stool and leaned forward to the cow again, who now stood patiently. Lothar watched her while she milked. She willed him to go away. After a short time, she heard his steps leaving and she relaxed a little. She kept milking, because she needed time to gather her thoughts. The stranger still stood there, watching her.

"Maerad," said the stranger quietly. "I wish you no harm. I am tired, and I need to sleep. That's why I'm here." He passed his hand over his brow, and then leaned against the wall of the byre.

"He didn't see you," she said blankly, still milking steadily to cover her amazement.

"No, it is a small thing..." he said, almost abstractedly. "A mere glimmerspell. What is interesting is that - you saw me." He stared at her again, with that searching, disturbing gaze. Maerad felt suddenly shy before him, as if she were naked, and turned her face aside. She felt his eyes upon her, and then a kind of release as he looked away. Involuntarily she shook herself. She heard him shift and sit down.

"I wish I were not so tired," he said at last, and then asked: "You were not always a slave?"

"My mother wasn't a slave," Maerad answered, speaking reluctantly, as if against

her will. "Gilman bought her and kept her here, when I was very little. I think he wanted to ransom her, but none came to ransom." She paused, and added flatly: "And then she died." She coiled around to face him, with a flash of anger. "What business is it of yours?" she demanded. "Who are you to ask me?"

The stranger seemed unperturbed, meeting her gaze calmly.

"What was your mother's name?"

"Milana. Milana of Pellinor, Singer of the Gift, Daughter of the First Circle. My father..." She stopped milking, and her hands flew to her mouth in astonishment. "Oh!"

"Oh, indeed," said Cadvan.

"I mean, my mother was called Milana, that's all I remember..." Maerad trailed off in confusion. "She... she died when I was seven years old... I don't know anything about... about the rest. Did you make me say that?"

"Make? No, I can't make you say anything. I asked, and the doors of your mind flew open. There is more in that treasury than most people realise. The School of Pellinor," he said, as if to himself. "That was sacked, oh, years ago. It was thought all were killed." He fell silent, and Maerad, shaken, continued milking. What was this man talking about? Was he mazing her, as wild spirits were said to do, bewildering her senses before snaring her? But he did not feel evil.

"By what right do you come in here and say... and say such things... I could call the Thane's men -" She stuttered to a halt. Somehow she knew she wouldn't call the guards.

The stranger put his face in his hands and didn't answer her. Maerad glanced at him angrily. She finished milking the cow and turned her loose, bringing in the next one. Cadvan was still sitting, unmoving, in the same position.

"You can't stay here, if you are of Pellinor," he said at last.

Maerad looked across at the stranger with a sudden wild hope. Did he mean that he knew some way to free her? But no one could escape from the cot...

He looked up at her. "Could you - perhaps - spare some milk?"

Wordlessly she offered him the milk pail. After a long draught, he wiped his mouth and smiled. "A blessing on you, and on your house," he said. Maerad nodded impatiently, brushing off the courtesy. "Will you have to come to the byre again?" he asked. "Today, I mean."

She examined his face suspiciously. "Yes, I am sectioned here today," she said at last. "I'll be milking again in the evening. Why?"

"Good." He stretched and yawned. "I'll sleep now. We'll talk later, yes, when I am less tired."

He cast himself down on the hay and was asleep almost instantly. Maerad looked down at him, considering whether to kick him awake and make him answer her questions, or whether to call the guards after all. But for reasons she couldn't trace, she did neither. Instead, she finished the milking and left him there. She was beaten for the missing milk.

That day Maerad was so absentminded she was lucky to escape a second beating. At her tasks in the milchyard, churning butter or setting the milk in bowls for soured drinks, she scarcely saw what she was doing. At first she didn't know what she felt about the man in the byre. Her mind, practised at the evasions of survival, skipped over the thought of him; he was, in a way, unthinkable. But every now and then an image of his dark face rose unbidden in her mind, and with it an unsettling feeling she couldn't name: a skin-prickling premonition, not exactly unpleasant, but not quite comfortable either. If she had been a child used to name-day celebrations, she might have likened it to the feeling of anticipating a gift; but she knew no such celebrations. At the same time, the blank, impassive mask under which she survived, secret even to herself, seemed to have disappeared, leaving her exposed and a little frightened. It was as if the stranger had opened a door long shut in her mind, and a cold fresh wind blew in, waking her from a stupor. Who am I? she wondered: and the question hurt.

She was used to her own strangeness. It had often been a protection as much as a curse. Because of her blue eyes and black hair, the fairhaired Northerners called her a witch, and she had played the part from an early age, making a virtue of what set her apart. And Maerad did possess the power of cursing: if she glared at someone, they might trip over and fall for no reason, or a beaker might fall from a shelf and break on their heads, and once she had blinded a man

for three days. She was also especially good with animals, another sign of a witch; those she tended grew fat and yielded twice the milk of the others. Most of the slaves feared and avoided her, and Gilman's men... well, the Thane's men had also learnt to leave her alone.

Gilman was deeply superstitious and, like all bullies, a devout coward. He believed that if Maerad were murdered her ghost would drive him to a grisly death - madden him until he ran out into the wolfhunt, perhaps, or skewer him slowly with invisible knives of fire. So Maerad escaped the worst details, which caused comment and petty malice among many of her fellow slaves. Recently this resentment had flared into open violence: a month ago six women had attacked her and tried to drown her in the duckpond. They had almost succeeded, but Gilman had rushed out of the hall, redfaced with panic, and hauled her out of the water. Though Maerad was cuffed for the trouble she had caused, the slaves who tormented her were whipped and given no food for three days. Saved by Gilman! She grinned humourlessly at the irony. It had stopped the persecution, for the moment; but now no one spoke to her at all, apart from idiots like Lothar.

If it hadn't been for her music she might have killed herself, or let the demons in her head taunt her into madness. Or she might have just turned into stone and become like the rest of them, brutalised of all feeling. Her lyre was her one possession, the only thing she still had of her mother. It was small, fitting into the crook of her arms like a baby, a bare wooden instrument with no decoration except some indecipherable carvings: but its tone was pure and true. One of her earliest memories was of her mother playing it, plucking the strings and singing to Maerad - she guessed she must have been very young, because then her mother had not been sad.

Maerad could play like a true minstrel; her ear was accurate, and she only had to hear a tune once to repeat it. Mirlad, Gilman's Bard, discovered her talent after her mother died. She was only seven years old then, and he somehow persuaded Gilman to relieve her from morning duties so he could teach her. Mirlad, gruff, taciturn, sometimes cruelly harsh, had been her teacher until she turned thirteen: then Gilman demanded her labour in the fields again. Maerad remembered her misery at that decision, and Mirlad's odd response. "I've taught you everything I know about music," he had said, shrugging indifferently. "Anything else would be a waste here. You can play in the evenings, anyway."

Her musicianship compounded her isolation, but it was another reason Gilman tolerated her: Mirlad had died some two years before, although perhaps only Maerad mourned his passing, and she was now the only person in the cot with the skill to play at his riots. She played for herself, privately, whenever she

could, and those snatched moments were the only consolation of her degraded life.

*Milana. My mother. How long since I thought of you? You braided my hair each night, even if your hands shook with tiredness, and you played me pretty tunes when I felt sad or when someone beat me, and kissed me, just there, on my forehead...* Maerad's mind flinched from the memory of her mother's death, how she had sickened, wasted by fever and pain and grief. She had died, that was all, and after that Maerad was alone.

For as long as she could remember, Maerad had dreamed of escaping Gilman's Cot. But year after year passed and brought only the knowledge that escape was impossible. Hope had ebbed little by little, until, had Maerad known it, she wore the same sad beauty that she remembered of her mother. Now, this Cadvan - she said the name to herself, privately - had appeared out of nowhere, as if walls and guards and dogs did not exist.

As the day wore on she turned over the morning's conversation with an increasing impatience. Sometimes she convinced herself that she had dreamed the stranger, that he was an illusion of her exhaustion, a shadowy projection of the longing that burned inside her. She had thought hope was dead inside her; but now she realised that it merely slumbered, like ash-grey embers which held yet a glowing heart, which the merest breath might fan into flame.

The hours dragged, but at last it was evening. Just before she went to the byre, prompted by a sudden impulse, Maerad slipped back to her quarters and took her lyre from where she kept it under her pallet, wrapped in sacking.

Cadvan was still there, lying on his back in the byre, his hands folded behind his head, apparently studying the ceiling. He was not so grey-faced now, although there were still dark circles under his eyes, and he smiled at Maerad when she entered. She looked back at him expressionlessly, waiting for him to speak. He sighed and stood up.

"Well, Maerad, I've had a little time to think," he said. "This is a foul noisome place, although to be fair the animals are well treated - better than the people here. That is unjust enough." He paused. "Do you wish to leave?"

Maerad almost laughed. The cot was guarded day and night, and the guards were vigilant. Some slaves had, indeed, tried to escape, but all her life Maerad had heard of none who succeeded, although she had seen many savage beatings and, once, a man torn to pieces by Gilman's hounds. It was enough to gainsay the attempt.

"Leave this place?"

"Seriously, Maerad."

"I've dreamed of nothing else these long years," she said. "It's impossible. Why do you think I'm still here?"

"So you do wish to leave?" Cadvan paused and looked down at the ground. "I guess it would be surprising if you did not. I am in a little dilemma, then, as to what to do. It would be most unwise of me to take you with me. I am flying from danger into danger, and the world ever darkens; and I do not have my full strength."

Maerad's heart dropped with disappointment; she hadn't realised, despite her frank scepticism, the resilience of her hope. But Cadvan continued.

"But neither could I leave you here, if you are indeed Milana's daughter, and you indeed wish to leave. Perhaps I could come back, when I was stronger; but I have duties I can't abandon, and I would not be free of them for months. And my heart tells me..." He fell silent again, looking at the ground, as if he were weighing a difficult decision.

"I must leave now. If you want to come with me, you may. Leaving will be a simple matter. Other things will not be so simple, but we will have to take them as they come."

Maerad was suddenly breathless, and could make no reply.

"Yes?" the stranger said. "Or no?"

"Why are you asking me this?" she said. "It's impossible! Are you tricking me?"

Cadvan merely looked at her, without answering. She stared back at him stubbornly, refusing to lower her eyes.

"There come few times in a person's life where there is a clear choice," said Cadvan at last. "The difference between one person and another is how they meet that choice." There was a short silence, and then he gestured impatiently. "I have no time. I have made my offer. You can stay or leave as you wish. I am asking what you want. If you don't know, it is no concern of mine." He brushed some straw from his cloak, and turned to leave the byre.

A feeling akin to panic surged through Maerad. For a second she felt as if she were plunged into suffocating mud again: only this time there would be no hand to haul her out onto the bank.

"Wait!" she called out. "Wait."

Cadvan turned again to face her.

"I'll come," she said.

Cadvan looked at her bundled lyre. "Is there anything you must fetch?" Maerad shook her head. "Well, that is good. We'll go now, then."

"Now? What about the cows?" And indeed, they were lowing, asking her to relieve them of their burdens of milk.

"Someone else will milk them tonight," said Cadvan. "I do not think Gilman will let his beasts suffer; they are too valuable. Now, quickly. Come here."

Maerad approached him warily, and he made her stand square in front of him. He put his hands on her shoulders and spoke. The words sent a thrill through Maerad, like plunging into cold, fresh water from a spring welling from the morning of the world.

"*Larneá il oseanna, lembel Maerad inasfrea!* Turn the eyes of men from Maerad so she may walk unseen, is roughly what I have said," he explained, dropping his hands. "Now no man could see you, though you stood a span from his nose. The virtue will not work on objects, if you drop them. So keep your bundle close! Now, we must scale the walls."

He picked up a pack Maerad had not noticed and walked towards the low door. As he did so, Maerad was assailed by another wave of panic. Somehow she already felt her decision was irrevocable, yet she didn't know what it was she had decided: why trust this man? She knew nothing of him. But her doubts were overwhelmed by a fierce longing, as if all her desires for freedom, crushed by

hopelessness for so many years, came back in a single urgent wave. *It can't be worse than here*, she thought, *because here I'm certain to die, and out there - who knows?* She took a deep breath and followed Cadvan out of the byre.

"We must hurry," he said. "No speaking. I cannot make us unheard as well."

They left the byre and made for the South wall. Maerad found it hard not to flinch in the open squares, where the Thane's men stood lounging against the walls toying with their weapons; it was difficult to believe in her invisibility when she felt so visible to herself.

Their way led them straight past the Great Hall. The chained dogs looked up and sniffed in greeting as they passed, but the men looked through them.

She kept close behind Cadvan, tiptoeing despite herself, until they came to the least guarded section of the outer walls. The wall itself was not hard to climb; Maerad had often considered the logistics. Impossible, however, under the vigilance of the guards, whose sight covered every inch of the wall and who knew their lives were forfeit if any left. Cadvan set his foot on the wall, and Maerad helplessly showed him her sacking-wrapped lyre, which she could not sling on her back. He stopped thoughtfully, took it and stowed it in his bag. Then they started again. When they reached the top, Cadvan paused, looking each way for the guards who patrolled the way. Choosing his time carefully, he took Maerad by the arm and pushed her across the narrow path, and then together they went down the other side.

As they did, Maerad heard the bell ring, once, twice, thrice, before it began a long urgent peal. It was the signal for an escape. She started, feeling horribly exposed. Lothar must have discovered her absence already, but it was very quick - no doubt he wanted to be revenged for her slight this morning, for she would be whipped for sparking an alarm. A commotion rose in the cot. She half scrambled, half fell down the wall, beating Cadvan to the ground.

"Now you make the pace!" he said, laughing. "I thought I'd never get you out of there!"

"They'll send the dogs after us!" whispered Maerad, panting with fear. "There's no escaping Gilman's hounds. They'll track a stag for a week and they can tear a grown man to pieces in a minute!"

"Dogs are easy to deal with," said Cadvan. "Don't be afraid, Maerad. If dogs are the worst we have to face, we will be fortunate. But now we must move on. See

the end of this valley? I want to be well clear of this before the night is over. Our doom tonight is, I am afraid, a long walk. Then we'll rest."

Maerad looked down the valley where she had been imprisoned most of her short life. The ground swept away before her, a constant steady decline of boulders and mountain rubble covered with sparse scrub and the odd tree bent against the harsh winds that swept down from the mountains, the Osidh Annova, Eastern border of the Inner Kingdom. A rudimentary track wandered down the centre of the valley, strewn here and there with stones from some landslide.

She suddenly felt very small and frightened. She looked at the man who stood at her elbow and swallowed. His face was dark and closed; the great dogs which figured in her nightmares, with their yelping bays and their long loping gait, were but small trouble to him. No doubt he knew far worse. He now seemed remote, charged with some hidden power she only sensed. She didn't want to seem foolish before such a man. She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath.

"We'll walk then," she said, turning her face towards the broken path.

At her back, behind the cot, reared the Landrost, its tip stained red by the setting sun, its massive bulk throwing all the valley into shadow.

## 2: THE LANDROST

They had not gone half a mile when Maerad heard the long halloo of the hunting horn and the bay of Gilman's hounds. Her heart constricted. Before long the gates of the cot flung open and three of the Thane's men emerged, shouting, roughly horsed, and the hounds poured after them, loping in the low light. Noses down, they cast around for a scent, the bloodlust already a fire in their eyes. Maerad fought a rising fear and unconsciously shrank towards Cadvan. He glanced at her swiftly.

"Maerad, they cannot harm us," he said softly. "The men cannot see us."

She nodded and trudged on, trying to contain herself. Suddenly another bay went up - the hounds had found their scent, and were running. The horsemen followed, spurring on their mounts. Cadvan was still walking steadily.

"But the *hounds* can see us," whispered Maerad hoarsely. "The hounds can see us, and..."

"They won't harm us," said Cadvan. "They're savage beasts, but innocent. They serve no dark purpose. Have faith."

The hounds were nearing them swiftly. As they drew close, Cadvan stopped and wheeled around. He raised his arms, and to Maerad it seemed that suddenly a light was gathered about him, or within him, although she could see no source.

"*Lemmach!*" he said.

The leading hound stopped dead in its tracks, so the dog behind it tumbled over its feet. The pack wheeled around and stopped.

"*Lemmach ni ardrost!*"

The lead dog came up to Cadvan and whiffled around his knees. Cadvan stroked its nose. "*Ni ardrost,*" he said again, gently, and the dogs each sniffed

him and then, as if they had just gone for a drink at a pond, trotted casually back to the riders.

Maerad stood stock still, her face a cipher. "What did you do?"

"I told them to stop, and asked them to go home," said Cadvan. "And being friendly beasts, they obligingly did so. They'll not hunt us now, no matter what their masters do. They obey older laws."

At her back, Maerad could hear the riders cursing the dogs, and their yelps as they whipped them. She realised she was trembling. A massive exhaustion swept over her, and she stumbled. Cadvan caught her elbow in quick concern.

"I'm sorry to drive you, Maerad, but we cannot rest here tonight," he said. "Gilman's hounds are no danger to us, but other things are. This is an unwholesome place. And already it grows dark."

Maerad shrugged off Cadvan's hand. Other things? she thought. What other things? All the recent rumours of Wers and other creatures of the night crowded uncomfortably in her mind.

"I'm all right," she said sullenly.

"It is safest if we keep moving," said Cadvan.

The night had a cold edge, but this early was still mild and clear. They walked for some time in silence, and as Maerad began to get her second wind, they started talking. Maerad asked Cadvan what he was doing in Gilman's Cot, but he evaded the answer, instead asking about her life there, and whether she had earlier memories, from Pellinor. She could tell him little on that point. "Fragments," she said. "A man - I think it was my father, a handsome man, tall, with long black hair, laughing. A chair with beautiful carvings with a strange coloured light falling on it from a high window. A few scraps of music. I thought that I dreamed it."

"It's no dream. The Schools are places of high learning and much beauty," said Cadvan sadly, as if he spoke of something loved that is vanishing. "There the Lore is upheld, and the Light shines over all who dwell there. But now their power wanes, and darkness reaches into Annar."

"What are the Schools?" asked Maerad, feeling ignorant and coarse. "Is that

where you learned those spells?"

He glanced at her, and to her confusion he laughed. "Maerad, it is so strange to me that one of the Gift should know nothing at all of the Schools."

"The Gift?" said Maerad. She looked down the valley; a long way before her she could see the stars glimmering between the spurs where it ended, opening out onto the wide world, of which she knew nothing. She suddenly felt more alone than she ever had in her life; and she was so tired, more tired than she had ever been. A ball of grief rose in her throat, and she couldn't speak.

"Please forgive me, Maerad," Cadvan said. "I do not mean to tease your ignorance. Perhaps more tutored, you would now be dead, and your lack of knowledge has protected you from the sight of those who would otherwise have done you harm." He smiled at her, and Maerad, not quite understanding him, smiled wanly back. "Perhaps I should turn Loresinger for a while?" he said. "Tonight we could have an introductory lesson. It will pass the time."

"All right then," said Maerad, glancing across at the shadowy man beside her. "Tell me about the Gift."

They had a long way to go, but they were making a good pace, despite boulders and loose stones which constantly threatened to turn an ankle. The last traces of daylight were retreating from the mountains, and it was the dark interval before moonrise. Her legs felt heavy and sore with tiredness, but talking took her mind off her discomfort.

"Where to begin?" said Cadvan. "What is the Gift? How to answer that, when nobody really knows?" He paused, as if gathering his thoughts. "Well, those of the Gift are like to the Loresingers of Afinil. All Bards are of the Gift, and it means they have certain powers and abilities. The most important is the Speech." He paused. "Bards do not learn the Speech, but are born with it already living within them. In the mouths of those with the Gift, the Speech holds its innate power; it is the source of our Knowing and much of our might. Those with the Gift also live for three spans of a normal life: I am already an old man by normal reckonings, although you would not think so, perhaps."

"An old man?" said Maerad, looking dubiously at Cadvan. He did not look old to her; she had already guessed his age to be about thirty-five years. She wondered briefly if he was making it up; but then she thought of how he had

made her invisible.

"Not old in the measure of Bards," said Cadvan, smiling, "but old enough. A long life is a double-edged privilege, believe me. But there are other signs; Bards know other Bards, which is how I knew you. This morning I thought for a second my powers had wholly failed me, when you challenged me." He clutched his breast. "My heart stopped! But then I saw your eyes..."

Maerad glanced at him, again uncertain of what he meant, or whether she should laugh. She noticed that as he spoke Cadvan was constantly alert, but in ways she didn't recognise. He never looked around or behind him, but seemed rather to be innerly attuned to something she couldn't hear, as if inside him flowed a music that, at times, demanded intense attention. It felt a bit odd, as if he were only half there.

"There is much you should know about Bards, and the Light," said Cadvan. "To have the Gift, and to be ignorant of what it means, can be a terrible thing." He began to speak in an oddly formal tone, almost a chant, which at first nearly made her smile. She had a swift unbidden vision of a stone hall with high windows, and of many people seated in a circle, their heads bowed in concentration. The vision vanished, and she looked around her at the empty night and the gloomy shadows of the mountainside; but Cadvan's voice continued steadily in the darkness.

"Know then, Maerad, that in Annar and the Seven Kingdoms the Bards are charged with the keeping of the Light. The centres of Knowing are the Schools of Bards, but it was not always so. Many lives of men ago the centre of the Lore was Afinil, citadel of Song, builded when the first Loresingers came to Annar. Some say a terrible cold drove them from their home, and others that they sailed here on great ships from a foundered land, and still others say we simply appeared here among other humans; whatever the truth, our origin is lost in legend. However they came, Bards appeared in Annar, bringing with them the remnants of an ancient Knowing from the very dawn of the world: the Gift of the Speech, and Reading and Making and Tending, the skills and knowledge known as the Arts of the Light. And here was built the great city of Afinil, which was the centre of the Knowing in the ancient days.

"Many songs tell of its unmatched beauty, of the unwallled towers that rose like lilies beside the mere, pure face of blessed water. And within this citadel dwelt the Loresingers, all those who loved and tended the beauty of the world. The Speech was on all tongues, and all met with understanding."

Cadvan's voice shifted subtly into a chant. Maerad's heart quickened; she couldn't remember the last time she had heard a new song. Even in her surprised pleasure, the musician in her noted coldly that Cadvan possessed a very good baritone.

"Dashed into darkness, deeper than heartgrief,  
All voices mourn thee, high and humble,  
Treespeech and beastspeech, manspeech and bard,  
All voices mourn thee, fruit of the dawn,  
Flower of ice enchanting the sunlight,  
Shadow of moonbeam woven from marble,  
Throat of the morning where all voices mingled.

In Afinil, O Afinil!  
Thy dreams are lost, thy music still,  
The briars creep where thy towers were  
And the stars are dark in the shadowmere.

"So it is remembered in song, as an ache, a memory of something lovely, now lost for ever. The story of its loss is an evil one. But you must know it, if you are to understand the Bards. For in the gifts of the Light, alas, were its own undoing."

Maerad stumbled again and this time fell, scrambling up immediately. Cadvan stopped. "Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes," she snapped, embarrassed, pressing her hands together where she had grazed them on the rock.

Cadvan looked at her sharply. "You haven't rested, and after a heavy day's work, no doubt," he said. "We must press on; but perhaps we can stop for a little while now, to go all the faster afterwards." He sat down on the ground, just where he was, and gratefully Maerad sat down next to him. Her legs were shaking. Cadvan opened his pack and drew out a bottle. "This helps weariness," he said. He drank some, and offered it to Maerad. It tasted like water, but with a faint hint of herbs. A fiery tingling rushed through her body and some of her exhaustion immediately lifted. In the sudden quiet the valley felt oppressively silent, and when Cadvan began to speak again Maerad almost jumped.

"Afinil, as I said, fell in part because of its generous provenance. Once in the South there arose a king, who feared to die like ordinary men and sought

instead endless life, freed from the doom of the world's circle. He envied the powers of the Light and desired them for his own. Masking his intent, he approached the gentle Bards of Afinil and asked for tutelage, and harbouring no suspicion in their hearts, gladly they gave it him. He was an apt pupil and in time became more powerful in the ways of Speech, more subtle in the Lore, more skilled in the arts of making and unmaking, than any before him. When he was satisfied he had learnt enough, he returned to his own land in the South, the kingdom of Dén Raven.

"The intention of the knowledge of Light is to make fair, to make grow, to keep the sacred Balance. But this king bent this knowledge to his own purpose. His first wrong was to cast off his Name."

"How can you cast off your name?" asked Maerad, fascinated and puzzled. "What did they call him, then?"

Cadvan laughed. "He still has a username, this sorcerer, though it is seldom said. He is usually called the Nameless. Every Bard has a secret Name," he continued. "You do not know my Name. You do not even yet know yours. A Bard's Name is given at Instatement, when you come into your powers: it is, if you like, your true Name, in the Speech. It says who you are. To cast it off is to reject yourself."

"But that's impossible!" Maerad objected. "How can you not be who you are?"

"Alas, it's not impossible at all," replied Cadvan. "The king rejected his Name, because then he could also reject death. But with the gift of death, he cast away also the knowledge of those who die, and found his heart was empty, a pain sharper than any that he had known. For he was not of the immortals, and had not the right to deathlessness. He looked out on the world, and his eye was dark. He sought then the dominion of all on the earth, and the destruction of all that rebuked him with its beauty, and challenged the Law of the Balance, and overthrew it. And then, with massed armies, he marched on the lovely citadel of Afinil, and cast down its fair towers and darkened the mere, so the moon no longer bathed there and the stars fled its lifeless face. Then began the Great Silence, when the Song was no longer heard in the wide lands of Annar.

"That was not the total of his evil, but it was among the most grievous. Many things then were lost to the world beyond restoration."

Cadvan sighed. Maerad listened in silence, overwhelmed with wonder, not only at the tale, but at the sweet tautness the names began to awaken within her: *Afinil, Loresinger, the Light*. They recalled much of the scent and sound of her mother, her voice as she plucked the lyre, the dark fall of her hair as she kissed her, and other memories that she could not trace. She sighed also, and looked around them. They were now more than halfway down the valley, and the stars were massed above them, bright around a moon waxing to the full. She picked out the Five Gemmed Daughters, swinging high over them in their ceaseless dance. Ilion was now sunk beneath the horizon.

Cadvan stood up. "We should move on," he said. Maerad scrambled to her feet, and they began again the slow trudge down the valley. Maerad felt her exhaustion beginning to return, but she forced herself on, and Cadvan returned to his lesson.

"The story of the downfall of the Nameless One is long and hard and desperate, and many parts of that tale never returned from darkness," he continued. "Suffice to say that he was at last defeated. After his fall, the Bards made the Schools, which keep and teach the Knowing of the Light throughout Annar and the Seven Kingdoms. The centre of all high knowledge is now Norloch, a fair place of gardens and high halls and learning. But in this way differing from Afinil: for Norloch is walled and provision is made for a great garrison, and the innocence that was the downfall of Afinil will not be its weakness again. And this perhaps is the greatest loss caused by the Nameless, although some argue it is not so, and that in its greatness Norloch surpasses even the ancient citadel."

"Have you been there?" asked Maerad, when he said no more.

"Yes," said Cadvan. "Many times. For I am no longer part of any School, and travel between them as I must. The Light once more is under attack. And Bards now are sent on dangerous and secret ways to spy out the tracks of the Dark, rather than singing the leaves of spring in the old ways, bringing increase."

"Was that why you were near Gilman's Cot?" asked Maerad.

A shadow of pain passed over Cadvan's face. "It is a little close to speak of that," he said. He was silent then for a long time.

In the quiet Maerad again felt the oppressiveness of their surroundings. It was now some three hours since sunset and the moonlight illuminated the

sheer edges of the mountains with a white dew, casting the ravines into impenetrable shadow. In the distance she thought she heard faint howls and shrieks. She thought also that Cadvan's face held traces of some great strain, although his voice had betrayed nothing. Maerad remembered his exhaustion only that morning, and that he had said he was wounded. She saw no sign of a wound.

At last she ventured another question. "Do you think that I might be a Bard?"

"Didn't you hear anything I told you?" said Cadvan shortly. Maerad cast him a glance of dislike. Her feet were beginning to throb with pain, and she marched on in silence, wondering if they would ever leave this cursed valley. Cadvan halted then, and gasped, and Maerad saw that sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Maerad," he said. "I must ask your patience. I contest the will of the spirit of this place, which would not have us leave here. It bears down on me, and it gets worse the further we go."

After a short time he walked on again, but more slowly, as if he was pushing through deep water. Maerad saw with anxiety they still had a long way to go before they passed out of the valley. She could feel nothing herself, apart from an increasing sense of dread. She didn't dare to speak. It was difficult walking, as now they picked their way through broken boulders and piles of scree slipped from the sides of the mountains, and at times the track almost vanished altogether. Her feet felt bruised and sore. And, for the first time that night, the cold began to trouble her. It seemed to creep into the marrow of her bones, forming crystals in her joints that made it hard to move. She gradually descended into a dull nightmare of exhaustion, and finally was concentrating only on putting one foot in front of the other. The mouth of the valley drew closer and closer, but as they neared it, so the cold increased and Cadvan's steps became slower.

At last he stopped altogether. Now sweat ran in runnels down his face, and the edges of his mouth trembled. "Maerad," he said hoarsely. "I must rest, just briefly." He seemed to collapse slowly to the ground.

Instinctively Maerad reached out and clasped his hand.

All at once she felt it: a cold, cruel will that crushed her mind like a vice. She dropped his hand as if the touch scorched her.

"What *is* it?" she whispered.

Cadvan looked at her in amazement.

"You can feel it?" he said.

"Something," she said, wincing. "Something horrible..."

"Take my hand again," he said. Maerad looked at him fearfully and flinched away. When she had touched Cadvan, it was as if her mind had been invaded by a malignant consciousness, implacable and terrifying.

Cadvan let out his breath in a gasp, and then braced himself to breathe again, like a man in pain. He held out his hand towards her, speaking steadily.

"Maerad, at this moment I keep the entire mountain from toppling on our heads. Perhaps you can help me. Take my hand!"

Reluctantly Maerad reached out and clasped it again. His fingers were cold as ice. The feeling came back, worse this time. Cadvan clutched her hard, as if he were drowning.

"Hold it back," he said. "Command it to retreat."

Maerad felt bewildered. What did he mean?

*Hold it back!*

The command seemed not to be said out loud, but inside her head. It was Cadvan's voice. In the midst of the baleful darkness which disordered her mind, his voice seemed to be a light, a small white flame... she turned towards it, fighting down her terror. She focused her thoughts. *Go away!* she cried. She didn't know if she said it out loud. *Begone!*

At once the crushing sense of malevolence lightened. Cadvan let out an enormous sigh.

"By the Light, Maerad, that is some Gift you have. Now perhaps we will be able to leave." Slowly, holding her hand so tightly she could feel the bones crunching, he stood up.

They crept on steadily, bent over as if they carried heavy burdens. Maerad

found it difficult to concentrate both on walking and on shielding her mind. Once she twisted her ankle on a rock and almost fell, crying out, but Cadvan kept fast her hand and she limped on. The end of the valley came closer with excruciating slowness.

At last, as the mountains began to turn silver-grey and then rose-pink with the approaching dawn, they reached the end of the valley. As they passed the last of its outrunning hills, Maerad felt the will snap shut behind her, like a gate, and suddenly her body walked freely again. She laughed with relief.

"We're out!" she cried, turning to Cadvan with an open smile for the first time.

Cadvan glanced at her sombrely. "But still we must walk! Even in its shadows, the Landrost has power."

As if to emphasise his words, a deep rumble echoed from behind them and a great slide of rocks and boulders slipped off the side of the mountains and fell in dust to the ground. Maerad turned and looked into the valley for the last time. Strange, she thought; she felt no emotion at all, neither gladness nor regret. Nothing.

Then she turned away.

Before them she saw the turfed knees of the mountains descending to a great forest, obscured by mists that even now were drawing up to the sky. The sun was rising over the green hills, and its pale light fell on her face.

### 3: THE SCRYING

MAERAD limped on, her legs heavy, aching for sleep. An hour after sunrise, when the mouth of the valley had vanished in the larger range, but before they had reached the edges of the forest, Cadvan stopped beside a small grove of white-barked trees. Maerad saw they were ancient, with wide, scarred boles, and grew in a circle close together.

"The birch is a tree of high virtue," Cadvan said. "Even here, we can sleep in peace. This is a dingle planted of old by the Northern Bards. It has a name: *Irihel*, Icehome, and travelling bards would stay here. It is well placed for us!"

They passed between the closely planted trunks and Maerad saw that within them the grass was short and close leafed, making a soft, fragrant ground that dipped down like a bowl. The branches met and interwove over their heads, the new leaves filtering the light green-gold. Cadvan sat down, throwing his pack to the ground, and stretched out his legs.

"We are not permitted to make fire here," he said. "More's the pity. My bones are frozen."

Maerad cautiously sat down with him. Her rough life in the cot had taught her to be wary of men; it had taken all her guile, all her summonings of witchfears, to ward off Gilman's thugs. She had seen what they did to women and any others weaker than they were. She was acutely aware she was alone in a wild place, wholly in the power of this Cadvan; but he wasn't like any man she had met before, not even Mirlad, Gilman's dour and taciturn singer.

Cadvan eyed her empathically. "There is a rivulet near by, if you would like to wash," he said. "I'll show you, and leave you there briefly. You will be within call, should you need me. If you are unable to call, shout my name in your head. I will hear you."

Maerad nodded, and he led her to a small stream that flowed, fresh and cold, from the mountains. Behind high bushes of gorse and bramble, a small bank of smooth grass shelved up from a pool, almost as if it had been made for bathing. Cadvan left her and Maerad washed for the first time since the day before, gasping at the cold water, and soaked her swollen ankle. The sprain was not too bad: it would be better in a day or so.

Then she returned to the dingle, where Cadvan had taken a blanket from his pack, and her lyre, still wrapped in sacking. He had also spread some food: dried fruits and meats, and a tough-looking biscuit. "Eat," he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

Maerad picked up her lyre, shaking off the sacking, and cradled it, but she was too tired even to pluck the strings. By the time Cadvan returned, ten minutes later, she was already sound asleep with the blanket wrapped around her, the lyre tucked in the crook of her arm like a baby, the food untouched. He smiled wryly, and ate some of the biscuit. Then he too wrapped his cloak about him and slept.

Maerad was awoken by hunger pangs. The sun was already low in the sky. Cadvan was sitting with his back to her and turned when she stirred. He was eating, and offered her some supper, and they ate in silence. That simple food, seasoned only by hunger, burst on Maerad's tongue like freedom, as if her entire body were glowing with the taste of sunlight, of wind blowing in wide spaces and trees reaching their burdened arms to boundless skies.

When they finished eating, Cadvan brushed the crumbs off his cloak with almost fastidious care. "Now, Maerad," he said, not looking at her. "We must think of our plans. I must travel many hundreds of miles, through dangerous country, and quickly. And now I have a passenger, and no extra food. And I notice you brought not a blanket, nor any food, nor even spare clothes - only a harp, like a true Bard. What shall we do?"

Maerad looked at him, schooling her face to betray nothing. "How should I know?" she asked. "You asked me to come with you." But a sudden fear plucked her. What, indeed, was she to do? She knew nothing, and no one. As far as she knew, her family were all dead. She had no home. And she could be nothing but a liability to this man, who had freed her from slavery though clearly in danger himself. Would he abandon her?

As if he read her thoughts, Cadvan said quickly: "Of course, I wouldn't leave you here. But we must have some thought of where to go. My way bends to Norloch, where I must report to the Circle. I can either take you to a closer School, where you may rest, and heal, and be taught, or take you with me to Norloch."

"I don't mean to be in the way," said Maerad, a little sarcastically.

"Maerad, Bards learn that little that concerns them is the consequence of mere chance. Our meeting seems to me of more weight than that. Those of the Gift are rare enough: to find you in a cowbyre, in such circumstances, is too strange. And I doubt I would have made it out of that valley without your help. That much is clear to me. It is also, to my mind, astonishing to find such power as yours, wholly untutored. I would not have believed it, if I had not experienced it. There's much I should tell you, much you should know. A gift of any kind is a double-edged blade, and its possession can damage you, if used wrongly. You are a puzzle."

He smiled at her, but Maerad sat gloweringly and would not smile back. There was a short silence.

"May I look at your lyre?" he asked. "It caught my eye..."

Maerad picked up her lyre, unconsciously stroking it, and passed it to him. He took it and examined it closely, his interest quickening, his long slender fingers testing its weight and balance. He drew his hand across the strings in a gentle chord. The notes rang out sweetly and hung in the air. Cadvan whistled softly.

"This lyre," he said. "Was it your mother's?"

Maerad nodded. Cadvan sat thoughtfully, turning it over in his hands, running his fingers over the carven script.

"Have you ever had to tune it?" he said. "I suppose you have never replaced the strings?"

"No," said Maerad. "Should I have? I didn't know... Mirlad never said..."

Cadvan laughed, startling her. "Oh, Maerad," he said, when he regained his breath. "Should you have strung it?" He laughed again, softly, wonder palpable in his voice. "This is a thing precious beyond the ransom of kings. What would Gilman have done, had he known such a treasure lay hidden in his small cot! It is worth ten times, no, a thousand thousand times, the worth of everything in it. Such lyres have not been made for many a long age, not since the days of Afinil. It was carved by a great craftsman. I don't know this script at all, and I know many that are long fallen into disuse; no doubt it tells the name of who made it. Dhyllic ware, they are, and a great potency is woven into their making. The virtue on its strings is one now long lost. I have read of these instruments, but I have never seen one. It was thought they were all lost. What a riddle you are!" He looked at her, still smiling.

Maerad had no idea how to answer him. She felt staggered. Her humble lyre, a thing out of legend? But, suddenly serious, Cadvan reached out and patted her hand.

"We shall have to be friends, if we are to travel together," he said. "And we must trust each other. Don't mind my teasing. Nevertheless, we must decide what to do."

Maerad looked uneasily down at her hands and said nothing. She didn't know what to say to this man: did he mean her ill? How could she tell?

"In any case, we won't leave here tonight," continued Cadvan. "I am still weary, truth be told. And I need to think. Here we are safe, for the time being. Rest will harm neither of us. And there is a long road ahead, whatever we decide."

He opened his pack, and drew out a lyre. "Of less noble lineage than yours, but noble enough to keep it company," he said. "And still true, and my first love." He struck some chords, tuning it, and then plucked a cascade of notes which pierced Maerad's heart. It was a song she knew well, the beginning of the tragic lay of Andomian and Beruldh, which Mirlad had taught her many years before. Cadvan began to sing the part of Andomian in a clear, beautiful voice.

Speak to me, fair maid!  
Speak and do not go!  
What sorrows have your eyes inlaid  
With such black woe?

He paused, plucking the melody, and Maerad realised he was waiting for her to respond. She was still holding her lyre, and began to play the antiphon, singing the answering verse. She hadn't played duet since Mirlad had died. They continued to sing the alternate verses of the ancient duet, Cadvan's baritone and Maerad's contralto filling the grove with music. Maerad had the odd feeling that the trees were listening, bending inwards the better to hear them.

My dam is buried deep  
Dark are my father's halls  
And carrion fowl and wolves now keep  
Their ruined walls

Stay and heal your hurt  
Lay down that brow of stone

From this day forth my hidden heart  
Will be your own.

The curse of Karak binds me  
My brothers are his thralls  
And I must turn all joy and flee  
To his foul halls...

Maerad stopped, suddenly faltering. Cadvan ceased his play, and after the rippling chords of music there was a deep silence. "And so Andomian and Beruldh met, and wended their way even to the dungeons of the Nameless, and there died, beyond hope or help of the Light," he said. "But none of the legends speak of his regret." He struck a sudden harsh, impatient chord. "You're right, Maerad. This is no song for such a place, unhoused, in the dark, where Wers howl in the distance. You play well: you've had some good teaching, clearly, although with some odd variants... I see you know more than you choose to show. I should have expected that, I guess. We'll talk of this later."

He put away his lyre, and spoke no more for some time, and now his brow was dark and troubled. Maerad sat disconsolate, wondering if she had been impertinent or coarse. This man was beyond her ken: he seemed to regard her with tolerant irony, and then, without warning, his mood would change and he would become distant and withheld. He was nothing like the men in Gilman's Cot, who were moved only by coarse, violent impulses, nor like Mirlad, who had been brusque, but whose gruffness concealed a deep kindness. An instinct had told her Mirlad was deeply unhappy and so she excused his disillusion and his odd moods. He had never spoken to her of the history of Annar, or the Lore, or the Speech, although he had taught her many songs, saying dismissively that they passed the time. Thinking back, she supposed he saw as little hope as she did of her escape, and so sought to protect her from dreaming, as perhaps he did, of another life. A life where Bards and Song were held in honour, and were not merely the entertainment at crude feastings.

And he had died there. She felt a new compassion wash over her for the degradation of Mirlad's life, and his lonely death.

Cadvan, though, was quite different, and much less easy to feel out. He seemed more mercurial; his face was mobile, and his thoughts flowed over it like the sun rippling over water. Yet paradoxically he seemed more hidden, more full of secrets beyond even those he hinted at. Perhaps, she thought, all real Bards are like this, at once more present and more remote. At least he had got her out of

the cot: but she couldn't think of what she should do now, unless she followed Cadvan. He said himself this was dangerous country, and she had no knowledge of any dangers, save those of being beaten, and fighting off the Thane's men. She would be as vulnerable as a baby rabbit.

Maerad leaned back against one of the birches and gazed up through its branches, which twined black against the deep blue of evening. A few early stars shone through, white jewels snared in an intricate net. I cannot understand this pattern, she thought tiredly. But the stars, at least, remain the same.

At last Cadvan said curtly she should get some rest, and so she curled into the blanket. It didn't take long for her to sleep, despite the disorder of her thoughts.

Maerad woke with a start. For a moment she forgot where she was and wondered why there had been no bell; then a shaft of light striking through the branches shone in her eyes, and as she blinked, the events of the past two days came back with a rush. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and saw that Cadvan was already up and had laid out breakfast. He had been to the stream, for his dark hair fell wet across his forehead.

"Good morning," he said, bowing. "The mistress of the house must forgive our fare, which, alas, is the same as last night. But wholesome, for all its monotony. Does my lady wish to wash first, or after she breaks her fast?"

Maerad laughed. "Later, I think. It's a better breakfast than I'm used to!"

They ate in a companionable silence. Then Cadvan packed up. Maerad wrapped her lyre in its sacking and Cadvan stowed it.

"We must leave here today," he said. "I have decided to vary my course somewhat, and go to a place I know about sixty miles hence. At a good pace, and all being well, we will make it in about a week. We need supplies, and you need some clothes. Bards are not welcome everywhere these days, and we will have to disguise ourselves. But I think they will not turn away travellers in need."

Then he paused, as if he was uncertain. "Now, I wish to ask of you a favour. Maerad, you are a sore puzzle to me, and such is the importance of my errand... I want to ask if I can scry you."

"Scry me?" said Maerad. "What does that mean?"

"It's hard to explain, if you don't know," he said. "But I must tell you, that if you refuse, I will respect your decision and will attempt to place no weight on it. Scrying is a hard thing, and no Bard performs it lightly. It means - that I wish to look into you and see what you are."

"Oh," said Maerad. She still had no idea what he was talking about. Doubtfully, she asked: "Does it hurt?"

"Well. Yes, it does, in a way. It's a little like my asking if you would take all your clothes off and stand in front of me while I pore over you with a seeing glass."

Maerad stared at him, nonplussed. Cadvan eyes were frank and open, and there seemed to be no guile in his request. Still, she felt misgivings stir within her. "It sounds like you want to magic me," she said suspiciously. "Don't you trust me? Is that it?"

He sighed. "It's not a spell, not as such. At least, I would do nothing to you, apart from look."

Maerad still said nothing.

"I don't like to ask," Cadvan said. "I brought you out of that place in good faith and I would not ask if all that was at risk was myself."

"What if I don't agree?" she asked.

"Then I won't do it," said Cadvan. "And we shall continue with our journey." His face was suddenly inscrutable, and he bent to pick up his pack.

"What do you have to do?"

Cadvan paused.

"I look into your eyes. I see into your mind. That's all."

"That's all?" Maerad considered for a short time. It seemed important to Cadvan. And she didn't believe he would hurt her; he had had plenty of opportunity already, if that was what he wished to do. "All right, then," she said, shrugging. "If it makes you feel better. What do you have to do?"

"Are you sure?"

"Do you want to do it, or not?" she said.

Cadvan dropped his pack again. "Then stand square in front of me, like you did in the byre. And place your hands on my shoulders."

She did so, and he put his hands on her shoulders. They stood face to face and Cadvan looked in her eyes. Maerad had a sudden desire to giggle.

"Don't laugh, Maerad," said Cadvan softly. "Empty your mind."

He spoke words in the Speech, very rapidly so Maerad couldn't catch them. It seemed then to Maerad that the light around them darkened, and that all she could see was Cadvan's eyes. They were a very dark blue and burned with an inner fire that seemed at first cold, but then, she realised, was hot at the centre, hot enough to burn. And what was that sadness in them? A deep sadness, a wound... a face much loved, she could almost see it... and something else, a darkness, like a scar... But then suddenly she was whelmed with memory of her own life: memories she had forgotten, or pressed back into the anterior of her mind. They came in a flood, in no particular order, almost as if her whole life were occurring in a single second; but some stood out.

Memory after memory of Gilman's Cot, numbing exhaustion and boredom and pain, the humiliations of the riots and beatings, playing with Mirlad when she was a child, and his dour teaching... Her mother, and an old woman, blue eyed, holding her, and a garden full of sweet scented flowers, and singing and music and laughter in a great hall filled with men and women and children in fine clothes and lit with great branches of candles... Her mother clutching her in terror and sickness and grief, lurching in a wain. A small table, piled high with fruit... Her mother holding a small baby, her brother Cai, who was chortling and reaching for a red flower... Her mother's despair and her mother dying, her mother yellowed and wasted on a pallet, her lips cracked and ulcered, her voice a whisper, brushing back her hair and saying, "Maerad, be strong. Be strong..." And the death rattle... And then crows wheeling in a dark sky, and men shouting, and terrible screams, a man she knew was her father felled with a blow from a mace, falling among many bodies, and a high tower burning in the night and a shout as the roof caved in, sending forth a leap of flame...

An intolerable anguish possessed Maerad, beyond even the grief she had felt at her mother's death; it was as if all the pain she had ever experienced gathered into a white hot node in her centre of her mind. It grew and grew, a coruscating

distress of her whole being, until she could no longer bear it. Beyond her conscious will, she screamed No! and burst into a storm of scalding tears.

She was aware of nothing else for some time. After a while, she realised she was on the ground, weeping on Cadvan's shoulder, and he was stroking her hair. Her sobs subsided at last and she sat back, thrusting Cadvan away and rubbing the back of her hand over her eyes.

Cadvan looked pale and distressed. "Maerad, I am truly sorry," he said. "I am very, very sorry."

She wasn't sure if he was sorry for the scrying, or for what the scrying had revealed. She felt limp, and the beginnings of a slight headache pulsed behind her brow. She hid her face in her hands.

"It did hurt," she said in a muffled voice.

"I shouldn't have asked," Cadvan said, after a silence. "For all your power, you are not much more than a child, and even the great find scrying a hard thing. I was in such doubt, whether you were a spirit of the dark, sent to trick me."

"Me trick you?" Maerad looked up in surprise. Cadvan grinned at her crookedly.

"You have the consolation that I have paid for my doubt. The cry you sent out threw me over to those trees. I was lucky my neck wasn't broken! "

"I did that?" She stared at him, her mouth open in astonishment.

"Indeed you did. But it wasn't your fault." He grimaced, rubbing his head, and Maerad saw there was a mark on his forehead. "You need to learn how to control your power."

"You'll have a bump there," she said.

"Yes, I will."

"Is it all right, then?"

"What?"

"I mean, it's all right?"

"Oh, yes." Cadvan answered her almost distractedly. "There is no darkness in you, if that's what you mean, I know that even though I couldn't finish the scrying. If there were, I would have found different walls and different kinds of refusals." He looked at her oddly, almost, she thought, shyly. "It's a strange business, scrying. I haven't done it very often. But I can tell you, Maerad, that I have not scried one with so much anguish as you. I shan't do it again in a hurry! And you almost scried me instead!" He shook his head, and they both sat unspeaking for some time. Maerad's headache ebbed away. She felt dazed and emptied; but also there was a strange sense of relief, as if she had been lanced of a large abscess.

Abruptly Cadvan stood up and brushed himself off. He seemed possessed by a new decisiveness, as if the doubts that had troubled him earlier had now been resolved. "We must leave here," he said. "The sun is already high, and we have a long way to go."

Maerad squinted up at him. "Where are we going?"

"I think I must take you to Norloch. But that is a long way from here. First we must find food, and maybe some horses."

He stood in the middle of the dingle and bowed to the trees, signing to Maerad to do the same. She scrambled to her feet. "We must thank the trees for their hospitality," he said. "They have been good to us." Then he picked up his pack, and walked out of the dingle.

Maerad lingered briefly before they left the shelter of the birches, for a last glimpse of the early sunlight shafting through the spring leaves. She thought the grove was the most beautiful place she had ever seen. The light scattered itself in silver and gold glints over the ground, and the intricate shadows of the branches danced with the gleams over the soft grasses, which rippled gently in the spring breeze. Thank you, she said silently, and bowed, feeling the ceremony strangely appropriate: the birches seemed more alive than most trees. For a moment she almost felt they were about to speak back to her, and they seemed to rustle a little sadly, as if they were friends waving farewell.

## 4: BATTLE WITH THE WERS

"WHY is it so quiet?" Maerad asked. "Is it always like this around here?"

"No, it's not. I don't like it," Cadvan said. "There are birds, very high up. I can't see what they are. Perhaps they watch us. It's like the quiet before a storm, but there will be no storm tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps, I think. No, it's something else."

"Can you guess what it might be?"

"Yes. But I might be wrong. What I guess is that the Landrost has sent his messengers out, and that the hunt is on. I have only seen crows today, all other birds are in hiding."

"The hunt?" said Maerad, faltering. She realised Cadvan was correct about the crows; she had seen no other birds all day.

They were steering South East, with the mountains on their right and the forest on their left. The sky was clear and cold, a high pale blue, and all through the morning the sun scarcely warmed them. All around them the earth was alive with the pale green of early spring; snowdrops and jonquils pushed through the tangled herbs and grasses, and marjorams and wild mints released sharp fragrances as they bruised beneath their feet. Low thorny trees and scruffy clumps of pines grew in the lees of the hills, bent by the winds, surrounded by tangles of gorse and bramble. Everywhere crept a pale blue flower shaped like a star, which Cadvan said was called aëlgorgen. "Dawnflower, in the Speech," Cadvan explained. "It only grows this far North." Maerad tried repeating the name, but found that her tongue tripped over it, and afterwards she couldn't remember it at all.

It was a beautiful countryside, but Maerad thought it curiously lonely. Their footsteps sounded loudly in the emptiness; they seemed the only things that moved as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of habitation anywhere, although strange grass-covered ridges and mounds, which seemed too regular to be natural, constantly threatened to trip her up: perhaps they were remains of buildings long vanished. And she saw no animals - once some rabbits propping and running in the distance, but that was all.

"I thought the Landrost was just a mountain," she said, looking back at its high snow-tipped peak. "You talk as if it were a man... and what's the hunt?"

"The Landrost is a power, yes, a person... the mountain is merely his dwelling. He is not a man, and never was."

"Like the Nameless One?" said Maerad.

"Not so powerful as him: although the Nameless was once a man, even as I am. He is but one of his slaves. I will not speak his name here, although I know it." Cadvan paused, and Maerad noticed again the exhaustion on his face: it was, she saw, a deep exhaustion born of long struggle and pain. "He captured me, and held me in his fastness, deep in the mountain. I saw things there that he would rather I did not know, because in his pride he thought to make me tremble before I died. But I escaped, and his vengefulness is deadly, and we are not beyond his reach, not yet. I only just held him back in the valley, with your help: he would have brought the mountain down on us, else. His power wanes the further we go, but here we are still too close.

"He does not easily countenance escape from his claws. I think he sends out the Wers, and that is why it is quiet. Their shadows track us, although they can do nothing while the sun still shines. Only in the dark can they take their forms. It will be a bad night."

He was silent for some time. His words seemed to magnify the stillness around them, and Maerad again looked around her uneasily. The landscape seemed peaceful and unthreatening, but some more subtle sense told her otherwise. Her skin began to creep with an indefinable dread.

"Maerad," said Cadvan at last. "I think I should have left you, rather than draw you into my own danger. I didn't think enough, when I stumbled across you in that cot. I was too astonished, and too weary. And now it is too late to turn back."

"No," said Maerad warmly. She thought of the suffocating despair of Gilman's Cot. At least here, now, she could breathe freely. "No, you were right to ask me to leave. I would rather die than stay there."

"Well, you might die," said Cadvan.

"At least I won't die a slave," Maerad answered. Proud words, she thought to herself; but she meant them.

Cadvan pushed the pace and they walked in silence, wrapped in their own thoughts.

Maerad still couldn't quite believe she had escaped the cot; every now and then she caught herself thinking idly that she should be performing some task - weeding the fields or churning butter or spinning the rough wool which made all their clothes - and then she would catch herself, with a tiny shock: perhaps she would never have to do any of those things again. Even with the increasing sense of watchfulness, a feeling that the very stones were spying on them, the present moment overwhelmed her. She couldn't imagine anything more amazing than the mere fact of her freedom. Where she was going, or why, were questions she couldn't even contemplate. And this Cadvan - who was he? Why did she have this strange feeling she could trust him? She knew nothing about him. She had never trusted a man before, save Mirlad, and even that trust had taken years to establish. Why start now?

They stopped for the midday meal beside one of the many streamlets that ran down from the mountains. Maerad's ankle was beginning to swell and she eased it out from the boot and held it in her hands, massaging the muscle.

"It hurts?" asked Cadvan. "Let me see." He took her foot in his hands and gently turned it. "It's a little swollen. Nothing very bad. Now, breathe in." He pressed his hand hard over her ankle and Maerad gasped with pain; then she gasped again, because the swelling and pain had vanished.

"It's gone!" she said. "Are you a healer as well?"

"All Bards are healers," said Cadvan softly, still holding her foot. "You should have shown me before." He smiled at her, and Maerad felt suddenly uneasy and withdrew her foot abruptly, wriggling her toes in relief.

"What's happening?" she asked. "I mean, there's so much I don't understand. Maybe I could help?" She looked up at him from under her tangled hair. "You said you were wounded, but I can't see any wounds on you. Did you heal yourself, too?"

Cadvan stood up and squinted at the sun. "We should move on," he said. "I'll

tell you things in time, Maerad. I was sent here on a secret task, and I am not at liberty to tell you everything. But yes, I was wounded, and no, I couldn't heal myself. It's not a wound you can see. I am weaker than I should be, here without protection in the wild."

"But you can trust me," said Maerad, beginning to feel angry. "You said so yourself. And if you're in danger, then so am I, if I am travelling with you. So you owe it to me."

"I owe you nothing, Maerad." Cadvan's voice was even, but Maerad saw the flash in his eyes.

"You wouldn't have got out of the valley without me," she said. "You said so yourself. What was it in the valley?"

"Peace!" said Cadvan harshly, and his face closed against her. "Maerad, you are a child. Don't bother me with all these questions, at least not now. We have a long way to go."

Maerad was suddenly furious. "And who are you?" She didn't care that she was shouting, although her voice echoed loudly in the empty land around them.

"You turn up out of nowhere in rags and then expect me to believe you're some kind of grand person from the South, with your talk of Bards and magic? You could just be a tinker full of tricks, for all I know. And then you tell me I'm just a child, go sit in the corner and be quiet. Shut up Maerad, you'll find out later! I'm not a child. I'm sixteen summers old!"

"There are more important things than the vanity of a young girl," Cadvan said coldly. Maerad realised she was standing before him, her fists clenched, trembling with anger. She flushed.

"I'm not a child," she said again, but with less conviction. All at once she felt very childish. Cadvan looked weary, but his eyes were hard. He turned and began to walk away. Maerad paused a while, and then followed him, afraid of being left behind in this eerie silence. He was walking very fast and she had to run to catch up. When she did, she didn't draw even with him, but walked just behind. Her temper had ebbed as suddenly as it had appeared, but she didn't want to apologise.

They walked in stubborn silence for more than two hours. The sun was warm on their backs now, and Maerad was tiring. Cadvan kept the pace fast, and she was by no means used to this punishing trekking, no matter how trained she was to

hard labour. She was too proud to ask him to slow down, and gritted her teeth. She was beginning to hate his straight, unbending back, always before her, always unforgiving. And there were still hours to go before sunset, when presumably they would stop, although it was quite possible that Cadvan would insist they keep going through the night. She had just swapped one tyrant for another... When they got to this place they were going, Norloch or whatever it was called, maybe she could find her own way through the world. For the moment she was stuck with him. Sweat trickled down her face. She was thirsty as well, and Cadvan had the water bag.

"We're making good pace," said Cadvan, turning at last. Maerad scowled at him, and he looked surprised. "Are you still angry? Put anger aside, child. It's no use."

"I'm not a child, I said," said Maerad sullenly. "Stop treating me like an idiot."

"If you are not a child, don't behave like one," Cadvan snapped. He turned to move off, then stopped, sighing, and turned back to her, holding out his hand. "Maerad, this is ridiculous. I'm sorry. I'm used to travelling alone. If I have been less than courteous to you, forgive me. I'm tired, and we have a long way to go unhoused. And this place worries me, I don't want to be out in the open tonight. Let's stop this bickering, yes?"

He held out his hand, and slowly Maerad took it and nodded, swallowing. She felt ungracious, hot and sulky under Cadvan's grave gaze.

"I need your help," he said. "Maerad, be sure there are things that I will tell you, when it is the right time, and that I don't tell you now because I can't bear to, not because I think little of you. And there are other things I can't tell you, because I may not."

"As you like," said Maerad. Suddenly she didn't care. Let him have his secrets.

He gestured Southwards. "I want to get to a place I know before nightfall," he said. "It's not a protection, like the Irihel, but it will be safer than the open. It's still a league or more hence and the afternoon is half gone. That's why I hurry."

"Can I have a drink of water, please, before we start again?" asked Maerad.

He pulled the waterbag out of his pack and handed it to her, drinking some himself. Then they began their trekking again.

Cadvan led them closer to the mountains, and towards nightfall began to steer towards what looked like a spike or a standing stone set high on a small, oddly round hill. As they neared it, Maerad saw it was a ruin, bare even of moss, with empty slits for windows. It was getting late; the sun already threw the long shadows of the mountains over them, and Maerad could feel the chill of early dew. The land was now completely silent, and it frightened her: she felt as if the unseen hunt was drawing in, crouching, preparing for attack. She thought she would like it better if she could see what tracked them. This invisible stalking was unnerving.

As they walked up the hill, slipping a little on the smooth turf, she asked what the ruin was.

"It used to be a guardhouse," answered Cadvan. "Nothing else stands here, but this. We did well to make it by now."

"What did it guard?" asked Maerad in wonder.

"A great city," Cadvan said. "Its name is now long forgotten. Before the Silence this was a rich and populous country. The Nameless razed even the memory of this place, and took all its palaces and gardens down stone by stone. Save this place. Perhaps it had a use for him."

They passed under a thick granite lintel into the roofless ruin. It had been a small tower, about fourteen feet square, and once a stair had led to a lookout high above. For the most part the walls, made of huge stones cunningly fitted together without cement of any kind, still stood high, although the roof had collapsed and the stairs and floors had long rotted, leaving the marks of fireplaces high on the walls where rooms once had been. There was only one doorway, and the slitted windows were set high up in the walls. Cadvan threw down his pack.

"We have but little time, and we must use it well, if we are to survive the night," he said. "Fire is our hope. We need wood, quickly, before it grows dark."

They left the tower and went wood gathering. Around the base of the hill grew some thorn trees, and two had been uprooted in some winter storm. "Dry, perfect firewood," Cadvan said. "I think there will be enough here." Maerad had

opened her mouth to ask how they were to chop firewood with their bare hands when Cadvan drew a sword from beneath his cloak. "Forgive me, Arnost, for putting you to such usage!" he said, and began to hack the dead wood as easily as if he cut bread.

"I didn't know you had a sword," said Maerad. "I never saw it before!" Suddenly she felt almost lighthearted, as if they were preparing a bonfire for a party.

"There is much you don't know about me," Cadvan said. "Pray that you get the chance to find it out! Now hurry!"

Catching Cadvan's urgency, Maerad dragged bundles of branches up the hill, and soon, after he had split the trees, he helped her. It was difficult work, as she kept slipping on the smooth turf. Before long they had a high pile of firewood inside the old guardhouse. Cadvan eyed it critically. "It will do," he said. "It will have to. It is almost dark. Gather some more branches while there's time. I have something else to do."

He drew a small, curiously shaped dagger and began to score a deep line around the base of the hill, and as she lugged more firewood to the guardhouse Maerad could hear him chanting words in the Speech in a low rhythmical monotone. When he had circled the whole hill, he stood still and lifted his arms up to the sky. Again he seemed to be illuminated by a strange light and for a second Maerad saw a ring of white flame leap around the tower; but then she blinked, and it was gone, and she thought it must have been a trick of the vanishing light.

She went inside the guardhouse. The pile of wood was high, and the sun was just now slipping over the horizon. Inside it was almost completely dark.

Cadvan joined her and immediately knelt down and made a small pile of kindling by the door. Then, stretching out his hand, his two forefingers stiffened, he said: "Noroch!" A tiny white flame lit on the kindling and spread, and he tended it, building the fire swiftly until Maerad was forced to stand by the opposite wall because of the heat.

"It's a bit like saying, here we are," she said. "Don't you think?"

"And you think they don't know we're here?"

"What happens when it's dark?"

"In the dark the Wers hold their power," said Cadvan. "They will fear this fire."

They cannot break the stone. I don't believe they will break the barrier I have made. We have - I think - enough wood to last until morning. Now, Maerad, I know this is not a good time to ask you, but can you fight with a knife?"

Maerad did, in fact, own a dagger she had stolen from one of the Thane's men and kept secretly in her belt next to her skin. "I can try," she said. "I've never really fought with one." She showed Cadvan the dagger and he examined it swiftly.

"It's of rough make, but serviceable, and your size," he said. "If you are attacked, go for the eyes, if you can, and remember to hold it firm in your fist, like this, so it will drive in. I'll have to give you lessons in swordcraft when we are in a less tight spot."

Maerad felt her stomach tighten. "What will attack us?" she asked. What use was a knife against shadows?

"I don't know, yet," said Cadvan. "But remember, although they are of the Dark, they can be killed. Their worst weapon is fear. Hold back the fear with everything you have. And only fight if you are attacked. Otherwise, leave any fighting to me."

He drew his sword and the faint ringing sound echoed off the stone. The fire snapped and cracked, throwing strange shadows over the ancient walls, leaping up into the abyss above them. Maerad could see no sky through the roof, only an impenetrable darkness. Cadvan stretched, and then reached for his pack. "But for now, I am ravenous!" he said. He tossed Maerad a biscuit and some nuts and fruit, and they ate, their backs to the walls, their feet stretched out to the fire, their faces glowing in the heat. Maerad could hear the silence of the empty land around them, stretching for miles beyond the friendly popping of the firewood. It bore down on her, like a weight. And then, the sound she feared: a long, drawn out howl. She almost dropped her biscuit with fright, but Cadvan appeared unmoved.

"The sun has set," he said.

"Wolfwers?" she whispered.

"Yes, for the meantime. The hunt is starting. They will take a little time to work out what to do about the barrier. It's white fire. The Dark cannot pass it without breaking its power, and that will not be easy. You should get some sleep."

The howl came again, and then was answered.

"Sleep? Now?"

"Why not? I will watch." Cadvan turned and grinned at her. "Be assured I won't let you miss any fireworks. Remember: fear is their worst weapon."

Maerad obediently lay down and closed her eyes. She tried to act as if she were not afraid, she tried to relax, but it was difficult, out in the wild, on a broken stone floor, with Wers howling for her blood sent by some black magician... She ached all over with weariness after the hard walk that day, and the fire was so warm. But her body sang with tension, and would not let her sleep. After a while she stopped trying and sat up, drawing closer to Cadvan, who nodded, but said nothing.

The Bard sat very still beside her, carefully feeding the fire. His face relaxed: he might have been asleep, apart from the watchfulness of his eyes. His sword lay drawn by his feet.

The Wers were circling the hill. Maerad and Cadvan could hear their feet padding, around and around, trying to find a way past the barrier. Cadvan listened hard and counted maybe twenty. Every now and then one would stop and howl, a long ululation that froze the blood, a sound of utter desolation born out of long years of horror and emptiness. The cries hit Maerad in the pit of her stomach. They seemed to her the very sound of un-life, of creatures neither dead nor alive, but caught in a tormenting void between, condemned to envy and hatred of everything that joyed in existence. She shuddered with nausea. Cadvan continued to feed the fire, apparently unmoved. Then they heard the Wers bunch together, and Cadvan reached for his sword. "They're going to rush the barrier," he whispered.

Maerad's pulse was hammering in her ears; she clutched her dagger until her knuckles were white. She listened to the heavy thunder of the Wers' paws, and their breaths, and the collisions as they hurled themselves; but the barrier held, and they were repulsed, howling. Cadvan relaxed, and sat back.

"First game to us," he said to Maerad. She saw the flash of his grin through the leaping shadows.

The Wers' assault on the barrier lasted for more than an hour: an interminable attack, as they threw themselves again and again at the enchantment, or tried to break it with their claws and teeth. Cadvan and Maerad sat in silence the entire

time. Cadvan's barrier held good: they were not strong enough to break it, and he wanted them to tire themselves in useless assault. He hoped that they would hurl themselves against it all night. Then they stopped their rushing, and he heard one Wer, the leader he guessed, begin to howl: but a different howl this time, a thin, almost human wail, with words in it. It started low and quiet, but as time went by it grew louder and more insistent.

"The Wer leader is making a counter spell," Cadvan said. "We're unlucky. It's rare for a Wer to know sorceries."

Maerad met his eyes, fear clutching her afresh. "What does that mean?"

"Either my spell is good, or it is not. There is nothing we can do except wait to see if it holds."

Cadvan picked up his sword and waited, tense. Maerad felt the power outside build. It gathered at the weakest part of the barrier, the join, like an evil black blade seeming to force itself into Cadvan's mind. He fought back, his jaw set, the sweat starting on his forehead, and Maerad watched him with mounting anxiety. The voice built to a crescendo, an unbearable pitch of sound, and then suddenly came a noiseless explosion, or a burst of black light, and Cadvan rocked back against the wall with a grimace of pain. But the barrier still held. The Wers could not enter.

Then came a sound Maerad disliked even more: silence. The Wers were regrouping.

Cadvan put down his sword and rummaged through his pack. "Drink something," he said. He passed her the bottle that contained the herbed drink. "Now we must be vigilant."

"What for?"

"Anything. Anything at all. Sit with your back to the fire. Try to remember that this tower is roofless. The only way they can get in now is from above. The fire will daunt them, but not enough."

Maerad grasped her dagger in her hand and sat next to Cadvan, straining to listen. She could hear nothing but the blood in her ears. Dread rose in her heart until almost she wished something would happen, anything, anything to break this horrible suspense. She stole a look at Cadvan. He looked almost serene, his face relaxed, his eyes watchful. She took a deep breath.

They sat in this silence for what seemed like hours. Every now and then Maerad moved to ease the aches in her body, but Cadvan never stirred.

"Maybe they've gone away," she said at last. "We've heard nothing for ages and ages."

"Sssshh," Cadvan hissed. "The only thing we can be sure of is that they haven't gone away. Listen."

"But there's nothing to hear."

"They will wait. They want our wills to weaken in fear. They feed on our fear. It's their life, their bread. Starve them! Send your mind out into the night. Use the Gift you have. Send it out into the night. Then you will hear."

Maerad wondered what he meant. Perhaps she should... Experimentally she gathered up her mind and imagined it past the walls of the guardhouse. At once she felt cold, although she still had her back to the fire. It was as if she had stepped outside, although she could see nothing but the opposite wall. But she heard the slow flapping of wings, wings of creatures that she could not guess, wings without feathers, taloned and heavy, and hisses, as of cold breaths drawn in and out of cold leathery bellows.

"Wings," she whispered. "But giant wings. It's not bats, or it's bats as big as wolves."

"Yes. They are close. The barrier will not hold them. I cannot make it high enough."

"But I can't see anything, Cadvan, I can't see anything." Maerad turned to him, her eyes wide. "They're so big, I can hear how big they are. What are we..."

"Silence!" Cadvan turned with the fury of a snake. "I can't be patting your hand like a terrified child. If we are to get through this night with our hides in one piece, you remember who you are. You are one of the Gift. Grow up, or we will die here."

Maerad gulped. Cadvan was preoccupied again, taking no notice of her, listening and watching, his sword in readiness. She took a deep breath and pushed back the terror that had started to take hold of her mind, winding its way through her muscles, insidious and cold, like a poison mist. Her heart was pounding, but she

forced herself to relax. She held her pitiful dagger in her hand. It seemed so small. She wished she had a sword, and knew how to use it. Perhaps then she might feel more like a warrior. She sent out her mind again, not knowing what else to do, and heard the winged creatures, further away now, higher up. They were flying to the top of the barrier. What was the barrier made of? She didn't know, but they were going to fly over it and down on top of them. She knew that now. Instinctively she stood up, and saw that Cadvan also was standing, staring above them, up the walls where the fire flickered into shadow and then blackness. She moved closer to the fire. Cadvan threw another few logs on, building it up so the flames leaped high. It was unbearably hot. She looked above her, straining her eyes, her nerves stretched to breaking point.

At last she heard something, but so slight she hardly knew if it was the wind. Cadvan's breath hissed through his teeth. Then, so fast she could hardly see it, a huge shape came plummeting down on them from above. It veered briefly into the fire and shrieked, flapping back. Cadvan leaped forward and hewed its neck with his sword, jumping back as it crashed down, spouting black gouts of blood.

Maerad saw with surprise it wasn't as big as she had thought: the body was about the size of a goat. But she had no time to look at it, for now the air was full of claws and wings and hissing. One came straight for her, she saw its eyes burning red in the fire. Her dagger was useless, and with a sudden inspiration she dropped it and dragged a burning branch from the fire and thrust it at the creature, which wheeled away and crashed into the wall. It fell to the ground, its neck broken.

Immediately another came for her, landing on the ground and rearing up to slash her with its claws. She swung the branch around and her shoulder jarred as she hit it hard. The creature cried out as the flames licked it, and its long neck snaked towards her, hissing in fury. Maerad hit it again and the branch broke. She leaped sideways, grasping another branch and the Wer struck her a glancing blow on her head with its claws. She didn't feel any pain; her fear was suddenly overborne by a surge of anger. She held the brand in both hands and swung it randomly: the room was so small it was impossible not to hit something. She was aware of Cadvan to her right, slashing and hewing, beset by three of them, and then another three, while others hovered overhead. Maerad kept lashing out, remembering to go for the eyes, and the creatures swung away from the flame, concentrating their attack on Cadvan.

Then one of them landed before her and to her dismay she saw its outlines blur and soften. At first she thought it a trick of her eyes, but then to her disbelief it began to transform into a man, startlingly white in the darkness. She cried out and thrust a brand in his face, and he fell back, but then came for her, his wings

melting into his back, his face blank and murderous, a black broadsword in his clawed hand. Maerad ducked the swing of his sword and with all her strength brought the burning branch back as hard as she could against his body. The flames burst into life and licked up his neck, setting his hair on fire. He screamed horribly and fell writhing to the ground, trying to beat out the flames, but it stuck to him like a deadly glue, spreading until he was wholly alight, a screaming torch.

Maerad watched in horror, almost for a second forgetting her danger, but another creature landed and rose on its hind feet and her horror burst again into rage. This time she swiped it with the brand before it could begin to transform. It fell stunned to the ground, which was now slimed and smoking with blood. She stepped forward to bash it again when Cadvan reached past her and slashed off its head. And suddenly the room was still.

They stood together, panting. Maerad sent out her mind to hear if any more wings were coming, but she heard nothing but the night. The room was piled with dead creatures. She gasped, feeling suddenly sick.

Cadvan put more wood on the fire, and started dragging the corpses out of the door. Maerad stood back, swaying with nausea. The stench of death was overpowering, and she was beginning to tremble. She realised that the branch she was holding was about to burn her hand. She dropped it back on the fire and then, fighting down her desire to vomit, helped Cadvan clear the room of the creatures, casting them out of the doorway and down the hill, although she couldn't bring herself to touch the one who had burned, the one who was still half a man. At last the room was empty, although it stank of burning flesh and hair and blood. Neither Cadvan nor Maerad felt like sitting down.

"What were they?" she asked at last.

"Wormfilth," said Cadvan. "Wers can take whatever shape they desire. But they are all evil shapes, mockeries." He looked at her, smiling grimly. "You did well, although you nearly got me once. A doughty fighter, but somewhat undisciplined."

Maerad tried to smile back. "Do you think there are more?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I counted nineteen, and I heard about twenty. Maybe one didn't chance the fire. And it's not long to dawn now."

They moved outside and sat down by the doorway, still watchful but too

exhausted to speak. Cadvan did not relinquish his vigilance, and Maerad, despite her weariness, watched with him. They heard nothing else that night, and at last the Eastern horizon began to lighten and the sun, with unbearable slowness, lifted its rim over the edge of the earth, sending level rays over the forests before them. Maerad thought she had never been so glad to see a new day. She turned to Cadvan, and almost laughed. They were not a prepossessing sight: both were smeared and spattered in the foul blood of the Wers, and their faces were black with ash.

"Well," said Cadvan heavily. "We made it."

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