

THE WORLD OF PELLINOR



PART ONE: THOROLD

Do not twine garlands of myrtle for my
forehead
Nor pluck sweet roses to adorn me
Make me a crown of sombre violets
For I am dying

The white arms of the maidens of Busk

And the flashing feet of dancing
goatherds
Will never again quicken my desire
For I am dying

Come to me merciful Meripon
In your ebony chariot drawn by
swallows
From the dim halls beyond the Gates
For I am dying

I kiss the peaks of Lamedon with my
eyes
And the white arms of the passionate
sea
Which loves this beautiful island that I
love
For I am dying

The Song of Theokas, Library of Busk

1: PURSUIT

IT was the foredreaming.

A chill swept through her and she was filled with a preternatural, foreboding clarity, as if her soul was suddenly made of ice. Her sleeping self stirred.

She was a being of the upper regions of air, bodiless and free, without self or memory or name. She gazed at the landscape beneath her, fascinated. For a long time she didn't even recognise it as a landscape; it looked like a strange and awesome painting. For as far as she could see, there

stretched a huge red expanse covered with ripples, like sand under water, but these ripples, she began to understand, must be enormous. She was very high up and she could see very far, and there were no clouds at all, only a tiny shadow moving over the earth, which she realised after a while was her own. She seemed to be flying with some purpose in a particular direction, although she couldn't remember what the purpose was.

After a while the land changed: the red ripples ran up against a ridge of purple rock and stopped, and she was passing over mountains whose shadows stretched long and sharp behind them. On the other side of the range ran tracks like rivers, lighter veins spreading in delicate fans, but she could see no water in them. The colours of the earth changed to subtle purples and dull greens which signalled vegetation. In the far distance she could see a whiteness which seemed to gather light to itself: it looked like a lake. But like a lake of salt, she thought with surprise, not water...

Then everything shifted. She was no longer in the sky, but standing on what seemed to be the spine of a high ridge of bare rock which dropped sheer before her feet down at least five hundred feet. She looked over a wide plain which stretched to the horizon before her. The soil was still a strange red orange, but this land was nothing like the one she had flown over: it seemed blasted, poisoned somehow, although she could not say how. As far as the eye could see there were rows and rows of tents, interspersed with large open spaces where what seemed to be masses of soldiers performed some kind of drill. A red sun sent low, level rays over the plain, casting black shadows back from the tents and soldiers.

There was a menacing purpose in those disciplined movements, a promise of destruction and death. She had never seen an army before, and the sight shocked her: so many thousands, uncountable

thousands, anonymous as ants, gathered together for the sole aim of injury. She turned away, suddenly sickened with a strange dread, and saw behind her, on the other side of the ridge, a white, bare expanse. The sun struck up from it, hurting her eyes as savagely as if someone stabbed her. She cried out, clutching her face, and stumbled and fell. Her body, now heavy and corporeal, fell with the ominous slowness of dream: down, down, down, towards the cruel rocks hundreds of feet below.

Maerad woke, gasping for breath, and sat bolt upright. This was an unwise thing to do, as she was sleeping in a hammock slung below the deck of a small fishing smack called *The White Owl*. The hammock swung dangerously and then, as she flailed for balance in the pitch dark, tipped her out onto the floor. Still trapped in her dream, Maerad screamed, putting out her hands to break her fall, and hit the wooden floorboards.

She lay still, breathing hard, as above her a trapdoor flung open and someone came stumbling down the steps. Maerad could see his form silhouetted against a patch of stars, and then a soft light bloomed in the darkness, illuminating a tall, dark haired man who moved easily with the motion of the boat.

"Maerad? Are you all right?"

Maerad sat up, rubbing her head. "Cadvan," she said with relief. "Oh, I had a terrible dream. I'm sorry, did I cry out?"

"Cry out? It sounded as if a Hull were in here, at least."

Maerad managed a wan smile. "No Hulls," she

said. "Not yet."

Cadvan helped her up, and Maerad groped her way to a bench along the walls of the tiny cabin and sat down. Her hands were trembling.

"Bad dreams?" said Cadvan, looking at her intently. "It is little wonder you should have nightmares, after what we've been through."

Maerad felt his unasked question. "I think it was a foredream," she said, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "But I don't know what it was of. It was - horrible." Foredreams, in Maerad's experience, were always horrible.

"Tell me, then." Cadvan sat next to her on the bench.

Maerad haltingly told him of the dream. Put into words, it didn't sound so awful: the worst thing about it was the feeling of despair and horror it had inspired within her. Cadvan listened gravely, without interrupting, and when she finished there was a short pause.

"I think perhaps you might have seen the armies of the Dark, massing in the south for an attack on Turbansk, on their way to Annar," he said. "What you describe sound to me like the deserts south of Dén Raven. And perhaps your dreaming semblance stood on the peaks of the Kulkilhirien, the Cruel Mountains above the Plains of Dust, where the Nameless One was said to have marshalled his forces in the days before the Great Silence."

Maerad thought of her brother Hem, now riding to Turbansk with their friend Saliman, and felt sick.

"If so, it is a very great army," she said at last. "Turbansk will be hard pressed."

"It will be a vast force," said Cadvan. "But even so, it is only one piece in the great stratagem the Nameless One is now unleashing. And you, Maerad, are as significant to him as that huge army. Maybe more so. Everything turns on you."

Maerad bowed her head, oppressed beyond measure by Cadvan's words. On me? she thought. How can it be so? What could I do against so great an army?

And yet she knew it was true.

She pressed her hands together, to stop their trembling, and Cadvan stood up and took a brown stoppered bottle and a glass from a cupboard nearby. "Have some of this," he said.

It was a strong spirit Maerad hadn't tasted before, a drink designed to ward out chills on cold nights at sea, and she gulped it gratefully, feeling the liquor sear a path down her gullet. It made her feel a little more substantial.

Maerad glanced at Cadvan as he sat down again beside her, his face sombre and abstracted with thought, and their first meeting came vividly into her mind. It had been a mere three months before, but to Maerad it felt like a lifetime ago. The first time she had seen him, she had been milking a cow in Gilman's Cot, the grim northern settlement where, for most of her short life, she had been a slave. He had stood silently before her, amazed and disconcerted that she could see through his charm of invisibility.

It had been a morning like any other, notable only for being the Springturn when winter, in theory at least, began to retreat from the mountains. Then, as now, his face had been shadowed with

exhaustion and anxiety and - Maerad thought - an indefinable sadness. Despite everything - despite his being a stranger, despite her fear of men, learned from the violent men of the cot - she had trusted him at once. She still didn't really know why.

It was Cadvan who had revealed to her who she was, and who had helped to unriddle some of the history of her family. With her mother Milana, Maerad had been captured and sold as a very small child after the sack of Pellinor, the School where she had been born. It was Cadvan who helped her escape from the misery of slavery, who had told her of her Gift and opened up to her the world of Bards. He had taken her to the northern School of Innail, and for the first time in her conscious life she had found a place where she felt at home. Maerad felt a sudden sharp ache in her throat as she thought of Silvia, who had almost become a mother to her in the short time they had known each other; and then of Dernhil, who had told her that he loved her, and whom she had spurned out of her own fears. Dernhil had been killed by Hulls, the Black Bards who were servants of the Nameless One, in part because of that love, leaving behind him a vanished possibility that she would always regret.

She wished fiercely that she had been able to stay in Innail, loved as you should be, as Dernhil had once said to her; that she could have spent a quiet life learning the Bardic Arts of Reading, Tending and Making. She would have liked nothing better in the world than to learn the scripts of Annar and to decipher its immense riches of poetry and history and thought, or to study herblore and healing and the ways of animals, to observe the rites of the seasons and keep the Knowing of the Light, as Bards had done for centuries before her. Instead, she was on a tiny boat in the middle of a dark sea, hundreds of leagues from the gentle haven of Innail, fleeing from darkness into darkness, her future more uncertain than it had ever been.

It wasn't fair. Her whole tale since leaving Gilman's Cot had been of finding what she loved, and almost at once losing it. Closely pursued by the Dark, she and Cadvan had fled Innail, heading for Norloch, the chief centre of the Light in Innail. During their journey across Annar, Maerad had found out much about herself, and had at last come into the Speech, the inborn language of the Bards, and her full powers. And it seemed her abilities were much greater and stranger than those of a normal Bard: she had vanquished a Wight, the malign spirit of a dead king returned from the days of the Great Silence, which even the greatest Bards said was beyond their magery. And she had found that part of her strangeness was her Elemental blood, her Elidhu ancestry which led back to Ardina, Queen of the golden realm of Rachida which lay hidden in the centre of the Great Forest. There was so much she didn't understand, and she was nowhere near being able to control the powers she had so recently discovered within herself. When they had at least reached Norloch...

Maerad flinched, thinking of the burning citadel they had left behind them two days earlier, riven by civil war, corrupted by evil. It was in Norloch that she had met Nelac, Cadvan's old teacher, a wise and gentle man who had instated her as a full Bard of the White Flame. That simple, mysterious ceremony revealed her Bardic Name, the secret Name that was an aspect of her deepest self, and it had confirmed that she was, as Cadvan had suspected, the Fated One, prophesied to bring about the downfall of the Nameless One in his darkest rising. Elednor Edil-Amarandh na: the starspeech echoed in her mind, with its cold, inhumanly beautiful music. Yet Maerad knew that for all her innate potencies she was but a young girl, unschooled and vulnerable: it was a mystery to her how she was to defeat the Nameless One, and it seemed more likely to her than not that she would fail. Prophecies, as Cadvan had once told her, often went awry: her birth was foreseen, but not her

choices, and it was through her choices that her destiny would unfold.

And it was in Norloch that she had last seen her brother. She had, by the strangest of chances - although Cadvan said it was not chance at all - found her brother Cai, who called himself Hem, in the middle of the wilderness. She had long thought him dead, slaughtered as a baby with everyone else in the sack of Pellinor. He was now a gangly twelve year old boy, dark skinned like their father, and unlike Maerad, whose skin was very white; but they both shared the same dark hair and intense blue eyes. Maerad had loved him even before she knew he was her brother, pitying the shadows in his eyes which betrayed a childhood even more nightmarish than her own had been. She loved him fiercely, protectively: Hem was her own brother, and she had so little to call her own. When they had fled Norloch, it had been safer to split their paths: Cadvan and Maerad's path lay north, and Saliman took Hem south to his home in Turbansk, there to learn the ways of Barding.

The loss of Hem seemed the cruellest of all. She had found, in Hem, a missing part of herself, and losing him was the old grief all over again, multiplied by new anxieties. The thought of the army she had seen in her dream marching on Turbansk, marching on her brother, filled her with dismay. And even if Turbansk did not fall, even if Hem survived, there was no certainty that she would live to see him again. She was pursued by the Dark, and now perhaps by the Light as well: Enkir, the First Bard of Norloch, had no doubt put a price on both their heads.

Involuntarily, Maerad's lip curled. Enkir was perhaps the first person she had ever hated with all her heart. Enkir, cruel, thin lipped, predatory, had a decade ago sold Maerad and her mother Milana into slavery. He had betrayed the School of Pellinor, and because of him it was burned to the

ground, its people slain without mercy, its learning and music smashed beyond recall, its beauty quenched forever. Because of Enkir, Maerad had seen her father murdered before her eyes, and had watched her mother wither away in Gilman's Cot, her power broken. But Enkir was cunning, and very few people knew or suspected his treachery. He was the First Bard in Norloch, the most important in all Annar. Who, not knowing what Maerad knew, would believe that such a man was a traitor? Or would trust the word of a young untutored girl against the word of a First Bard?

It was two days since they had fled Norloch, rescued by Owan d'Aroki in his humble fishing smack. They had slipped unseen out of the harbour even as the citadel's high towers collapsed in flame and a terrible battle was fought on the quays. Now they ran north west on a charmed wind, scudding over the swell. Two days of the sea's deep solitude had done much to clear Maerad's mind, although she found it hard to sleep on the boat, and suffered recurring bouts of seasickness, which distressed her almost as much as everything else... but the weather was fair, and Owan said they should reach Busk, the main town of Thorold, within another two days. And perhaps, at the end of this brief, uncomfortable voyage, they would be able to rest. She longed for rest, for a still place, as a thirsty man longs for water; every cell of her being cried out for it. But underneath, Maerad knew that even if they found a haven, it would be temporary at best: nowhere was safe.

All this passed through Maerad's mind quicker than it takes to tell, and she sighed heavily, prompting Cadvan to turn and look at her, his eyes suddenly clear and present. Around his left cheek and eyesocket curled the marks of three cruel whiplashes, injuries from their battle with the Wight. The wounds were still criss-crossed with tiny herringbone stitches, and when Cadvan smiled, as he did now, he winced slightly.

"Well, Maerad," he said gently. "I suppose you should try to go back to sleep. I doubt you would have another foredream, if that is what it was. It's deep night yet, and we still have some hard sailing to do."

"As if I know anything about sailing," said Maerad ironically. "You know I just get in the way."

"We need a lookout," said Cadvan. "It is wearing, I tell you, sailing so hard with just me and Owan. But the sooner we reach Busk, the sooner we can stop."

The sun rose the following day in a very nearly perfectly blue sky. Owan gravely professed himself satisfied with the weather, and said they were well on track for Thorold.

With his olive skin, lively face and grey eyes, Owan looked typically Thoroldian, but he was uncharacteristically taciturn for those loquacious islanders; although it could have been sheer exhaustion. Both he and Cadvan were grey with tiredness. *The White Owl* was Owan's pride; she might have been only a small fishing vessel, but she was a beauty of her kind, every spar and plank lovingly laid. In her making each part of her had been embedded with charms, to keep her from upset or to ward away hostile creatures of the deep; and she had also a steering spell so she could, if necessary, sail herself. Unfortunately, under the stiff wind Cadvan summoned to the sails this was too risky, and Owan and Cadvan took turns day and night on the tiller. When Cadvan was too tired to keep the wind, *The White Owl* sailed on the sea's winds; but he never slept for more than a couple of hours at a time. Maerad had already witnessed Cadvan's powers of endurance, but his stubborn will impressed her anew: his face was haggard and

his mouth grim, but he moved with the alertness of a well rested man.

Maerad sat in the bows, trying to stay out of the way. She was still disconcerted by how tiny the boat was, a mote in the vastness of the ocean. And she was miserable with seasickness. Cadvan had managed to stay it a little, but he was so busy she felt hesitant to bother him again, and had decided to suffer it, unless it became unbearable. She hadn't been able to eat for the past day and night, and her emptiness made her feel light-headed.

Trying to feel less useless, and to distract herself from her physical misery, Maerad kept watch, although she had no idea what she was watching for. There was, she thought, nothing to see except water: water, water and more water, and on the northern horizon a darkish blur which might be land, or might be a bank of cloud. It frightened her a little: she had spent her childhood among mountains, and had never imagined that space could behave so limitlessly. *The White Owl* was pitching strangely with the wind, bumping across the tops of the swell, which probably accounted for her nausea, and she gazed with an empty mind across the blue-green backs of the waves, endlessly different and endlessly the same.

After several hours she had entered an almost trance-like state, but towards mid-afternoon something captured her attention. At first she followed it idly with her eyes: a darker current rippling cross-ways through the larger patterns of the waves, just where the path of their wake spread and dispersed over the surface of the sea. As she watched, it seemed to draw a little nearer. She sat up straighter and leaned forward, squinting, and stared at it for a few minutes. It was hard to be sure, but it did seem to her that it was a definite trail, and she had an uneasy feeling that it was following the boat. It had something about it, even at that distance, of a hunting dog on a trail.

She called Cadvan, and he nodded towards Owan and came over to Maerad. Wordlessly, she pointed down *The White Owl's* wake, and he leaned forward shading his eyes.

"Can you see something?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"There's a sort of - trail in the water," said Maerad. "I've got a feeling it's following us. Just there, by the wake."

Cadvan finally saw what she was pointing at, and studied it for a few seconds. "Have you been watching it long, Maerad?" he asked.

"About ten minutes. It's hard to tell, but I think it's drawing closer."

Cadvan nodded and called Owan over. He lashed the tiller and came back to them, and when he saw the dark line in the water his face tightened.

"Do you know what it is?" asked Cadvan.

"No," said Owan. "But I can guess." He looked at Cadvan. "And if it is what I'm thinking, then it would be best to outrun it. Can you whistle any stronger wind, do you think?"

Cadvan grimaced up at the sails. "Perhaps," he said. "How strong is the *Owl*, Owan? I fear her breaking if the wind blows too hard..."

"Strong enough," said Owan shortly, and went back to the tiller. Almost imperceptibly, Cadvan's shoulders sagged; and then he sighed, as if he were mentally preparing himself for an effort beyond his strength. He went back to his post near the prow of the boat and lifted his arms, speaking words that were tossed away by the wind so Maerad could not hear them. She knew he was using the Speech, and

she felt a prickle in her skin, a resonance of magery. At once the sails bulged with a new, stiff blast of wind, and *The White Owl* sprang willingly forward, like a horse urged to a gallop which it had, until that moment, restrained within itself.

Maerad's neck snapped back with the speed, and she put out her hand to steady herself, and looked down the wake towards the ominous track in the sea behind them.

For a few minutes it seemed to vanish, and she relaxed; but with the new motion of the ship her sickness came back, worse than before. She battled for a few minutes, trying to find a stillness within her body which could counterbalance the nausea, and after a while it almost worked. Finally she looked out over the bows again, and her nausea returned threefold. Whatever it was had more than matched their new speed; it was now cutting through *The White Owl's* wake, gaining on them every moment, and two white waves, like wings, fanned out behind a dark form she could now see breaking the surface of the water.

She cried out, and Cadvan and Owan looked back over their wake. Owan shrugged his shoulders at Cadvan.

"You can't whistle up more?" he asked flatly.

Cadvan shook his head.

"Well, then." Owan stared over the bows, scratching his head. "I'm pretty sure it's an ondril. I've never seen one so fast, though. And it's behaving strange, for an ondril."

"What's an ondril?" asked Maerad, trying to sound as casual as Cadvan and Owan. They could have been discussing a slight problem with that evening's meal.

"A kind of snake, a serpent of the sea," said Cadvan. "I dislike this."

"It's a mighty big one, if it is," said Owan. "They usually leave fishing craft well alone, unless you're unlucky enough to venture into their territory. But we're going so fast now, we'd have long gone past its borders. Normally it would just have turned round by now and gone back to its place."

"It has the stink of Enkir about it," said Cadvan.

"Aye," said Owan. "I'd believe anything, after what I saw in Norloch. Didn't know Enkir was a seamage, all the same."

"He is many things, alas, and few of them good," said Cadvan. "And he draws on powers far beyond his own native abilities. I think perhaps some creature of the Abyss has been summoned, out of the shadows. Perhaps we did not escape the harbour as unnoticed as we hoped."

"Well, what can we do?" Maerad stood up, suddenly impatient.

"I guess we'll have to fight it," said Cadvan. "It's obviously following us. And we're clearly not going to outrun it."

Maerad looked back. The creature, whatever it was, was now less than half a mile away, and gaining fast. Its head, the only part of it which was visible, was a massive black wedge which drove through the water like a spear; even at that distance it looked unimaginably huge. At the thought of being attacked in their flimsy boat in the middle of a great desert of water Maerad's stomach lurched with fright.

"What if it just smashes the boat to bits?" she demanded. "It looks big enough... And we'll just be

thrown into the sea, to be drowned or eaten..." Her voice trailed away, and neither Owan nor Cadvan answered her, which she took as a bad sign.

"I'd let the wind drop, if I were you, Cadvan," said Owan, breaking the heavy silence. "No point in using up that energy now."

"Yes, it's no use having it snapping at our tail," answered Cadvan.

Instantly the sails slackened, and *The White Owl* slowed and then almost halted completely. Without the charmed wind, only the lightest of breezes ruffled the waves. Owan spun the boat around, and they looked back towards the creature driving inexorably towards them. It was now less than a quarter mile away.

"Do you think you could sail towards it?" Cadvan asked suddenly.

Owan cocked his head and thought for a second or two. "Aye, easily enough, if you put a breeze in the sails," he said. "Think you that a good idea?"

"I don't," said Maerad violently. "I think it's mad."

"We may be able to wrest the initiative," said Cadvan. He looked at Maerad and smiled with a sudden sweetness which illuminated and transformed his sombre face. "Come, Maerad. It is better far to put away fear, than to be driven by it. You know that."

Yes, I know that, Maerad thought sardonically. But I'm tired of having to be brave when really I'm so terrified I scarce know what to do... She swallowed hard, and then stood and drew her sword.

Cadvan nodded, and lifted his arms and spoke. *Il sammachel Estarë de...* I summon you, Wind of the

West... Hearing the Speech used in its full power always sent a thrill down Maerad's spine, as if she had stepped into a fresh spring from the mountains of the morning of the world. For a moment she forgot their peril, feeling only the irresistible tug of Cadvan's command, and turned to face him. He glimmered faintly with a silvery light. The sails bulged, and *The White Owl* creaked as she leaned into the wind, and Owan guided her back down her wake, towards the black thing which made now its own huge wake as it swept towards them. The speed with which they rushed towards each other was dizzying.

Cadvan turned to Maerad, his face stern. "Look to your Gift, Maerad," he said. She held up Irgan, her sword, and an answering light blazed up from its hilt. "I think this beast will not expect us to rush it. Owan, I'll make a fastening charm so you are not thrown out if the monster hits the *Owl*. Stay your course until the last moment, then turn north, sharp as you are able. Maerad and I will attempt the rest."

Owan nodded, his face unreadable.

"You do the fastening, too, Maerad," Cadvan continued. "Be alert. I have not encountered one of these creatures before. The eyes are vulnerable; hit there first. And it is said that under the carapace of the head there is a soft spot, just where the skullbone meets the neck. Watch for it! And may the Light protect us!"

Maerad nodded fiercely, clutching her blade. There was no time now for fear: the monster was so close that she could now see its head scything through the waves, a fearsome wedge-shaped thing, bigger than their boat, greenish-black and spotted with yellow and green weeds and parasites, with two huge pale unblinking eyes and a wide lipless mouth. It stank like brackish, stagnant water. As their tiny craft neared it, the mouth opened to

reveal a nightmare of fangs, rows behind rows of snagged yellowish teeth, like a cave of knives. Maerad thought they were going to plunge into that dark gullet, to be shredded and crushed. For a crucial second she was too terrified to move. Beside her, Cadvan lashed forward with his sword, and a bolt of white light sprang from the blade and hit the fearsome head. Maerad saw one eye go out, like a quenched lamp, suddenly clouded with black blood, and then, at the last moment, the sail swung around and *The White Owl* darted past the horrific mouth, which snapped shut on nothing with a huge crash, drenching them with seawater.

The boat was bobbing wildly, but Cadvan was leaning forward, his sword raised, and Maerad came out of her frozen terror and scanned the side of the monster with furious concentration. Suddenly she saw it, where the carapace of the skull left a gap, revealing a darker, unscaled skin, and she struck out with her blade, crying aloud words which seemed to come into her mind beyond her volition: *Takarmernë, nachadam kul de!* Be cursed, monster of the Dark!

Two bolts of fire arced from the boat: one bounced off the hard scales of its long body and vanished sizzling into the waves, but the other clove deep into the unmailed skin. The sea boiled as the seamonster thrashed violently and roared, a deafening noise which raised all the hairs on Maerad's skin, and for a while she saw nothing but a white chaos of spray. She heard Cadvan shouting "Back!", fearing they would be swamped, and felt the boat move under Owan's sure handling.

When she could see again, they were a few hundred yards from the ondril. For the first time Maerad could really see how big it was: it had a thick, scaled body which stretched back for hundreds of feet, coiling and uncoiling in spasms of fury and agony which sent up geysers of spray. A black cloud of blood boiled out into the sea, reaching even to their

boat, and Cadvan called Owan to draw back still further.

"Will it leave us alone now?" Maerad asked.

"Perhaps," said Cadvan. "It may simply give up and go to lick its wounds. But I think we dare not count on it; I think it more likely that it will come for us now with a fury of revenge, and we would be most imperilled if it dived and came up from beneath. I think we need to blind it, at least."

He turned to Owan, and Owan simply nodded. "Best be quick, I reckon," he said. "Before it's worked out where we are."

"I fear the *Owl* might be swamped," said Cadvan. "My beauty won't sink," said Owan with certainty. "Not unless she's broken to bits." He began to steer steadily back to the eye of the maelstrom, where the ondril was beating the ocean into a tumult.

Maerad shared none of Owan's confidence, but said nothing. She took a long breath and then took her place by Cadvan on the prow of the boat, her sword raised in readiness.

They were tossed wildly as they neared it, and but for the fastening charms would surely have been thrown into the sea. It was much more difficult now to see where to strike; all Maerad could see was a seething chaos of scales and water. She did not see how they could avoid being smashed to pieces, but for the moment fear had left her, to be replaced with a steely resolve. She squinted fiercely, scanning her side of the boat. Suddenly, no more than ten feet from the rail, the head broke the surface of the water, rearing up before them, the mouth opening wider and wider and wider. Time seemed to slow almost to a halt as the ondril reared high on its endless neck, towering monstrously above them. Maerad cried out, and

she and Cadvan struck out for its one remaining eye. Both bolts hit their mark, and a black torrent of blood burst out and splattered smoking onto the deck, and the monster roared and fell back, drenching them all with a huge rush of seawater which washed over the deck and fell in streaming torrents down the sides, and Owan was guiding the tiny *Owl* so it darted away, slipping as nimbly as a minnow evading the rush of a pike.

This time they kept running. Cadvan put a swift wind in the sails, and they scudded westward over the waves. Owan lashed the tiller and silently disappeared belowdecks, and Cadvan and Maerad both sat down heavily, looking behind them to where the sea still boiled with the ondril's fury, which now dwindled fast behind them. It did not seem as if it would follow.

Owan shortly reappeared with the small brown bottle of liquor, and they all took a swig. Maerad studied the deck; there was no sign of their ordeal anywhere. The ondril's blood had all been swept away by the water, and around them was a calm, blue sea, in which it seemed impossible such monsters should exist.

Cadvan toasted Owan and Maerad tiredly. "A brave bit of sailing, Owan," he said. "And well marked, Maerad! That was a great stroke, behind the head; I missed that one. I should not have liked to have gone down that gullet."

"By the Light, I think not," said Owan. "And a rare piece of fighting, if I might say so. It was quite a sight, to see you both in action. I'd have a think or two before taking you on."

Maerad looked down at her toes, feeling nothing except a vast emptiness. Inside her was no sense of triumph, nor even relief. All she was aware of was a returning wisp of nausea in her stomach. The only good thing about being frightened half to death, she

thought, was that it made her forget all about being seasick.

2: BUSK

FROM the sea, the town of Busk seemed to have been scattered along the cliffs of the Isle of Thorold by some idle giant. Its roads and alleys scrambled around the steep hills in a crazy but picturesque disorder, and its whitewashed buildings gleamed like blocks of salt amid the dark greens of cypresses and laurels and olives. It was a busy trading port, its harbour well protected against both storm and attack by a maze of reefs and rips, and also by the arms of its encircling cliffs. These were extended by tall crenellated breakwaters that ended in two harbour towers.

As *The White Owl* neared the towers, Maerad began to feel apprehensive. The entrance was very narrow, a strip of water barely twenty feet wide, and the tower walls loomed over their small craft and cast a chilly shadow over the water. The echoes of waves slapping on the stone seemed unnaturally loud, even threatening. The ancient stone, green with slime and encrusted with barnacles and limpets, was uncomfortably close. She wondered if anyone watched them through the slits she saw high up in the walls.

She breathed out heavily when they burst through into the sunlight again, and entered the bustling haven of Busk. The buildings on the harbourside were plain and whitewashed, casting back the bright summer sunshine with a blinding glare, but any sense of austerity was offset by the activity going on around. The quay was crowded with rough woven baskets full of blue and silver fish packed in salt, giant coils of rope, piles of round cheeses coated in blue and red wax, lobster pots, barrels of wine and oil and huge bolts of raw silk, and dozens of people.

As she stepped onto the stone quay, it seemed to Maerad's startled perception that everyone was arguing. Many traders were bargaining, scoffing in disbelief at the prices offered, talking up the inimitable value of their wares. Elsewhere fishers were bringing in their catch, shouting orders to each other, and sailors were working on their boats or greeting friends, laughing and swearing. The teeming, noisy harbourside was a shock after the silence and solitude of the sea, and she glanced back at her two companions, momentarily discomfited.

Cadvan and Maerad fondly took their leave of Owan, promising to meet him soon, and headed up the steep streets to the School of Busk. Cadvan picked his way unerringly through the tangle of tiny streets and alleys and Maerad looked around eagerly, her tiredness momentarily forgotten.

The people of Busk seemed to live outside on their vine-shaded balconies, for the pleasures it afforded them of chaffing passing friends, minding each other's business and exchanging gossip: she saw them washing, eating, dressing children and cooking, all in the open air. Cadvan noticed her staring.

"Thoroldians are a people apart," he said, smiling. "They think Annarens are cold and snobbish. Annarens, on the other hand, think Thoroldians are impertinent and have no sense of privacy."

"I think I like it," said Maerad. "It seems very - lively. But I don't know that I'd like to live like that all the time."

"Perhaps not," said Cadvan, smiling. "But of course, it's different in winter; everybody moves inside."

The School of Busk was set above the main town, surrounded by a low wall which served as a

demarcation rather than a barrier. Here the ubiquitous whitewashed houses and twisting alleys gave way to wide, stoneflagged streets lined with tall, stately cypresses and magnificent olive trees. The road, like all the roads in Busk, was flagged with stone, and threw back the sunlight blindingly. Behind the trees were Bard houses built of marble and the local pink granite, surrounded with wide porticos held up by broad columns ornately decorated in bright colours and leafed with gold; many were entwined with ancient vines, their fat fruit purpling in the sun. Maerad glimpsed the dark tops of conifers behind high walls, and thought longingly of cool private gardens.

Unlike Innail and Norloch, the only Schools Maerad knew, Busk was not planned in concentric circles; the geography of the island, steep and irregular, made this impossible. And, as Cadvan said, the Thoroldians liked in any case to do things their own way. The streets were laid in terraces, with flights of broad steps to connect the different levels, and it was very easy to get lost until you knew your way about, because they seemed to follow no rational order. There were no towers in Busk, apart from the small ones guarding the harbour: the grander buildings were simply broader and wider, and built with higher roofs.

The School was, for all its impressive architecture, as lively as the lower town. It was now mid-afternoon, when, as Maerad discovered later, Thoroldians put the business of the day aside for pleasanter pursuits. The streets themselves were deserted; the sun was really too hot for going out. As they walked through the School, Maerad saw that some of the wide, shady porticos were populated with Bards. Like everyone else in Busk, they all seemed to be involved in lively conversations and disputes. Some groups of Bards were playing instruments and singing. They looked up curiously when Cadvan and Maerad passed, and some waved a greeting. Cadvan smiled back.

Maerad stopped shyly to linger outside one of the houses, burning with curiosity. The Bards lounged in comfortable wicker chairs arranged around low wooden tables, most of which were laden with platters of fruit and carafes of wine and water. She watched a woman who was sprawled in a chair, declaiming a poem to a small group of Bards. They listened intently until she finished and then broke into a furious argument about its prosody. The woman, who was tall and heavy boned, with a bright scarf wound about her head and long green earrings, stood up and argued back fiercely, finally throwing her arms up in the air in frustration and cuffing her most vocal critic, to the cheers of half the table.

The Bards alarmed Maerad more than the townfolk; after all, she was not a Thoroldian, and could be expected to be different. But in the School she was a Bard: one of them. She couldn't imagine that she would not be overwhelmed among such people.

Maerad looked sideways at Cadvan. "Are the Bards of Busk always so loud?" she asked.

Cadvan gave her an amused glance. "Pretty much, Maerad. But it's more lively than Norloch, don't you think?"

"Well, yes," she answered feelingly, thinking of the stern Bards she had met there. "But, you know, they seem just as frightening, in a different way."

"You'll get used to it," he said. "In a way, you're part Thoroldian yourself."

"I am?" Maerad turned to him open-mouthed.

"Of course you are. I told you," he said, with the edge of impatience he always had when he had to repeat something, even if it was something he had mentioned in passing two months before. "The

House of Karn fled to Thorold during the Great Silence. Thorold was always one of the most independent of the Seven Kingdoms, and was a chief point of resistance to the Nameless One. I suppose it's eight hundred years or so since last your family was here, so you can be excused a little strangeness. The Thoroldians are a great people: a true bastion of the Light. The only real problem is keeping up with their consumption of wine. I don't know how they do it."

As they were speaking, they stopped in front of a house and turned in to the portico. Maerad was blinded in the sudden shade, and Cadvan led her blinking through two large bronze double doors into a huge atrium flagged with marble. Orange and lemon trees and flowers were planted in big glazed pots, giving a delicious perfume, and jasmine climbed over the slim columns. In its centre, in the middle of an intricate mosaic of birds and flowers, played a fountain. Maerad relaxed in the coolness and looked around. The atrium seemed to be deserted.

Cadvan rang a brass handbell that stood on a small plinth, and then sat down on a wooden bench and stretched out his legs.

"Someone will come in a minute," he said. "Sit down."

"It's lovely," said Maerad. She sat next to him, content to do nothing for the meantime. She felt again how tired and grimy she was, and how much she longed to wear clean clothes and to sleep in a proper bed. Was it only yesterday they had driven off the ondri? It seemed like last year... She felt as if she had been travelling forever.

"Do you think we could stay here a while?" she asked.

"It would be a good idea, if the School permits us," said Cadvan. "I'm a little tired of travel myself. Busk has a very good library; I was hoping I might be able to find out something about the Treesong. And we are safe here, for the meantime."

Maerad sighed, and turned to look at the fountain. The sunlight struck off the droplets in little prisms, and its murmurous music sank into her hypnotically, as if it were a song of which she almost understood the words. She didn't notice the old man who stepped out of the shade at the other end of the atrium until he was only a few feet away.

Cadvan stood up, extending his hand in greeting. "Elenxi," he said. "Greetings."

"*Samandalamë*, Cadvan," said the old Bard, smiling widely. He had strong, white teeth. "Welcome." Maerad looked at him wonderingly; he must have been a giant in his youth, and still towered over Cadvan. His hair and beard were utterly white, and his dark eyes were sharp, the eyes of a much younger man. Like Cadvan he used the Speech, the inborn language of Bards, and not the tongue of the Thoroldians. It was much more than a courtesy to strangers: to use it was an offering of trust as much as a practicality. It was said to be impossible to lie when using the Speech.

"My companion is Maerad of Pellinor," said Cadvan. Maerad bowed her head, and Elenxi, bowing his head in return, gave her a swift, piercing glance, but made no comment. "We are here seeking refuge, fleeing peril on land and sea, and bring news of great import."

"You are always welcome, Cadvan," said Elenxi. "And I have heard somewhat of Maerad of Pellinor." Again he gave her that sharp, disconcerting gaze. "Nerili will no doubt wish you to join her for dinner; she is detained at present. In the meantime, I will arrange rooms, and I expect

you want to refresh yourselves and rest."

So it was that barely twenty minutes later Maerad found herself in a graceful room with cool stone walls decorated with embroidered silk hangings, and a huge bed draped with a white net which Cadvan told her later was for keeping out stinging insects at night. Against the wall was a high cabinet carved out of dark wood, and there was a table with a lamp and a plain wooden chair. It bore a decanter of water and a glass, and a bowl of summer fruits. On one side were wide windowed doors, with white shutters both inside and out. These were now open and led out, past the portico, to a shady garden. Fresh clothes - a long crimson dress of the style of Thorold, with a low neck, well fitted sleeves and a wide brocaded belt - were laid out for her; and the chatty Bard assigned to show her around finally left her to her own devices, after Maerad earnestly requested to be shown the bathroom.

Maerad was addicted to baths. For most of her life, the years of drudgery in Gilman's Cot when she had been a mean slave, she had never even heard of bathing. But since her introduction to Bardic ideas of cleanliness in the School of Innail, Maerad couldn't get enough of them. This bathroom was especially pleasant: it was painted a cool blue, and opened out on a tiny courtyard where finches hopped in the potted trees. The bath itself was tiled with a mosaic of dolphins and other sea creatures, and the water was hot and plentiful. When it was deep enough to come up to her neck, Maerad dropped a bunch of lavender and rosemary into the water and stepped down into the fragrant bath with a sigh of bliss. She emerged an hour later, dressed herself leisurely, wandered to her room, and unpacked.

Unpacking had become a ritual, a kind of reckoning of her life. First she took out her wooden lyre, freeing it from the leather carrying case stamped with the lily sign of the School of Pellinor which had

been a gift from Cadvan. The lyre had been her mother's, and of all things she owned it was the most precious to her. She brushed her fingers gently over its ten strings before she leant it carefully in the corner. She put all her clothes aside for washing, unpinning the silver brooch from her cloak and laying it on the table, and unpacked the light chain mail and helm and the sword, Irigan, that she had been given in Innail, and put them in the cabinet. She put various other items in one of the drawers: a small leather kit containing a hoofpick and brushes for horses, a pen and a small pad of paper, a leather water bag, a clasp knife, and a blue bottle of the Bard drink medhyl, brewed to combat tiredness, which was almost empty.

Lastly she took out a number of objects which she placed carefully about the room, for they were precious to her: a reed flute, given her by the Elidhu in the Weywood, whom Maerad alone knew was also the Queen Ardina of Rachida, and who had, in her other incarnation, given Maerad the exquisitely wrought golden ring that she wore on her little finger, and a black wooden cat that might have been carved as a toy for a child, retrieved from the sacked caravan the day they had found her brother Hem. Lastly she unwrapped from bound oilskin a small but beautifully illuminated book of poems given her by the Dernhil of Gent. She looked at it sadly; she had not had much time to read it, and reading was, in any case, a slow business for her; but she knew most of the poems in it by heart. Dernhil's death still weighed on her heavily, a regret and a grief.

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts, and picking a golden pear out of the bowl on the table, stepped outside. All the rooms on this side of the house had doors which led out here, but the garden was empty. The shadows were now beginning to lengthen and a fresh breeze had sprung up, smelling faintly of brine. Maerad stepped barefoot onto the cool grass and sat on the ground in the

shade of a trellis overgrown with pale yellow roses. She ate the pear slowly, letting its sweet juice fill her mouth, her head entirely empty of thought, utterly content. Somewhere a bird burred unseen in the bushes, but otherwise all was quiet.

When the shadows lengthened and the lamps were lit, Cadvan knocked on Maerad's door and they wended their way through the Bardhouse to the private quarters of Nerili, First Bard of Busk. Nerili's rooms were on the other side of the Bard house, and they had to pass through the atrium again on their way there. Maerad dawdled through it, feeling that she would rather sit there all evening than meet any Thoroldian Bard, let alone the most important Bard in the School. The fountain bubbled peacefully in the twilight, murmuring its endless song, as the white stars opened above it in a deep blue sky.

They left the atrium and entered a labyrinth of corridors, turning again and again until Maerad had completely lost her sense of direction. The Bardhouse was enormous. But Cadvan led her unerringly, and at last they stood outside a tall door, faced with bronze like the front door of the house, and knocked. It opened, and a slim woman stood in the doorway and smilingly greeted them.

"Cadvan of Lirigon! It is long since your path has led this way," she said.

"Too long," said Cadvan. "But alas, such has been my fate."

"I regret that the charms of Busk could not draw you here more often," said Nerili. There was a sharpness in her tone which made Maerad look again, but now she was smiling and stretching her hand towards Maerad. Cadvan cleared his throat and introduced her.

Nerili of Busk was not quite what Maerad had expected. She seemed too young to be a First Bard, although among Bards age was always difficult to guess. Maerad thought she looked about thirty five years old, which given the triple life-span of Bards probably meant she was perhaps seventy or eighty. She was short, not much taller than Maerad, but her authority and grace, and the challenging glance she gave Cadvan as they entered, gave her an illusory stature. She was strikingly beautiful, with the grey eyes, black hair and olive skin of a Thoroldian, and her grey silk dress fell softly about her, shimmering like a waterfall. Her hair was piled up on her head and held in place by silver combs and a length of grey silk, in a style worn by many Busk women, and she wore no jewellery apart from long silver earrings. Maerad was a little dazzled, and stammered as Cadvan introduced her. It seemed to her that even Cadvan was uncharacteristically awkward. She glanced at him curiously; surely he wasn't shy?

Her rooms, like Nerili herself, were elegant: she eschewed the usual silk hangings, ubiquitous in Busk, and instead the stone walls were painted a pale blue, with a faint stencilling of birds in a deeper blue. The only other decoration was the exquisitely glazed blue and white tiles around the doors and windows and fireplace, each painted with a different scene from Thoroldian life: fishermen, silkweavers, goatherds, children playing. The mahogany furnishings were plain but beautifully made, the chairs and sofas upholstered in blue silk, and white lilies stood in a big vase on a plinth in a corner. It was a calm, beautiful room. Through a half-open door Maerad could see what she supposed must be Nerili's study, from the chaos of manuscripts, scrolls and books she glimpsed piled on a table, and on the far side was a dining table set with candles in glass holders and a generous meal - flat rounds of unleavened bread, little bowls of pickled vegetables and sauces, cold meats and

cheeses. There was a plate of round black spiky things that looked like strange fruits, and a large bowl of shells with orange lips. Her mouth started to water: she was very hungry.

Nerili invited them to sit down and poured out a light red wine. "So," she said, looking at Cadvan with an unusual directness. "Elenxi tells me you have news, Cadvan? Serious, important news, he said. And he said you were seeking refuge. Refuge from what?"

Maerad suddenly thought, she's a Truthteller, like Cadvan. She couldn't have said why she understood these things; she simply knew. She examined Nerili with new interest.

Cadvan raised his glass. "Good wine, Neri. It's been a while since I tasted Thoroldian grapes; I had forgotten how excellent they are." Nerili smiled briefly, and Cadvan leant back in his chair and let out a long breath.

"Well, we have a long and complicated story to tell. But I will tell you the worst news first." His voice hardened. "Maerad and I are seeking refuge from Enkir of Norloch, who has betrayed the Light. We fled the Citadel three days ago: it was then in flames. I fear civil war in Annar. And I know that the Nameless One returns, the Dark moves on Annar; and even as it rises, the White Flame collapses from within. The First Circle of Annar is broken."

Nerili swallowed hard and was silent for a few moments as she studied Cadvan's face.

"I see that you say no untruth," she said quietly. "But I can scarce credit it. Norloch burns? The First Bard betrays the Light?"

"It's true," said Maerad. A sudden image flashed

into her mind of Enkir's face, cold and vicious with rage, and she felt a bitter anger rising within her. "The First Bard Enkir sent my mother to be enslaved and betrayed Pellinor to the Dark. I was only a little girl when it happened, but when I met him I remembered his face. Before we left Norloch he tried to imprison half of the First Circle for treachery. He sent soldiers for us, and we only just escaped, with Owan's help."

"He sent an ondril to pursue us," added Cadvan. "And no ordinary ondril either. We only just escaped that, too."

Nerili shook her head in bewilderment, and put up her hand. "Let's go back to the beginning," she said. "You are saying that Enkir caused Pellinor to be sacked? That is a grim accusation..."

"He did. He wanted me." Maerad looked up at Nerili, her jaw jutting out. She was tired of having to explain her story. "He knew the Fated One would be born to my parents. We don't know how. But he took my brother Hem instead; he thought the boy must be the Fated One."

Nerili gave a small, barely audible gasp.

"My father was killed with everyone else. My mother died later, in slavery." Maerad stopped suddenly, twisting her fingers around the glass and staring at the floor. This stark narration caused all her old sadnesses to rise up inside her, choking her throat.

"The One? You are sure?" asked Nerili softly, looking across at Cadvan. Cadvan nodded. Nerili leaned forward and took Maerad's chin in her hand, looking at her intently. Maerad stared back into her eyes without fear or surprise; a few Bards had searched her this way now, not quite scrying her, but feeling her out. She

felt a delicate touch in her mind, a light like music. After a few seconds, Nerili sat back and passed her hand over her face.

"I shall need some time to absorb this." She picked up her glass and drained it. "I have not felt anything like you before, Maerad. I do not know what you are."

"Neither do I," Maerad answered, a little forlornly.

"You have great power. But it is a strange power, a wild power. And you are very young to bear such a burden." Nerili filled her glass again and, as if suddenly remembering something important, turned urgently to Cadvan.

"What of Nelac?" she asked. "Is he still in Norloch then? Or did he flee as well?"

"Nelac." At the mention of his old teacher, Nelac of Lirigon, Cadvan's voice thickened with sadness.

"Nelac wouldn't come. I asked him. He said he was too old, and that he was needed in Norloch. I... I have no doubt he is in great danger, and I don't know what has happened in Norloch since we left. I fear for him greatly."

"He is a powerful Bard," said Nerili. "He is not easily endangered."

"Yes. But you do not know what Enkir has become. He draws on something other than himself. How else could he summon a creature like an ondril? I think that he guesses we are here, even as we speak. And Nelac is old, even by the count of Bards. He is not afraid of death. Perhaps..." Cadvan sighed, and stared out into the garden. "Perhaps I won't see him again."

"Your news is all ill," said Nerili. There was a short silence. "Well, there is much to discuss. I'm sure you are both hungry; we can talk and eat." She gave Cadvan a strange private look, and Cadvan

looked away, his face troubled.

Maerad realised suddenly that Cadvan and Nerili did indeed know each other, and that Cadvan's awkwardness had nothing to do with unfamiliarity. Perhaps, she thought, they had even been lovers. Cadvan called her Neri, not Nerili... Quite unexpectedly she felt a flash of jealousy, and awkwardly stood up to follow the older Bards to the dining table, almost knocking her glass over.

Over dinner, Cadvan and Maerad told of how Cadvan had helped Maerad escape from slavery in Gilman's Cot at the beginning of that spring, how he had come to suspect she was the Fated One, prophesied to bring about the downfall of the Nameless One, and how her instatement as a full Bard in Norloch had confirmed his suspicions. It was a tangled telling: Nerili constantly interrupted with questions and speculations, and led the conversation in different directions.

The atmosphere relaxed, and Maerad began to feel less tense. She decided she liked Nerili very much; she spoke as someone sure of her authority, and there was a quick warmth behind her apparent coolness, and a deep gentleness. Cadvan's face was inscrutable, and Maerad could not guess what he felt.

To distract herself, she experimented with the food. She discovered that she liked olives, although she found their bitter, oily taste a little unpleasant at first. The bread, crusty and tough, was unambiguously delicious, and she enjoyed the pickled vegetables, most of which she didn't recognise, and the meats, which were flavoured with lemon and garlic and herbs.

She fared less well with the shellfish, which she had not eaten before, as she had never lived by the sea. Cadvan told her the orange-lipped shells were mussels, so she picked one up and, as Cadvan

instructed her, split open the bivalve shell and picked out the flesh. Even that made her feel a little sick, but she persevered and put a small piece in her mouth. Only a rictus of politeness prevented her from spitting it out on the table and she put the rest of it aside uneaten. The black spiky things were sea urchins, boiled and split in half so their rosy insides were exposed, like exotic, poisonous flowers. Nerili ate them with enthusiasm, spooning out the flesh from the shell, but Maerad thought they smelt like rotting boots. She noticed that Cadvan, who was monopolising the mussels, wasn't touching the sea urchins.

Nerili and Cadvan began a complicated conversation about the politics of Norloch, which bored Maerad slightly, and the wine conspired with her tiredness to make her drowsy. Her mind began to wander. She hadn't thought of Cadvan having a lover, apart from Ceredin, who had died when he was a young man; but now she did think of it, there was no reason to suppose that he hadn't. She guessed they were not lovers now, and it wasn't as if she and Cadvan were, well, were... she had no reason to feel jealous. But she did, all the same. She had so few friends.

She thought again of Dernhil, who had loved her, and whom she had turned away in panic and confusion, so long ago it seemed, in Innail. Dernhil had spoken to her of the Way of the Heart, and Silvia had too... even the Queen Ardina had talked to her of love. *You have a great heart, the Queen had told her, but will only find it to be so through great pain. This is the wisdom of love, and its doubtful gift.*

But Maerad hadn't understood. She still didn't understand. Was it love which had given Nerili's smile its ironic edge? But maybe she was imagining it all... Cadvan and Nerili were simply two Bards, debating questions of high policy, and these subterranean feelings which so disturbed Maerad

were but flutterings of her tired mind.

She stared abstractedly out of the window, where the garden was now wrapped in purple shadows, with flowers glimmering palely in the darkness. Whenever Bards had mentioned the Way of the Heart to her, it filled her with an unreasoning fear. She had spent her childhood protecting herself from the violent men of Gilman's Cot, and that was certainly part of it; but at a deeper level was some kind of foreboding, a sense of darkness which wrapped itself around the part of her which might love, as if to love might extinguish her. It seemed too full of risk, and she already risked too much, simply by being who she was.

"Are you weary, Maerad?" Nerili broke in on her thoughts, startling her. "You seem a little tired."

"I am," she answered. "I haven't slept much these past nights. I wouldn't mind going to bed."

"Maerad is no sailor," Cadvan said. "She was a very interesting green for most of our voyage here."

"And you didn't spell her? I thought you were a rare healer." Nerili gave him a mocking glance.

"I had to keep the wind in the sails. That was exhausting enough."

"He managed to stop my vomiting, which was really almost miraculous," said Maerad dryly. "But even Cadvan couldn't get rid of the nausea. Not that the ondril helped."

"You must be tired almost to death." Nerili stood up, grimacing. "And you must be longing to sleep in a proper bed, and here I am, plying you with questions. We can talk in the coming days."

"Will you be able to find your chamber, Maerad?"

asked Cadvan. "It's still quite early, and I'm not ready for sleep. Nerili and I have much to speak of."

"I'll manage," said Maerad lightly, although she wished that Cadvan didn't want to stay and talk with Nerili, and would come with her instead. "I'll see you tomorrow." She bowed her head in farewell, and left the room.

She made her way without difficulty back to her room, only turning the wrong way once, noticing with pleasure the now familiar noises of a Bard house around her - the murmur of conversation in distant rooms, people laughing outside, musicians playing a duet somewhere, some young Bards arguing. A hunger she had been barely aware of flowered painfully inside her. Music! When had she last played? She couldn't remember.

Back in her room, she picked up her lyre and started plucking it, randomly at first and then more seriously. She was a little out of practice. She ran through a few scales, and then picked out a tune she had once heard some minstrels play in Ettinor - she didn't feel like playing Bardic music tonight. It was a plaintive song about a man who had fallen in love with a water sprite. She couldn't quite remember the words, so she made up some of her own once she had the melody down to her satisfaction. She sang it through twice, feeling her anxieties subside in the absorption of playing. Then, yawning violently, she put her lyre carefully aside and prepared herself for bed.

3: THE BROKEN PROMISE

THE golden light of a late summer morning played over the garden outside Maerad's room. She sat alone in the portico, enjoying the warm breeze on her face. Birds argued in the trees and Maerad, using her Gift, idly eavesdropped. Birds, she thought, are so brainless. All they say is *Mine! Mine! Mine! Go away! Go away!*

She let the birdspeech return to pretty burble, which was much more pleasant to listen to, and breathed in the balm of the garden's beauty. She ached: oh how she ached. Her soul was like one big bruise.

A late breakfast had been brought to her room by the same chatty Bard she had met the day before, but Maerad, who couldn't even remember his name, feigned sleep until he crept away. She felt momentarily guilty at her rudeness, but that dissipated quickly over her meal, sweet pastries and a salad of fruits, which she took outside and ate on the portico, where there was a low table and three chairs for her use. A silver pot held a hot sweet drink she hadn't encountered before: when she had finished eating she poured it into a small glass, wondering at its blackness, tasted it cautiously and decided she liked it: bitter and sweet at once. She sighed luxuriously and leant back in her chair, sipping the drink.

It was so pleasant to sit alone in a beautiful garden, and not to feel filthy or exhausted or cold or frightened, not to feel hunted by the Dark. But now she had a little peace, all these disturbing thoughts bubbled up inside her. Was she any closer to knowing who she was? She had all these new names - once she had only been Maerad, then she was Maerad of Pellinor, and now she was Elednor

of Edil-Amarandh, the Firelily come to resist the Dark - but really they told her nothing. And now Cadvan and she were on quest, charged to find the Treesong: some mysterious - song - she supposed, which was to do with the roots of the Speech. Putting together this clue and that, they had decided that they must head north; but here, in this pretty garden, it seemed like the flimsiest of theories. And what were they looking for? Even Nelac didn't know what the Treesong was.

What are you? she asked herself, echoing Nerili's question of the night before. A freak?

She had been ruminating for about an hour when another door further along the portico opened and Cadvan peered out. "Maerad! Good morning!" He came to up her table. "I see you've been spending your time well," he said, looking at the empty plates. "Is that coffee still hot?"

"Coffee?"

"The drink. Coffee."

"No."

"A pity. I'm rather partial to it. It's a Suderain drink: you can rarely get it anywhere in Annar except here. They trade the beans from the South."

"It's nice," said Maerad. "But it's strong. I couldn't drink more than one glass."

"A bit like the Thoroldians, yes?" Cadvan said, smiling. He pulled one of the chairs up to the table and sat down.

"Well, I've only met Nerili. But, now you say so, yes."

Cadvan and Maerad sat in companionable silence

for a while, looking out over the garden. Maerad toyed with the idea of asking him about Nerili, and then decided against it. She doubted he would tell her anything; and another part of her didn't want to know, even if he did.

"It's lovely here," she said at last. "I wish we could stay here forever."

"We can't," said Cadvan. "You know that. But we can certainly stay for a few weeks. We both need a rest. And before we head north to seek the Treesong, we have to some idea what we're looking for. I'm going to have a good look through the Library here - it's the most ancient in Edil-Amarandh, except maybe the one in Turbansk - and try and find some clue. If we knew what it might be, then it might not be such a goose chase."

"It might be a goose chase anyway," said Maerad, thinking of the argumentative geese she had herded as a slave child, and then of the wise, gentle Bard Nelac, as she had last seen him in Norloch, solemnly laying quest on them. They were such incongruous images she almost laughed.

"Well, while you hunt about in the library, I'll just sit in the garden," she said. "I like it here."

"No, you won't," said Cadvan. "You can use the time to study. There's so much that you should know, and that it's dangerous not to know. You really need years to catch up, but of course we'll have to make do. I've spoken to Nerili about it - she's agreed to let you have private teaching, so you don't have to sit in classes with children half your age. And you have particular needs, anyway."

Maerad stuck her lip out mulishly. "I want a rest," she said. "I'm tired."

"And a rest you shall have. For two days. It will take

me that long to arrange your lessons. You'll need some beginner's instruction in High Magery, which is a bit peculiar, because you have all the abilities, and more, of a full Bard, but you've never done the basic stuff. I'll have to think about who is best to teach you. Me, probably, but I'll be busy. And of course swordcraft, and reading and writing. You're quick, you'll use your time well."

Maerad pouted, but made no other protest. The prospect of resuming study excited her, but she wasn't going to tell Cadvan that. For all her powers, she was painfully aware that she had very little skill.

In Busk, for the first time, Maerad began to live the life of a normal Bard. She slipped as easily into it as a fish into a stream; it seemed as natural as breathing. The days settled into a steady pattern: rising at six, breakfast at seven, and lessons from eight to three in the afternoon, with a short break for a light lunch. After that, unless she had further study to do (which was often) her time was her own; she was free to go back to her room and rest, or to sit in the garden, or to wander down to the town and markets of Busk, or, as she began to do more and more often after her first week, to join the noisy Bards in their colloquia under the porticos. She usually ate dinner with Cadvan, either in the Common Hall or in one or other of their rooms, when they would swap news about their day: what Maerad had learnt (a voracious amount) or what Cadvan had found (nothing). Or they would wander down to the lower town to meet Owan and eat in the one of the many taverns, or at his house, which was surprisingly big for a humble fisherman, cementing what had become a fast friendship.

As Cadvan had predicted, Maerad used her time well, and within a week all her mentors were telling

her that they were astonished by her progress. Years of brusque tutelage from the Bard Mirlad in Gilman's Cot, being taught musicianship by ear, meant her memory was excellent; she had only to be told something once to remember it. But more than that, it seemed as if she held an innate knowledge of Barding which her teachers merely had to reawaken. Although Maerad didn't know this, they all commented on this separately to Cadvan; they found her aptitude a little unnerving.

Her teachers were all senior Bards in the School of Busk. Elenxi of Busk taught her swordcraft, Intatha of Gent taught her reading and writing and, to Maerad's initial abashment, Nerili herself had taken on the task of introducing her to High Magery. Partly, Cadvan explained, the senior Bards were teaching her because Maerad was such an unusual case and because she needed swift teaching; another reason was secrecy. Maerad was known within the School as Maerad of Innail, travelling with Cadvan, who was too well known to conceal his identity.

"I don't doubt that some will guess that you may be Maerad of Pellinor," said Cadvan, the first night after her lessons commenced. "Bards are the worst gossips, and your arrival and acceptance as Minor Bard at Innail caused a lot of comment: a survivor of the sack of Pellinor was big news. As was the scandal when I applied to be your sole mentor. But even so, it's better for us to lie low and be discreet, even here. We are just travelling Bards, visiting the School at Nerili's invitation. There is nothing unusual about that."

Maerad shrugged her shoulders. "Do you think there are spies here?"

"For the Dark, you mean?" said Cadvan. "I do not think there are any spies in the School, but nowhere is safe for us: and in the town there could be some. News has not reached here yet from Norloch. I

don't doubt that it will soon. And then perhaps things might become a little more dangerous."

Maerad pondered what "dangerous" meant and then her thoughts turned, as they often did, to her young brother Hem. The day before, Cadvan had sent a message by bird to Turbansk, to tell them of their safe arrival in Thorold. Hem would riding there now with their friend, Saliman of Turbansk: Maerad wondered where they were, and if they were safe.

Maerad's lessons were interesting. Her sessions with Intatha of Gent gave her a little pang at first; they could not but recall Dernhil, who was the first to open for her the world of reading and writing. For Maerad, reading itself was imbued with memories of him. And Intatha was of the same School as Dernhil, although Maerad never dared to ask her if she knew him.

Intatha was an imposing-looking Bard: tall, with high cheekbones, a formidable eagle nose and hair that was silvering from black. She was, in a particularly gentle way, a stern teacher. Maerad worked hard for her, not because she feared her dispraise, but because she somehow expected something of her which Maerad wished not to disappoint. She found herself mastering the alphabetic script of Nelsor very quickly, building on the basics Dernhil had taught her, and even found that her handwriting began to please her, instead of looking scratchy and ill-formed. Intatha also started teaching her the Ladhen runes, coded symbols which Bards used when travelling to leave signs to each other, and some of the Dhyllic pictograms. It was intense work, and Maerad left their long sessions feeling both stimulated and drained, with her arms full of more work to do on her own.

Elenxi of Busk was surprisingly fun. For all his age and his giant frame he was quick and agile, and

Maerad was not surprised to find he had been a famous warrior in his youth: she imagined that he would have been fearsome. Unlike Indik, the master swordsman who had taught Maerad at Innail, Elenxi was a patient and encouraging teacher. She was also no longer a raw beginner: holding a sword was no longer strange, and she had quick reactions and a good natural balance, and was surprisingly strong for someone of her size. Elenxi coached her in advanced swordcraft and unarmed combat, and Maerad began to feel for the first time that perhaps she might be able to hold her own against attack.

"Don't get over confident!" Elenxi warned, after praising her efforts in her first lesson. "You are still only a beginner. It's the stroke you don't see that kills you." He looked at her, wiping the sweat out of his eyes. "I think we deserve a wine, yes, young Bard? We have worked hard today."

"A wine?" said Maerad shyly, thinking of the vociferous Bards in the porticos. Elenxi looked at her and laughed.

"Don't tell me you are frightened! Well, we'll have to cure that."

"But I'm filthy!" Maerad objected, blushing.

Elenxi lifted an eyebrow. "So? Does one have to be clean to drink? I should like to know when that was made a rule. No, young Bard, I will hear no excuses. We'll go to Oreston's house, he has the best wines."

They stowed their fighting gear, and only permitting her a quick wash, Elenxi led a reluctant Maerad down the road to one of the houses nearer the town. He strode into the portico confidently, expecting Maerad to be right behind him, and when he saw her still hesitating in the road went back and physically took hold of her, almost dragging her to a

table where about six Bards, men and women, were engaged in lively conversation. At one end of the table a young man was idly plucking arpeggios, which ran like a quick river of music underneath the talk, on a beautiful big bellied stringed instrument.

Maerad felt paralysed by shyness, and sat down quietly, hoping nobody would notice her. Elenxi exchanged cheerful greetings with all the Bards, and then introduced Maerad as a guest from Innail. She was immediately swamped with questions in both the Speech and Thoroldian: Innail? It is long since someone came all the way from the East - how goes it there? How was Oron? They had heard of the death of Dernhil of Gent - how could that have happened? Hulls murdering Bards in a School?

Elenxi put up his hand to stem the tide. "Now, be fair," he said in the Speech. "Maerad is clever, but she can't speak Thoroldian. How can she answer all of you? Anyway, what does she know about the high policies of Innail? She is only a young Bard, and she hasn't been there for months. We have been working hard at improving her swordcraft this afternoon, and she is tired and needs a wine. She came all this way here to be taught by me, which shows remarkable good taste."

He winked at her slyly, and Maerad, grateful for his intervention, gave him a little smile; she hadn't understood much, but she knew they had asked about Dernhil, and the mention distressed her. Suddenly a glass full of a dark red wine was in front of her, and she was being plied with delicacies and solicitations instead of questions. She clutched her glass and gulped the wine. The conversation resumed, in the Speech so she could understand it, and she sat quietly listening. After a while, emboldened by her second glass of wine, she asked the young man with the instrument, a Bard called Honas, what it was.

"It's a makilon," he said. "My father made this one especially for me: he's a master crafter of instruments, famous in Thorold. It's beautiful, yes?" He handed it to her, and she stroked the smooth, mellow wood, admiring the mother of pearl inlay around the soundhole and the delicate carving of its neck.

"Oh yes, it's lovely," said Maerad. She let her fingers trickle over the strings, listening to its resonance. "So beautifully made. I've never seen one before. How do you play it?"

Honas, his face alight with what was obviously his passion, took the instrument back and started to show her the complicated fingerings and plucking styles for the makilon. Maerad's fingers itched to try them, and before long Honas gave it to her, placing her hands correctly on the neck and the strings. She ventured an arpeggio, marvelling at the sound. Honas was beginning to be more interested in Maerad than the music, but only Elenxi, keeping discreet watch from the other side of the table, noticed this. He smiled into his beard. Maerad was totally absorbed, and had now forgotten her shyness altogether.

Maybe they weren't so frightening, these Bards.

The most demanding studies were those in High Magery. This was something Maerad had never studied formally, although Cadvan had taught her much on their travels together. She went to Nerili's rooms for her first lesson with a strange reluctance; she hadn't spoken to the First Bard since the night she had arrived in Busk, and she felt a little apprehensive, as if she would not know what to say. Nerili took care to put her at her ease.

"Well, Maerad," she said, smiling, when Maerad

entered. "Cadvan has told me of your feats, striking down both a Kulag and a Wight. It seems passing strange to be teaching you, when you have already done more than most Bards!"

That day Nerili was dressed plainly, and wore no jewellery, but Maerad still found her beauty a bit dazzling, and she felt stiff and awkward. "There's still a lot I don't know," she mumbled, embarrassed. "I didn't think about anything when those things happened. It just - burst out of me."

"So I understand. Well, we will just have to feel strange about it, no? I'm sure that will disappear once we start working." And so, Maerad found, it did.

They worked in a room which was clearly set aside for teaching: there was little furniture, apart from a big table and bench by the wall where they could both sit, if need be. A large part of what Maerad learned over the ensuing weeks was theoretical study of what the Bards called the Knowing, which was roughly divided into the Three Arts, Reading, Making and Tending, each of which was intricately related to the others. She was also taught various traditions about the Speech, some of which contradicted each other. "There is no single truth," Nerili explained. "But all these truths, woven together, might give us a picture of what is true. That is why it's important to know all the different stories. We can never see all the sky at once."

Maerad was introduced to the complex system of Bardic ethics. It had evolved over many centuries, and was centred on the idea of the Balance. The more she learnt about these things, the more Maerad wondered that Bards did magic at all: it seemed that drawing on her powers was fraught with responsibilities and implications, and that in most cases Bards practised their powers in order *not* to use them. Often in those days she thought uneasily of the times when her powers had

exploded out of her, uncontrollable and terrifying, and of the wild exhilaration she had felt when she finally come into the Speech. Serious magery, she learned, was something practised seldom and only at need. The Balance was a delicate thing, and the smallest action could have unexpected and unintended consequences. Bards who had turned to the Dark, the Hulls, were those who desired power above all else, and eschewed the responsibilities of the Balance.

"The difficulty is, of course," said Nerili thoughtfully during their first session, "that because they have not the same inhibitions on their powers, they can access forces and take actions that Bards will not. And this can make it difficult to fight them: they laugh at us, because they say our hands are tied and we are weak. Despite their mockery, we are well able to defend ourselves... but we remember that if we did not adhere to the Balance, even in our extremity, we would become like them. And that would be the greater defeat."

Maerad wondered at this, but for the moment did not argue. She thought of the brutality of her childhood in Gilman's Cot and of the malice of the Dark. She remembered the times when she had had to kill, in order to save her own life. She had always felt, with a deep discomfort, that the killing wounded her somehow, even though it had been necessary, even if it could be totally justified. Yet, she thought, there might be times when the Light couldn't afford such niceties.

Nerili looked at her steadily and then added, as if she caught the tenor of her thoughts: "There's a great force in the renunciation of power, which those who are blinded by the lust for domination cannot understand, because those who love truly do not desire power. Among Bards, it is often known as the Way of the Heart. The Dark understands nothing of this: it is its greatest weakness." Maerad started - this chimed a little too uncomfortably with

her thoughts of the earlier night - but Nerili was staring out of the window, as if Maerad was not there.

"Love is not easy," said Nerili. "We begin by loving the things we can, according to our stature. But it is not long before we find that what we love is other than ourselves, and that our love is no protection against being wounded. Do we then seek to dominate what we love, to make it bend to our will, to stop it hurting us, even though to do so is to betray love? And that is only where the difficulty begins."

She turned to Maerad, smiling a little sadly, but Maerad didn't respond: she felt too surprised. For a moment she was sure that Nerili was speaking of her own feelings for Cadvan, and was aware, too, of the tangle of Maerad's emotions and sought, obscurely, to comfort her. She shook her head: she was probably imagining things again. To her relief, Nerili dropped the subject, and moved onto the practical aspects of High Magery.

In these lessons, Maerad began to learn properly how to use her Bardic powers: how to control and shape the Speech, and how to make enchantments and spells. Nerili started with glimmerspells, the least part, she explained, of Bardic magic: a magic of illusion, not of substance. "You can already do glimmerspells, simply by willing them," Nerili said. "You know that?"

"Yes," said Maerad. It was easy to make herself unseen, or to change her appearance.

"There's more to them, nevertheless, than those instinctive powers. Glimmerspells can be quite useful. Not against Bards, of course, as you know: Bard eyes can always see through them. But if we do this" - and Nerili made a strange pass with her hands - "we can persuade Bard eyes to collude with us. Though it won't work against a Bard's will. And

then we can share our imaginations."

Suddenly, in the middle of the room, there appeared a silver sapling. As Maerad watched, enchanted, it grew to the height of the roof in the space of a minute, putting out branches and broad silver leaves. When it was fully grown, there burst out all over it little golden buds, which opened wide to luminous flowers that seemed to be made of pure light. The petals withered and vanished, releasing a delicate fragrance, and where the flowers had been there swelled marvellous fruits: golden apples so bright they threw shadows over the walls. There was a music in the room, the same clear inhuman voices Maerad had heard during her instatement, which seemed to her like the sound of stars singing. She gasped in pure delight.

"The Tree of Light, as I see it each year at Midsummer," said Nerili, looking at it with her head cocked to one side. "It is beautiful, yes? Each Bard sees it in her own way. This is how it appears to me. If ever you do the Rite of Renewing, you will see a different one. But just as beautiful." She clapped her hands, and the tree vanished. "Now you try."

Maerad's mind went blank. "What?" she asked.

Nerili shrugged. "Show me something," she said. "Something you remember. Did you catch the passes?" She showed Maerad the hand gestures again, and Maerad copied them slowly, fixing them in her memory. Into her mind leapt an image of the Wight she had destroyed at the Broken Teeth, just before she had reached Norloch. She bent her imagination to visualising it, and Nerili gasped.

"Not that!" she said quickly. "Not a creature of the Dark. No, show me something else."

My memories are full of horror, Maerad thought to

herself. I can't help it. Obediently she pushed the Wight out of her mind, and cast about for another image. Gradually, shimmering a little, the figure of a woman appeared in the room, facing away from them. She was dressed in white robes and her long dark hair fell unbound down her back. Slowly she turned to look at the two Bards. Her face was full of sadness.

"Your mother, Milana of Pellinor," said Nerili softly. "I never met her. She looks very much like you. Thank you, Maerad." The figure faded away, and there was a short silence. Maerad looked down at the floor. She didn't know why she had shown Nerili her mother, and she wished she hadn't, because she now felt like weeping. Nerili took her hand, and Maerad jumped. If she had said anything to her, Maerad might have started howling, but she didn't: they just sat wordlessly for a while, until Maerad had collected herself.

"Magery, even the slightest, calls on the deepest parts of ourselves," Nerili said at last, releasing her hand. "And often that is painful. It is the pain of being in the world, where so much that is fair passes into death and forgetfulness. But if we are to know joy, we must embrace that pain. You cannot have one without the other."

Maerad nodded, her face downcast. Sometimes, it seemed to her, the pain far outweighed the joy.

An emissary arrived from Norloch very quickly, five days after Maerad and Cadvan. They made council with Busk's First Circle and left early the next day for Gent. After they had gone, Nerili called another council of the First and Second Circles, all the senior Bards of the School of Busk, and this time Maerad and Cadvan were summoned.

When they arrived in the Council Room, Maerad was surprised to see half a dozen people who were clearly not Bards. They were the Steward of Busk, a tall, burly man called Arnamil, and the members of his Chamber, three women and two men; one of whom, Maerad saw, was Owan d'Aroki. In tandem with the six Bards of the First Circle of the School, the Chamber governed the Isle of Thorold. With the sixteen Bards, it made a sizeable gathering around the large round table which dominated the room. When everyone was seated, Nerili stood and began without preamble.

"Welcome, Chamber and Bards. Thank you for coming. I realise this meeting is out of our usual schedule, but these are unusual times." She paused, and looked slowly around the table, meeting the eyes of each person present. "Bards of the First Circle, you know why I have called you here. You were present yesterday, when Igan of Norloch issued the edict of Norloch to the School of Thorold. What he told me deeply concerns all of Thorold, and this is why I asked you, Lord Steward, and your Chamber, to be present."

She drew a deep breath, as if she was nervous; but Maerad realised quickly that Nerili was, with difficulty, restraining fury.

"Igan of Norloch informed me yesterday that there have been certain changes within the School of Norloch, and within Annar." Here Maerad sat up more straightly. "There has been revealed, he said, a plot within the First Circle itself, a faction of rebels who are in league with the Dark. The rebellion has been put down, and its leaders imprisoned. The imprisoned traitors are Nelac of Lirigon, Tared of Desor and Caragal of Norloch."

There was an audible gasp of dismay around the table, and Maerad met Cadvan's eyes. He looked saddened, not shocked; she suspected he knew this already. Nerili continued. "Norloch is under the

military rule of the White Guard, commanded by the First Bard, Enkir of Norloch, to combat the emergency caused by the rebels. He has invoked the triple sceptre, the emblem of the lost Kings of Annar, and claims the authority of High King over all the Seven Kingdoms."

Again there was a collective gasp of shock. Arnamil leapt out of his chair, his mouth open ready to say something, but Nerili held up her hand to indicate she wasn't finished, and he slowly sat down.

"Moreover, he spoke of news that the kingdom of Dén Raven is moving in the south. He said that Norloch expects that Turbansk will be attacked within the next three months by the Sorcerer Imank." Maerad thought of the army she had seen in her foredream. She bit her lip and looked down at her hands, trying to focus her thoughts; even if Turbansk was attacked, it didn't mean that Hem would be hurt. But it was hard to think of her brother in the midst of war; he was so young. Nerili kept speaking.

"In this climate of danger, Igan tells me, the First Bard of Norloch and the King of Annar, Enkir of Norloch, seeks the loyalty of all Schools and all Kingdoms. We are to give our undivided fealty, without question, to the triple sceptre, or we are to be regarded as rebels. And he gave me to understand, in not so many words, that to be rebels, and thus to earn the enmity of Norloch, would be to risk the full wrath of Norloch's might and power."

The final statement nearly caused a riot. Almost everyone in the room stood up and started shouting. Nerili again held up her hand for silence, and her voice rang out over the room.

"My friends," she said. "My dear fellow Thoroldians. I know as well as you that never, even in the times of the Kings of Annar, were we or any

of the Seven Kingdoms under the authority of Annar. And you can be sure that I said this to Igan, embassy of Enkir of Norloch. And he said to me, 'Nerili of Busk, times change. We have entered dangerous times, and we must change our free ways if we are to survive them. Thoroldians must obey the new laws, or be the victims of them.' Such is the edict of Enkir of Norloch." Nerili bowed her head. "I am ashamed to be the bearer of this news. It casts a shadow over all Bards."

There was an wrathful murmur around the table, and Arnamil stood up again, his eyes flashing. "What did you say to this insult, Lady of Busk?" he asked. "Did you throw him out of the School, with his tail between his cowardly legs, as he deserved?"

"I did not." Nerili looked him steadily in the eye. "Arnamil, to do so would be tantamount to severing all connection with Norloch, and risking open war. Such a thing has not happened since the Kings ruled in Annar, and such I am not prepared to venture, on my own authority." She again looked around the table, which now sat in tense silence.

"I received him politely. I listened politely. I told him that I was aware that we live in dangerous times, and that we must take heed in such times of such that threatens us. I said I would consult with the Bards and Chamber, and then would let Norloch know of our response." She paused. "He gave us a week. And he said again that if our fealty was withheld, we would suffer grave consequences."

"I say, then," said Arnamil, thumping the table with his huge fist, "that in a week we send back his damned edict, torn into little pieces." Most of the table cheered. "We don't need Norloch." He sat down truculently.

Now Elenxi stood. "I suggest, for the meantime, another way," he said. "Because if we can avoid war

with Norloch, I think we should. Let them force the issue. If Norloch seeks to betray the covenant between Annar and the Seven Kingdoms in this way, then let Norloch break it. Not us."

"What do you suggest, then?" Owan, who had hitherto sat silently throughout the noisy meeting, twisted around to look up at the old warrior.

"I suggest we offer Norloch our fealty." There was an angry rumble. "We offer them our fealty, I say, under our unwavering allegiance to the Light. That covenant guarantees our freedom and our independence. If Norloch doesn't like it, Norloch has to say on what terms our fealty is unsatisfactory. This will take a little time, since we have broken no promises. Meanwhile, we send emissaries to other Schools in the Seven Kingdoms, and seek to know their own answers to this outrage. I think their minds will be like to ours. Will Annar seriously declare war on all of the Seven Kingdoms? And in the meantime we look to our fortifications." He glared around the table from under his bushy eyebrows, and sat down.

After a short silence, Arnamil started chuckling. "They always said you were a fox, Elenxi. I like it."

"This is the course I advise, and the full First Circle," said Nerili, standing again. "Are we all agreed?" Everyone in the room, even Cadvan and Maerad, who were not really supposed to vote, put up their hands. Nerili nodded. "Good then. We will pursue this policy until we find out whether Norloch's words have real steel, or are only empty threats. Norloch would be a dire enemy, doubt it not; but it would be no small thing to invade Thorold. We will all keep in close consultation. Elenxi and Arnamil can confer on the strength of our defences, and improve them, if need be."

"They'd have to kill every man, woman and child before they beat us," growled one of the Chamber.

"And even then..."

"Now, there is one more thing. I need to introduce to you Cadvan of Lirigon and Maerad of Pellinor." Cadvan stood up, and Maerad, taken by surprise, scrambled up after him. "Most of you know Cadvan well. He has spent much time here. Maerad only some of you know; she has been Cadvan's student, and is now a full Bard. They are, Igan told me, dangerous members of this rebellion in Norloch, and they are outlawed. They are now sought over all Annar."

The council turned to look at them with lively curiosity.

"I want you all to know that I cannot and do not believe that either of these Bards have any truck with the Dark. Igan tells me that anyone who hands these criminals to Norloch will earn great favour with the citadel, but those who harbour them from justice will feel the full force of its displeasure. He is unaware as yet, of course, that they are here in Thorold. I warned my people to keep silent when the embassy came, and I know also that they were asked after, both within the town and the School. To my knowledge, they found out nothing; but we cannot be sure of that. They may already know that these Bards have sought refuge here.

"I ask you now whether we, as Thoroldians, will hand them over to Norloch, as is ordered? Or do we suffer this risk - to grant haven to Cadvan of Lirigon and Maerad of Pellinor, and risk its punishment?"

The table erupted again. The mood against Norloch was so ugly that Nerili had no need of persuasive argument: to be declared rebels by Enkir was itself enough to ensure their protection.

"I need not tell you, then," said Nerili, "that their presence must be kept secret within the School, and

must not be made known within the town of Busk, aside from those here, who already know. We do not know what spies are abroad, and the arm of Norloch is long. A loose word could forfeit their lives, and it would also cause Norloch to declare us rebels." She stared around the table, to underline her seriousness. "Well, that is the end of our business."

She lifted up her arms, as if in blessing, and said with a sudden wild joy which sent goosebumps down Maerad's spine: "My friends - you make me so glad! I expected no less from you. No tyrant will crush the heart of Thorold!"

The council ended in cheers.