

The Song Thief



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by

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Chapter One

Smoke drifted from the chimneys of the Blue Highwayman Inn like an offering to the gods. Inside, under its smoke-blackened beams, weary farmers and travelers sat around its hearths drinking ale, sharing jokes, and talking over the day's events. Everyone was content.

Everyone except Fiona the harper.

"Faces o'the Fian, Birney," she said, hands on hips. "Why y'showin' me the door?"

Birney, a tall, portly man without a hair to be seen on his body, collected mugs from tables as he spoke. "I told ye, Fiona, we've had a bad string o' bards coming through lately. After the last fella, I'll not be wasting more skeatt. Times are hard these days."

"I'm not one o' those hacks, and you know it," Fiona snapped. "I'm a keeper and a seeker of songs, just like my father and mother were. I know 'em all!"

"That's what the last fella said."

"Birney, come on," Fiona said, and grabbed his meaty

forearm.

The innkeeper lowered his gaze to Fiona's hand. He had once served in Skara Brae's city guard, and as old as he was, he was still as intimidating as an ogre.

Fiona snatched her hand away but continued her plea. "Remember last winter when that storm hit? Roads closed for three days and everyone stuck here with nothin' to do. Who kept 'em all entertained 'til the skies cleared? Who kept 'em from breakin' the furnishings?"

Birney sighed and wiped his hands on his apron. "You did, Fiona. But that doesn't change the fact that every bard I've hosted over these last weeks has crapped all over themselves. We always close the night with 'The Feathered Cap,' and the last three bards didn't know it. As soon as they were called t'sing it, all they could do was stutter. Ye don't play unless ye know that song."

"Know it? I was singin' it before I was born!" Fiona favored the innkeeper with her most winning smile. "Trust me, Birn. Have I ever failed ye before?"

"Shite," Fiona mumbled.

Angry eyes glared at her from all around the inn. She stood on the raised stone curb surrounding the inn's largest hearth. It was closing time and the normally bustling common room had quieted, and an impatient air of expectation was mingling with the pipe smoke and scent of sour ale.

Fiona gulped. "Er, before we do 'The Feathered Cap,' there's another tune I've been itchin' t'sing. It's about a girl searchin' for her lost love in the dark wood o' the—"

An impatient cough sounded from the back of the room. From somewhere else somebody shouted, "Just sing 'The Feathered Cap,' bard! Bed's waitin'."

A general rumble of agreement filled the room.

"Aye, o' course," Fiona said, her pale cheeks heating.

There was only one problem. She couldn't remember the song—words or tune—and that should have been impossible.

As a traveling bard, and the daughter of bards, she knew thousands of songs, learned first at the feet of her parents as they traveled up and down the length of Caith, then drilled into her by her uncle Taveon—who'd raised her after her parents died—and who'd been determined she would be the finest bard of her generation. With such an apprenticeship, forgetting the words to a song was like forgetting how to breathe. It just didn't happen.

She'd come to the Blue Highwayman chasing a rumor that folk around here knew a verse of the legendary lost song, "The Lay of Svante." The lead turned out to have been false. It was the same verse everyone knew. Having not found what she'd come for, Fiona had figured she'd at least try to earn her supper, and when Birney finally relented and allowed her to play, Fiona had not disappointed. She'd sung and led sing-alongs, brought tears to sentimental eyes with Baedish ballads, made folk laugh with comic songs, and got the whole room dancing with reels and jigs, but now, when it mattered most, when the patrons wanted their favorite going-home song, she'd come up completely blank.

She plucked the strings of her harp again, trying to reset her focus and everyone's attention, but the song still wouldn't come.

"Are we goin' t'get 'The Feathered Cap' or not?" called someone.

"Aye, o' course. Just give me a moment to—"

"Get strummin', girl."

Fiona clenched her jaw. It was in D. That much she knew. Or was it? Maybe E?

Panic raced through her gut. She strummed an E, desperately hoping that muscle memory would lead her into the opening notes, but it was no use.

"Go back t'hoeing radishes, girl," called a woman.

Across the common room Birney the innkeeper

crossed his meaty arms.

Fiona tasted dirt as she landed on her face outside the front door of the Blue Highwayman. Her travel sack followed close behind, landing in the dirt by her cheek.

“Knew I shouldn’t’a trusted ye,” Birney grumbled, as he tossed her harp at her. She barely managed to catch it before it broke on the ground.

“Careful!” she shouted. “That’s an antique!”

“Lotta good it did ye in there,” the innkeeper said. “Now don’t come back ’til ye can sing the song we want.” He wiped his hands on his apron and started back inside, muttering, “Never trusting a bard again.”

Fiona stood and dusted herself off, then gingerly touched the side of her face. “Well, that’s a new thing.”

Checking the instrument to make sure it was all right, Fiona wondered what to do next. She’d been looking forward to a real bed and a hot breakfast, but that wasn’t going to happen now.

She looked up and down the dirt road, pondering. The Blue Highwayman sat halfway between Carradal and Skara Brae, and she felt Carradal calling to her. Good money up there, and friendlier barkeeps, but it was a long journey, and she didn’t fancy starting it now. She turned back to the inn, eying Birney’s barn, which was tucked behind it. A much better idea. A pleasant kip in the hayloft and a fresh start in the morning. Just the thing.

With a quick glance toward the inn’s door, Fiona snuck to the barn and slipped through the half-open doors. Darkness filled the barn’s interior save for a stream of dust-filled moonlight shining through a hole in the roof.

“Anybody here?” called Fiona.

A rat or a mouse scampered into a nearby hay bale, but beyond that and the soft breathing of horses, only silence

answered her.

“Ah, good.”

She slung her harp onto her back and climbed the rickety ladder to the loft. Stacks of bundled hay stood higher than her head. Not exactly the bridal suite, but she found a reasonably comfortable spot between the bales and settled in. Or at least tried to.

She still couldn’t believe she’d forgotten that song. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before. A momentary fluke, of course, but still.

Closing her eyes, Fiona took a deep breath, hummed a D note—she was sure it was D—and waited for the song to come.

It didn’t. Nothing came.

“What is wrong with me?”

It was the strangest sensation. She remembered singing the song countless times, could see herself doing so in scores of different inns, but no matter how hard she strove to recall the words and the melody, they continued to elude her. Maybe it would help if she concentrated on what the song was about. It was worth a try.

She closed her eyes and conjured the image of a feathered cap and . . . and . . . what? Was somebody wearing it? Stealing it? Giving it as a gift? Remembering it was like trying to grasp smoke.

“Shite!” she yelled, and kicked a hay bale.

“Oof!”

The sound came from the hay bale. Fiona yelped and scrambled to her feet, fumbling for her dagger and backing away.

“Who’s there?” she said, her voice quavering only slightly.

Silence answered her.

She took a nervous breath. Whatever had stirred in the hay had been too large, too human sounding, to be an animal.

“I’m going to start stabbing if ye don’t come out!” she said.

The hay trembled. “D-don’t stab. Please.”

“Then get out here where I can see ye,” Fiona said.

A figure sat up from behind the hay bale, shivering with fear. He had mottled gray skin, sunken eyes, and long, pointed ears that lay flat like a cowering dog’s. A tuft of coarse brown hair grew along the crest of his head.

A trow.

“Please don’t kill me,” he whimpered as he stood.

“Who are ye? And what are ye doing in my hay loft?” Fiona demanded.

It was only after she spoke that she realized how ridiculous she sounded. She was the one who’d crashed his loft, wasn’t she?

“I-I’m Soriac, at your service.” He bowed awkwardly, and it was only then that she noticed he clutched a large book, bound in aged red leather. “And I’m sorry t’ bother ye.”

Fiona relaxed but kept the dagger drawn, just in case.

“I suppose I’m the one who should be sorry,” she said. “Kickin’ yer bunk like that.”

She studied the trow, remembering the countless stories she’d heard and told of his kind throughout her life—fairy tales about their kindness and their trickery, their mischievous humor and their hatred of meanness. Baedish folk used to believe that having a trow living on your property was good luck, and that if you left out milk and oatcakes they’d wash your pots for you and spin your yarn. These days the Fatherites taught that they were evil—akin to demons—and would sicken your children if you let them near you. The paladins were to be alerted if one was seen, and prayers said for the cleansing of the house.

Thus, few trow ventured into Baedish lands these days, and when they did they hid in garbage dumps and middens.

“What’s the likes of you doing so close to Skara Brae?” she asked. “D’ye work for Birney?”

“No, I, uh, I’m just passing through,” Soriac said, keeping his head bowed low still. “Whom do I have pleasure

of addressing?”

“Oh, right.” She returned his bow. “I’m Fiona the harper. Singer of songs and teller of tales.”

Soriac’s eyes widened. “You’re a bard? Do ye sing magic?”

Fiona sighed. “A little, but . . .”

She knew a few songs that were said to have magical effects, giving encouragement to the frightened, sharpening the eye, but those songs weren’t as interesting to her as the songs of the folk, and she had always focused more on preserving the music and oral histories of the Baedish people.

Soriac beamed and raised his eyes to hers for the first time. “I know a little magic too. I . . . I’m a wizard!”

Fiona blinked. That was a surprise. She knew trow had some small magics of their own, but she’d never heard of one calling himself a wizard.

“Are ye now?” she said, cocking an eyebrow. She nodded toward the book he clutched in his arms. “And I suppose that’s yer spell tome? Who’d y’steal it from?”

Soriac’s grayish cheeks reddened slightly. “Nobody!” he insisted.

“Sure,” Fiona said, rolling her eyes. “Look, I’m tired. I need t’get on the road before dawn.”

An eagerness lit Soriac’s eyes. “Just wait,” he said. “I’ll show ye!”

“Sure y’ll,” Fiona said, and settled back into the hay.

Soriac opened his book, keeping it close as if to keep its contents hidden from Fiona, mumbling to himself as he flipped the pages back and forth.

“Still waitin’,” she said, stifling a yawn.

Soriac lifted a bony, long-nailed hand toward the ceiling and began chanting. His voice was cracked and scraggly, so it sounded more like an out-of-tune cat yowling at night, but despite the hideous sound, the hair on Fiona’s arms stood on end. Unless her imagination was running wild, the air in the loft had warmed.

“What are y’doin’?” she asked.

“Shhh!” Soriac snapped. “Summoning a demon lord!”

“A what?” Fiona gaped. “Can’t ye just show me a mage flame? Actually, never mind, I don’t need to see proof. I believe ye. You’re a—”

Soriac chanted louder, more quickly, and now Fiona definitely sensed heat all around them.

“Stop!” she shouted.

Soriac’s eyes widened. “I-I can’t! I—”

The hay around them burst into flames.

Chapter Two

Fiona leaped from the hay loft, harp in one hand, dagger in the other, and landed in a crouch on a stack of hay bales, then slid to the barn floor as, above her, the fire spread quickly.

She looked up. Below thick smoke, Soriac's eyes peered over the edge of the loft. He was clutching his book tightly to his chest.

"What're ye waitin' for?" Fiona called. "Jump!"

Soriac shook his head.

"Hurry up or ye'll be a baked ham," she said, then looked to the open barn door. It was really time to go.

"Last chance, trow," she called again. "I'm not—"

A high-pitched squeal echoed through the barn as Soriac leapt at last, knobby legs flailing. He clung to the book as if hoping it would sprout wings. He wasn't going to land anywhere near the hay that had broken Fiona's fall.

She dropped her harp and dagger and rushed to catch him. He slammed into her and they both tumbled to the

ground. Soriac squealed and scrambled as wildly as a badger caught in a snare, and caught her in the teeth with a foot. Fiona shoved him away.

“Yer welcome,” she snapped.

Frightened by the smoke and fire, the horses that had been stabled for the night whinnied and stomped in their stalls. One reared, kicking its door.

Soriac stared at the flames as they raced up the wall and began eating the roof. They reflected in his eyes.

“Guess I need to work on that third hand gesture,” he whimpered.

“What you need,” growled Fiona, “is t’never do that again. Now, good luck to ye, and goodbye.”

She ran to the barn door and pushed it wide. Cool air and a multitude of stars greeted her, inviting her to run into the night. The screams of the horses stopped her.

Fiona gritted her teeth. She couldn’t leave the horses. She whirled around and ran back into the barn.

She ran back to the nearest stall and unlatched the door. “Go on, get!” she shouted, and smacked the rump of the horse within. The horse galloped out of the barn, snorting and shaking its head in panic.

Fiona looked up as she ran from stall to stall. Fueled by the inrush of night air, the loft was burning like a bonfire, and for a moment, the stacks of hay bales did indeed resemble a towering figure looming within it.

Soon all the horses were free and she turned to the door again. She thought she saw Soriac scamper out ahead of a charging horse, but then a falling beam forced her to back up, and she had more important things to worry about. She looked around for another way out. A narrow door stood open at the back of the barn. She ran for it and dove out just as the beams of the hayloft gave way with a thunderous crack.

She picked herself up and looked back as she dusted dirt and glowing embers from her sleeves and shoulders.

“That was a near miss—”

“Who’s that?” bellowed a deep voice from the direction of the inn. “Stay where you are!”

Fiona whirled to see Birney pointing a thick finger at her as he stepped into the yard. A crowd of patrons spread out behind him, their faces painted orange and red by the light from the burning barn.

“Where’s my horse?” shouted one.

The inn’s cook demonstrated some sense by shoving a handful of mostly sober men toward the inn’s well. “Don’t just stand there! Get a bucket line!”

Birney’s attention remained fixed on Fiona. “You!” he shouted. “What in Malefia’s name did ye do!”

Fiona did what any right-thinking bard would have done in such a situation. She ran.

Judging by the shouts behind her, more than a few of the patrons had decided to run after her.

Fiona sprinted across the open field adjoining the inn as fast as her legs would take her, but before she was half-way across, she was winded and nearly doubled over from a stitch in her side. The bards of legend might have been grand heroes who ran all day and all night before battling evil arch-mages and demon hordes, but that sort of thing didn’t happen to Fiona. Her life was far more often filled with comfortable hearth fires, late breakfasts, and good company.

A line of oak and fir trees loomed ahead. She ignored her aching side and ran faster, hoping her pursuers were too drunk to catch her.

She reached the trees and kept running until she was deep enough in that she was confident she couldn’t be seen, then ducked behind a thick oak to catch her breath.

She counted five slow breaths, then listened for her pursuers. Muffled voices indicated the mob was just entering the woods. Risking a glance, Fiona peered around the tree trunk. Her pursuers were about a hundred strides away and lighting torches.

“Troublesome trow,” she grumbled to herself. She didn’t wish him ill, but it was still his fault she was in this

mess.

“Yes, lady bard?” hissed a nearby voice.

Fiona nearly jumped out of her skin. Soriac was hiding behind another tree, his eyes like full moons of fear, still clutching his damned book to his chest. Seeing him, she wondered if she’d been too kind in her previous thoughts.

“Leave me alone!” she hissed.

“Those people,” Soriac whimpered, tiptoeing toward her. “How do we get away from them?”

“*We*?” Fiona snapped. “There’s no *we* in this discussion. You brought this trouble!”

A cry from her pursuers made Fiona realize she’d been shouting. The torches rushed in their direction.

“You see what you’ve made me do!”

She ran again, hoping to lose the mob, and Soriac too.

Fiona heard rushing water to the east and ran toward it. Sure enough, a creek flowed through the trees, carving a surprisingly steep bank through the forest floor. Fiona skidded down the near side and hid behind a boulder. Moments later, Soriac arrived at the creek too, about twenty strides upstream. The look he gave the water, and the way he clutched his book, told Fiona he was afraid to cross.

Shouts and flickering light told her the torch-wielding mob had reached the river. Fiona crouched lower and watched as Soriac dropped flat. She wondered if they’d seen him back at the barn and whether they connected him to the barn burning.

“There’s the trow!” came a shout. “Where’s the other one?”

“Well, there’s my answer,” Fiona mumbled to herself.

Soriac yelped and started to run along the river bank, away from Fiona, and she heard the crowd surge after him. Now was her opportunity to escape.

But she found she couldn’t leave.

“Web of the Spinster,” she cursed. “This trow’ll be the death o’ me.”

She tucked herself under the overhang of the bank and

pulled her harp off her back. She strummed it once, then quickly adjusted the tuning pegs, her need for it to sound right warring with the urgency of the situation. Finally she began to sing, and somewhere in the back of her mind she found herself glad she could remember the words.

Most Baedish songs were simple folk songs or legends told in verse. But a rare handful carried something more within them. Woven into their lyrics and melody were threads of magic that could shift reality like a magician's spell. Nobody remembered how to create such songs anymore, but they could be taught, and Fiona knew a small handful.

She sang the old ballad "Sorceress Kreli" and let the music and magic drift upstream toward the mob.

Cold came the wind
O'er Kreli's cairn
No warmth for she
Who lied and sinned

Across lone hill
An' through the night
The wind calls she
Who lies unstill

She knew she'd done it right when a ghost-wind stirred around her, pebbling the skin of her arms, then rattled the leaves before wafting across the men and women bearing down upon Soriac.

O cry for thee
O cursed witch
Who love hath doomed
To always be

The magic in the song shifted Fiona's voice, so by the time it reached the mob it had taken on a harrowing banshee tone, and they started looking over their shoulders with ner-

vous eyes, searching for the source.

Peeking over the bank of the stream, Fiona continued to sing and pluck her harp, telling the grisly tale of Kreli and her vengeful heart.

Now the whole mob stopped and looked in all directions. One man nearly lit his companion on fire with his torch as he turned this way and that.

“What’s that?” a heavy, gray-bearded man asked.

“‘Tis ol’ Kreli’s ghastly shade!” said another.

The fear magic was working. Fiona sang on, letting the frightening terror overwhelm everyone who heard it. Now it was time for the big finish.

She emerged from behind the boulder, standing back-straight, letting herself be seen. She sang louder now, drawing more attention.

The mob stared at her, Soriac forgotten. But Fiona knew they didn’t see her. The illusion they saw was of a terrible banshee that had crawled from the river, hair writhing in time to her screams. Perhaps they saw even more than that. Illusions were powerful magic when the mind believed.

A few men and women screamed and ran into the woods, followed closely by several more. The others held their ground for a few seconds, but as Fiona walked closer and sang louder, they too turned and fled, the light from their torches quickly vanishing in the depths of the nearby trees.

Fiona let her last note trail off, feeling relieved. At least she’d been able to perform one thing properly tonight!

She turned to Soriac and found the trow huddled in the dirt, eyes shut, clutching his book and shaking with fear.

“Hey,” Fiona said. “It’s over. It’s me.”

Soriac cracked an eye open, peered at her and then began looking around. “Wh-Where’s the banshee?”

Fiona chuckled. “Y’know, for a powerful mage, yer a bit crap at recognizin’ magic.”

“That was you?” Soriac found his feet and looked in the direction the mob had fled. “Y’chased them away? Y’came back for me?”

“Don’t get all weepy on me,” Fiona said. “Let’s go before they realize it was an illusion.”

“*Let’s* go?” The trow’s eyes widened. “You mean together?”

Fiona sighed. “Just come on.”

Chapter Three

The next morning, Fiona shuddered awake from a nightmare but kept her eyes closed so she could pretend, at least for a moment, that she was waking up nestled in the clean sheets of a big four-poster in the best room of a comfortable inn. Sadly, she was too cold for the pretense to last long.

When she finally opened her eyes, they confirmed what her freezing body had already told her. She was sleeping rough again, at the bottom of a chilly hollow somewhere west of Skara Brae, curled near the meager burnt-out campfire she'd made the night before.

Soriac had expressed fear that the “angry people” might see the firelight and find the camp, but Fiona, too cold for caution, had cut off his grumbling by telling him to gather firewood or she would use his book as kindling.

She sat up and looked around. The trow was nowhere to be found. Maybe, if she was lucky, he'd wandered off for good.

As she sat there, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she remembered her nightmare. She'd been standing in front of a crowd of angry punters in an inn, unable to remember a song she had sung a thousand times before. Then her heart sank. It might have been a nightmare, but it was true too. She pulled her harp from her pack, plucked a chord, and opened her mouth to sing "The Feathered Cap."

As before, it wouldn't come. She tried a different song, "Ayedan's Kinfest," and a pang of fear grabbed her as she realized she couldn't recall that one either.

"Winter's famine," she cursed, "That's two songs now!"

Desperate, she tried a song she'd learned long ago from a brewer friend in Thuath—"The Lists of Averlyn," a song he'd said his granddad had taught him. She remembered the lesson as if it was yesterday. Fargist had stayed up late into the night with her, teaching her the chords and words.

To her relief, she remembered them.

The King of Averlyn
Bade all his kith and kin
To joust for knightly fame
And revel in his name

He sent for Len the Blue
Of mighty mane and thews
And called for Fen the Green
Of sword like razor keen

He summoned Sen the Red
Who did more than he said
And asked for Ven the Gold
So daring and so bold

She sang the chorus, then the third and fourth verses, then looped to the beginning and started it all over again. She wanted to hold onto the song forever.

He sent for Len the Blue
Of mighty mane and thews
And called for Fen the Green
Of . . .

Her mind slipped. What was Fen the Green's claim to fame again? It had to rhyme with green, didn't it? She started the verse again.

He sent for Len the Blue
Of mighty . . .

The lyrics faded from her mind like a puddle evaporating on a summer morning.

What was happening? She'd just sung it a second ago! She decided to try the song again from the beginning. But as she put her fingers to the strings of the harp she found she couldn't remember the melody, or even the starting chord. In less time than it took to finish a quick meal, an entire song had vanished from her head as if it had never been.

"Why'd y'stop?" Soriac asked her.

Fiona jumped and looked over her shoulder. The trow sat on a rock nearby with his book resting on his lap. By the looks of him, he'd been listening to her for a while. She glared at him, embarrassed that he had seen her floundering. She didn't want to share her troubles with some addle-pated trow, but they were boiling up in her, and there was nobody else around to listen.

"I . . . can't remember the words," she said at last. "I don't think I'm going crazy, but songs are slipping from my mind like oilfish."

"Maybe write 'em down?" Soriac suggested.

Fiona fixed him with a flat stare. "I'm a bard. I don't write songs down. The ones I know are as much a part of me as my blood. At least," she added with a mutter, "they were."

"Wish I had a memory like that," Soriac said. "This

book is heavy.”

“You and yer damn spellbook,” Fiona said. “Where’d ye dig that thing up anyway?”

Soriac raised his chin. “It—it’s my book.”

Fiona shrugged. “Sure. And I’m Gillan the harper.”

“Maybe I don’t have a long beard and a tall hat like an archmage, but I’m a wizard!”

“If yer not wizard enough t’find me a spell t’get my memory back, then what good are ye?”

Soriac glared at the ground. “The other bard wrote his songs down. Don’t know why you can’t.”

A lump of unease began to form in Fiona’s stomach. “What other bard?”

Soriac shrugged. “Came t’the Blue Highwayman a few days before you. Old man in a fancy purple cloak. Asked folk for songs o’ the lowlands and wrote ’em down in a little book as they sang ’em.”

“Which songs?” Fiona asked.

“Don’t know,” the trow replied. “But he was the smartest bard t’visit. After him, the rest that came couldn’t remember half their songs, just like you.”

The lump of unease grew. Birney had mentioned other bards who’d disappointed his patrons.

“So y’say that, after this man came by the inn, folk began forgetting songs?”

Soriac nodded.

“Did y’hear his name? Did he say where he was goin’?”

Soriac shook his head. “Not safe for a trow in a place like that. I was watchin’ from a window. Saw him leave later t’ the south.”

Fiona chewed her lip. “Hmmm. What else do y’ remember about this bard?”

“He . . . he scared me,” Soriac said.

“Scared ye? How?”

Soriac shuddered. “There was . . . darkness around him. No one else seemed t’notice, but I did. It was like he

had a bunch of other people with him, and he was always in their shadow.”

Fiona frowned. Bards were always searching for songs, especially old songs. She herself has been on the trail of “The Lay of Svante,” the long-lost legendary song from the time of Mangar’s rise, for more than a decade. That’s what had brought her to the Blue Highwayman in the first place. So it was no surprise to learn that a bard had been asking around for songs. Yet bards rarely wrote songs down, and certainly not the common songs that the crowd at the Blue Highwayman would know.

That in itself, though, wasn’t so unusual that it would cause lumps of dread to fill her belly. But that, in addition to forgetting “The Feathered Cap” and “The Lists of Averlyn,” along with Birney’s tales of other bards forgetting songs too?

There was something happening, something bad, and she was suddenly afraid that if she didn’t figure out what it was, there would be more lost in the world than a few old songs.

Fiona looked at Soriac and sighed. As a child, she’d hoped to meet some fantastical forest creature and have an exciting adventure with it. Now it was happening, and it wasn’t anything like she’d hoped. She was cold, hungry, and frightened, and her fantastical companion was a sulky trow with delusions of grandeur who burned down barns.

“Get yer book an’ help me clean camp,” she said. “We’re going south t’ find this bard.”

Soriac looked up. “You know where he went?”

“No, but I know somebody who might.”

In the middle of a balmy afternoon two days later, Fiona and Soriac approached their destination, the old garrison town of Thuath.

The place had been wrecked and rebuilt multiple times as wars and uprisings had ravaged the land over the centuries. It had even occasionally changed names, but one thing had remained constant—the imposing wall that surrounded it.

Normally, Fiona would've just walked through the ancient gate as easily as a lullaby, but Soriac's presence was a problem. This far south, where the temple of the Swordfather held sway and the old ways and old races were frowned upon, being seen with a "devil" creature could bring unwanted attention from the local militia, maybe even a visit from the paladins. So Fiona found herself resorting to the age-old art of disguise. Soriac was swathed head to toe in crusty rags and walked with the aid of a makeshift crutch.

"We seek healing at the temple," Fiona told the guard at the gate, not bothering to mention that she meant the defunct temple of the Barley Maid, which had, since the advent of the Fatherites, gone from the holy brewery of the Ancient Order of Barley Brethren to just a plain brewery.

The man who'd stopped them might have been the tallest person Fiona had ever met, with thick blond hair that fell to his shoulders and a blond beard to match. Of Einarr stock, then.

He squinted down at Soriac as he shielded his eyes from the sun. "An' what's wrong with ye, ol' timer?"

"Granddad's got the tongue rot," Fiona said. "And it's catching, I think. I've got a spot on my tongue that seeps puss. Y've got t'let us pray at the temple."

The guard leaned on his spear and gave Soriac a suspicious look. "Been rumors of a pair of troublemakers north o'here who burned an inn t'the ground. Y' wouldn't know anything about that, would ye?"

Fiona didn't hesitate. "Oh aye, we saw 'em. Two ragged rascals, headin' toward Skara Brae. One tried to grab Granddad's pack, but I bit 'im. Almost feel bad for the fool. Probably got the plague now."

The guard wrinkled his nose in disgust. He motioned

them through the gate. "Go straight t'the temple. And don't cough on no one."

But as they started forward, another guard, a woman with a captain's broach holding her cloak closed, stepped out of a guard room in the gate tower and held up her hand.

"Hold," the captain said. "Y'tell a good story, lass. But yer granddad's a wee bit on the short side, don't y'think?"

"Er, he never got enough t'eat as a child. It stunted his growth."

"Another good story. I'd almost think you were a bard." She looked over at the tall guard. "Say, Conklin. Wasn't one o'those barn burners supposed to be a bard?"

The tall guard nodded and leveled his spear. "Aye, Captain. And the other was supposed to be a trow, now that I think of it."

The captain motioned to Soriac. "Remove yer hood, 'old man.'"

"That's a bad idea," Fiona said. "He's very sick. Downright disgusting t' look at."

"I'll bet," said the guard, and yanked Soriac's hood back, revealing his unmistakably trow features. Soriac cringed away.

The captain drew her sword. "I knew it! Conklin! Arrest them!"

"Curse it!" Fiona said, and kicked the big man's knee out as he reached for the trow. The guard crumpled to the ground.

Soriac jumped back, right into the arms of the captain, who tried to force him to the ground. In the struggle, the flap of Soriac's pack fell open and his spellbook slid to the ground, exposing its pages. The trow snarled and sank his teeth into the captain's thumb.

The captain screamed and snatched her hand away. "Bastard beast!"

She swung her sword.

The dagger flew out of Fiona's hand before she could think, twirling end over end through the air before its pom-

mel cracked the captain on her temple. She dropped like an empty robe, sprawled loose-limbed in the dirt.

Soriac stared at her with wide eyes.

“Don’t just stand there!” Fiona yelled. “Run!”

Soriac grabbed his book and sprinted into a nearby alley after Fiona as the tall guard regained his feet and hollered for reinforcements.

Fiona and Soriac burst from the far end of the alley and ran blindly through the streets, dodging people and goats and carts and puddles of muck. Rounding a corner, Soriac tripped and his book fell into the mud. He gasped and started to gather it up daintily.

Fiona grabbed it by the spine and shoved it at him, surprised at how heavy it was. “Next time y’ drop it, it stays dropped. Now let’s go.”

Fiona dragged the trow by the scruff of the neck into a run. This wasn’t how she’d been hoping to spend her morning.

“The brewery’s this way,” she said a few blocks later, and made a left turn. “Hurry.”

They found their destination on a cart track called Ratlin Street. Fiona immediately recognized it by its famous stained-glass windows, left over from its days as a temple. It was a two-story stone building with a slanted tile roof. The windows above the vestibule entrance depicted the story of the legendary Destiny Wand and how it had been sun-dered, reforged, and wielded to vanquish the archmage Lag-oth Zanta, who had, with the help of the Lestradae, almost conquered Caith. What this had to do with the Barley Maid and the holy brothers of her order, Fiona had no idea. Maybe they catered the celebration after all the fighting was over?

Fiona would’ve loved to study those windows as she’d done once before, but there were more urgent matters to at-tend to this time. She shoved Soriac through the door and then leaned her back against it, trying to catch her breath. The brewery smelled of barley, herbs, and sour beer—in oth-er words, happiness.

“Hello?” Fiona called.

Soriac whimpered and pulled his hood back up. “Are they coming?”

“Don’t worry,” Fiona said. “We lost ’em. I think.”

Shuffling footsteps sounded from an archway on the far side of the entryway, and a young woman peeked around the corner, then blinked at them. She swallowed, clearly nervous, and stepped into the colored light filtering through the stained-glass windows.

“Welcome t’ the Barley Brethren Brewery,” said the woman. She was dark-skinned and thin, and she toyed with a thick braid of long brown hair that hung over her shoulder. “I’m Merryvale. Can I help ye?”

“I’m here to see Fargist,” Fiona said. “Tell him it’s the red-peppered bard.”

The woman twisted the tip of her braid. “Sorry, but Master Fargist isn’t seeing anybody.”

Fiona gritted her teeth. “I’m friends with Fargist. Please—it’s urgent.”

“He—he’s meditating,” the woman said, “and can’t be disturbed.”

“Meditating?” Fiona said, cocking an eyebrow.

The woman nodded. “It’s very important to his work.”

“Merryvale,” Fiona sighed. “Let’s cut to the chorus. Bad things are happening here in the lowlands, and Fargist might be able to help. Now I can either have my friend the dangerous wizard start throwing spells around and turning all your pretty windows to slag, or y’can let him know I’m here.”

Merryvale gulped and flicked a glance at Soriac.

“I only need a few minutes with him,” Fiona said.

Merryvale looked like she was ready to pull her braid from her head. “I’m sorry, but—”

Fiona nodded to Soriac. “Right. Start melting glass.”

Soriac hesitated, then opened his muddy book.

“Stop, stop!” Merryvale cried, holding out her hands. “Okay, I’ll take ye to him.”

“Deal.”

Fiona breathed a quiet sigh of relief, certain that whatever magic Soriac might have managed would’ve been a disaster.

As Merryvale led them to a set of basement stairs, the brewery’s front door creaked open. Fiona caught a glimpse of the chainmail-clad figure of a city guard. She cursed and ran ahead, grabbing Soriac and hoping they hadn’t been seen.

“City Watch!” called the guard. “Anybody here?”

From the sounds of it, he’d brought friends.

Fiona put a finger to her lips and motioned for Merryvale to go see to them.

Merryvale gave her a frightened *What have you brought upon us?* look, then turned back to greet the guards as Fiona and Soriac hustled down the stairs. The cellar was dimly lit by a pair of lanterns set on a table. A smoking brazier filled the air with the scent of incense. Heavy tapestries covered the stuccoed walls, hiding murals from the time when the Barley Brethren owned the place. The murals depicted monks making beer. The tapestries that covered them depicted the Swordfather leading mighty armies to war. One of the central banners showed a knight holding a blazing sword of light high above his head, blinding demons.

The Fatherites had been a presence in the southern lowlands since before Fiona was born, but it still rankled to see their imagery in what she felt to be her land. The Baedish lowlands had their own traditions and gods. There was no need, in Fiona’s opinion, for the Swordfather to have come barging in.

It took a moment, in the half light, for her to find Fargist, who sat cross-legged on the far side of the room, his back to the tapestries and his eyes closed.

Fargist was a dwarf, with a rough gray face and a scraggly gray beard. While not the rarity in the lowlands that trow were, dwarves were still rare, and getting rarer by the year as the Fatherites made them more and more unwelcome. Fargist was one of the few outside of Skara Brae who

continued to live openly, and that was entirely due to the excellence of his beer. Nobody wanted to kill the dwarf who made their favorite golden brew.

Fiona had known him for years, having first met him shortly after she'd had a falling out with her uncle and struck out on her own.

"Fargist? It's Fiona. I need to talk to ye."

The dwarf grunted and reluctantly opened his eyes.

"Dammit," he rasped. "I told Merryvale not t' let anybody bother me. I've taken a vow of silence."

Fiona looked from Fargist to Soriac and back to the brewer. "But y' just spoke."

"I—damn," said Fargist. "See what y' made me do? I'm still trying to get used t' this, and you and yer trow aren't helping."

Fiona looked over her shoulder toward the stairs. She hoped Merryvale had managed to send the guards off. "Why did y' take a vow of silence?"

"Somethin's been taintin' the beer. Part of the troubles that have been plaguin' the lowlands of late, I'm thinkin', but it's puttin' me out of business."

"And what has that got to do with not talkin'?" Fiona asked.

Fargist shrugged. "The old Barley Brothers never spoke, so I thought maybe some o' their holy magic might protect my stock if I honored their traditions. So I—"

Fiona cut him off. "All very fascinating, I'm sure, Fargist, but we're in a bit of a hurry at the moment, and I need your help."

Fargist stuck his chin out and resumed his meditative stance. "Forget it. I've had enough of bards lately. I'm returning t' my silence, starting . . . now."

"Bards?" Fiona said. "Why bards, particularly? Did—" She cut herself off as an idea occurred to her. "Did something happen? A bard visited ye recently, didn't he? Asking about songs?"

Fargist's snarl-eyed stare told Fiona she'd struck gold.

“What’s it to ye? I—damn! There I go again, talkin’!”

“Somethin’s fishy, Fargist,” Fiona said, stepping forward. “The other day, I was performin’ at an inn and couldn’t remember a song. It just . . . vanished from my mind. And it seems more are fading every day. The other night I tried to sing ‘The Lists of Averlyn,’ which ye taught me. It disappeared as if I’d never heard it. I need t’ know. Do y’remember it? Can y’sing it?”

Fargist shook his head. “Not since that bard visited and asked me to teach it to him. He was polite enough, paid me handsomely t’ sing three or four songs, wrote them all in his book, and afterward, I couldn’t sing ’em if my life depended on it.”

Fiona’s pulse quickened. “Was he wearing a purple cloak?”

“The color of dark wine.”

Fiona leaned in for emphasis. “He was at the Blue Highwayman about a week ago,” she said. “He collected songs there, too. Can y’ remember the words to ‘The Feathered Cap’?”

Fargist’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he shook his head. “Is he . . . stealin’ ’em somehow?”

“I can’t think of any other explanation.”

The dwarf sighed. “Maybe it’s for the best. The old ways are fading. Day by day they give way to new traditions.”

Fiona snorted. “Says the dwarf who’s takin’ a vow of silence t’be like long-dead monks.”

“Yeah, well, you see how that’s workin’ out.”

“But how can you accept letting the old traditions fade?” Fiona asked. “When one of the *new* traditions is telling dwarves t’go back to their mountains?”

“That’s what all this is for,” said Fargist, waving around at the Fatherite banners and tapestries. “If anybody asks, I’m a convert now, a humble new servant of the Sword-father.”

Fiona grimaced. “For your sake, I hope it—”

Muffled voices from upstairs cut her off.

“What’s that?” asked Fargist.

“Uh . . . well . . .”

“What have y’done, y’cursed ginger?” he asked.
“Have y’brought trouble to my brewery?”

“The guards took exception to my friend here,” Fiona said in a rush. “Look, what can ye tell me about the man in the purple cloak?”

The brewer cursed. “I knew bards were bad news!”

“Please, Fargist. It’s important! What do you remember of him?”

“Not much,” the brewer said. “Didn’t give a name. Said he was continuin’ south. He had coin, so I didn’t ask questions.”

“Can y’ tell me anything that’ll help me find him?”

Before Fargist could reply, heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

“I’m sorry!” came Merryvale’s voice. “Master Fargist is not accepting guests!”

“It’s not the brewer we’re lookin’ for,” replied a guard’s voice.

“Quick,” said Fargist. “Through the tapestry. There’s a passage leading to the old monks’ cellars. From there, follow the statues of Old Man River. They’ll lead ye out beyond the city walls.”

“What about you?” Fiona said.

Fargist rose smoothly to his feet. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “The guards like my beer too much t’give me a hard time.” He pointed to the lanterns resting on the table. “Take one o’those.”

“Thank ye, Fargist. And sorry for the trouble.”

“Get back my songs, and all is forgiven.”

Fiona grabbed a lantern and pushed through the tapestry. Soriac followed, clutching his spellbook. A low door lay behind. Fiona opened it and shoved Soriac through ahead of her. “Come on, trow!”

With a final glance back toward the tapestry, Fiona fol-

lowed him into darkness.

Chapter Four

The tunnel Fiona and Soriac found themselves in was cramped and crumbling and wreathed in spider webs. Their lantern illuminated dirt walls reinforced by wooden beams and the occasional brick retaining wall. The stifling scent of soil and the dim flicker of light did little to push back the claustrophobic gloom.

It didn't help that the passage was dangerously steep, and its floor covered in loose dirt and rocks. Every other step was a slip and a frantic recovery, and twice she and Soriac had to give up walking altogether and just skid down on their backsides. Finally the passage leveled off and they took a moment to recover their breath before they started forward again. Twenty feet in, it ended at a dead end made of cemented stone.

"What's this?" Fiona muttered. "Fargist didn't say anything about a wall."

"Trapped!" Soriac wailed. "We're trapped!"

Fiona held the lantern closer to the wall. "Maybe not,"

she said. "I think this might be a door."

Soriac's eyes looked at the stones with new curiosity as Fiona's fingers traced over them. She couldn't see an obvious latch, but there had to be one.

Hopefully.

The trow joined her in running his hands over the wall, searching. Fiona considered, but quickly dismissed, the idea of going back up the tunnel to ask Fargist for help. The brewer was likely dealing with the guards—or already arrested, she thought guiltily. She and Soriac were on their own.

A series of thin scratches near the edge of the wall caught Fiona's attention. She brushed dirt off them and felt her heart leap. The scratches were deeper than she'd initially thought, and they linked together to form a stylized symbol.

"Ah!" she said.

The trow peered at the marks in confusion. "What is it?"

"A harp symbol," Fiona said. "The mark of the old Baedish bards."

"What's it mean?" the trow asked.

"It means a bard helped build this door," Fiona said. "So that means . . ."

Soriac gasped as understanding dawned. "It means the door's t'be opened with a song!"

"Yep."

"But what song?" Soriac asked. "Do y'know it?"

Fiona grinned at him. "O' course. Give me some room."

Soriac stepped back as Fiona readied her harp. The first magical song Fiona had learned had come from her father, though she hadn't realized until years after his death that it was indeed magical. When sung, "Open the Door for Mother" would reveal certain magical seals and unravel them. If the seal didn't yield, the song could be varied to probe its weaknesses, like a musical lockpick.

Fiona took a breath and strummed her harp, then paused. The song wasn't coming. She tried again. Still noth-

ing. With a sinking in her gut, she realized it was gone, just like the other songs she'd lost.

"No," she moaned. "No."

Soriac took another step back, staring at her.

Fiona plucked a final, pathetic chord. "I'm sorry," Fiona muttered. "It's . . ."

It was one thing to lose beloved songs her people had passed down for generations, but entirely different to lose a song that carried magic in its notes. It was like taking away a carpenter's tools or a writer's quills. She was being robbed of her usefulness.

"I guess we need t'go back," she sighed.

Soriac chewed his lip a moment, then swallowed.

"I . . . I could try."

"Eh?"

"With my book."

"Er . . ." Fiona looked askance at the trow. "You're not going to set things on fire again, are you?"

Soriac glared. "Of course not. It's a spell of showing hidden things. Nothing to do with fire."

"Well," Fiona said, biting her lip, "fine, then. Do your worst. Er, best."

Soriac sat down and opened the big tome across his knees, then started brushing off mud and flipping through the pages. "Here somewhere . . ."

Fiona leaned against the wall and waited, trying not to think about all the tons of rock pressing down on them from above, and how little oil was left in the lamp.

Finally, just when she thought she was going to have to scream just to relieve the tension, the trow lifted a bony finger.

"Aha! Here!"

Fiona peered over Soriac's shoulder at the page. The old script was utter gobbledygook to her. How in the seven realms could he read it?

"Er . . . are you sure there won't be any unintended consequences? No unexpected demons? A rain of fish?"

"I told you! It only reveals things!"

"Okay, okay. Go on, then."

Soriac stood and approached the blank wall, cradling the book in one arm, then began to chant and wave the other around in strangely delicate gestures.

As he continued, a pressure like being underwater built up around them, but just as it started to become uncomfortable, Soriac's chant ended and the pressure popped like a soap bubble.

"What happened?" Fiona asked. "Did it work?"

"Look!" Soriac said, pointing at the base of the wall.

Fiona looked and saw a small hole, like one a mouse might make.

"Has that been there the whole time?"

"Revealed!" Soriac crowed. "By the spell!"

He stepped to the hole and reached into it, then manipulated something within. A heavy clicking, like a tumbler rolling over, sounded within the wall. Soriac smiled up at her.

"I think that's it."

Fiona shoved the wall with her shoulder, and it reluctantly swung outward with a heavy grinding noise. She turned back to the trow.

"Nice work," she said. "I admit that went better than I—"

She stopped with a gasp as she saw an indistinct figure looming behind him. Soriac turned and gasped too.

The figure drifted past them without moving its feet. It didn't seem to know they were there.

"A . . . a ghost?" Fiona asked.

"Another one!" Soriac cried, pointing.

Fiona whipped around. Another dark figure, shorter and broader than the first, was coming the other way, also drifting, also paying them no mind. Then a third, this one clearly female, emerged from one wall, crossed the passage, and vanished into the opposite one.

"Where did they all come from?" Soriac asked.

“You said it was a spell that *reveals hidden things*?”
Fiona said.

The trow’s eyes widened. “I . . . I did . . . that?”

“All the folk who ever died down here, and now we’ve got them for company,” Fiona muttered. “Wonderful.”

Soriac shrunk into himself, clutching his tome like a rat clinging to a board in a flood. “S-sorry.”

Fiona sighed as she saw his misery. “No, no. I’m sorry. I don’t think they mean to hurt us. There’s no harm done.”

Soriac thrust out his lower lip. He nodded, glum.

“Come on,” Fiona said. “Let’s see where this leads.”

Soriac snuffled as he followed Fiona through the door. They found themselves in a large room, far wider than the weak light of their lantern could illuminate. Tall stacks of aged barrels rose on all sides, and where they were absent there were murals of robed monks, similar to the ones in the brewery above. Some of the monks stood in square fighting stances with flames surrounding their upturned fists. Others bent in fields, reaping wheat and barley, or worked in cellars, brewing or bottling beer. Others hoisted mugs of brew with joyous expressions on their faces.

“These must be the monks’ cellars,” Fiona said. The air smelled of centuries of sour beer, as if it had been soaked into the walls. “And now we need t’look for Old Man River.”

There was a rubble-floored hole in the opposite wall, and as they teetered through it they found themselves in what appeared to be old, moss-covered sewer tunnels. Several passageways intersected a few paces from where they stood, like spokes coming off a wheel, and each entrance was flanked by crude, almost faceless statues.

“Who are they?” Soriac asked.

Fiona held up the lantern. “The old Baedish gods. This one is the Smith, and this one the Spring Wife, and this . . . this is Old Man River. I don’t know why they’re here, but Fargist said to follow him, so on we go.”

Each of the Baedish gods had a light face and dark face. The Smith’s dark face was the Wrecker. The Spring

Wife's was the Winter Wife, and Old Man River was the dark face of the Boatman, the Baedish god of commerce, trade, and travel. Like his light side, Old Man River also dealt with travel, as he was the Baedish god of death, and oversaw the soul's passage to the underworld—which made following his path feel a bit ominous.

After a few minutes they came to another intersection, which was also decorated with statues, and again they chose the one flanked by Old Man River.

The next intersection they came to did not give up its secrets so easily. Here the walls and statues were thick with a strange black mold, and everything stank like bad meat. Fiona couldn't tell at a glance which statues were which, and she didn't fancy scraping away the foul-smelling mold to find out.

"I . . . er . . . let's try this one," she said at last, and they started down a muddy tunnel that smelled slightly less repugnant. An unusually chill wind howled from the passage she'd chosen, making her shiver.

"A breeze means we're getting close t'the outdoors, right?"

"Doesn't smell like the outdoors," Soriac said.

A little farther on, they came to a wide crack in the sewer wall. It was choked with slimy roots and the mold was thicker than ever. Fiona held the lantern up to the crack and saw a black archway within, guarded by two grotesque statues. One depicted some sort of humanoid, but its face had been chiseled away. Not much was left of the other statue, as it had been toppled, leaving only its lower half. The archway between them was carved with slithering, intricate runes that Fiona didn't recognize. Fascinating, though.

"Not Baedish," she said, and edged closer to the crack. "I wonder what they are?"

"Don't!" hissed Soriac.

Fiona whirled and found the trow staring at her, eyes wide with fright. She'd been so intrigued by the runes she'd almost forgotten he was there.

“Broken strings!” she said. “Y’ scared me half t’ death.”

Soriac edged back from the crack. “We need t’ leave. This is a bad place.”

“What is it?” Fiona asked.

“I’ve seen places like this before. I . . . I found my book in . . .” He shivered, then turned. “Please. Let’s go.”

Fiona looked back at the archway beyond the crack. Suddenly the runes were more nauseating than fascinating. She shivered and followed the trow.

When they got back to the moldy intersection, Fiona tied a scarf around her nose and mouth and scraped with her knife until she found two Old Man River statues flanking a passage, then they resumed their journey.

“Listen,” Fiona said after a while. “About your book—”

“I didn’t steal it,” Soriac snapped.

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Fiona said. “I was just wondering how you know what it says.”

“Trow can read.”

“I know that, but”—she nodded at the book—“I don’t know many of any race who could read the gibberish I saw in *that*.”

Soriac sniffed. “How did y’ learn to be a bard?”

“From my parents, when I was young,” Fiona said. “Then, when they died, from my uncle Taveon. They were all bards. The best in the land. Are y’sayin’ that’s how you learned to read ancient texts, Soriac? From your parents?”

It was the first time she’d ever said his name. His ears drooped.

“Soriac isn’t my real name,” he said. “It’s . . . it’s Gurgle, and . . . yes, my mother taught me t’ read the old stuff. She—and my brothers and sisters too—were minions for a necromancer.”

“Slaves, you mean.”

He nodded, baring his teeth. “Made us dig for books and things in old ruins, and . . . well, we had t’ know if what we found was a cookbook, or a spellbook, or a journal, so he

taught my ma how t'read, and she taught us."

"Let me guess," Fiona said, smiling. "You learned more than the necromancer expected, and you used the books you found t'turn the tables on the old bastard."

The trow shook his head. "He put hexes on us so we couldn't raise a hand to him. Not even a dirty look. And my ma, he hexed her so she couldn't leave him."

"Aw, Soriac . . . er, Gurgle, I didn't . . ."

"You can still call me Soriac," the trow said. "I . . . I'd prefer it."

"All right," said Fiona. "Soriac it is. So what happened?"

"One day," he continued, "deep under Skara Brae, we found a sealed chamber, skulls everywhere, nasty carvings on the walls, like that archway we saw, and something sick wafting in the air. My brothers and sisters ran, scared and puking, but I saw some books in there, a whole library. A skeleton was holding this one. I took it. I opened it, and inside . . ."

He looked up at Fiona, his eyes bright.

"Magic," he concluded. "Spells of every kind. I knew I'd find one in there that would let me free my—"

He sobbed suddenly, and Fiona's heart went out to him. Life had dealt her a pretty rough hand of cards, but it wasn't anything as bad as being born a slave, with a mother bound by magic to a cruel master. No wonder Soriac clung to his book so desperately. It represented freedom, for himself and his family.

"So y'stole the book and ran?" she said.

"I didn't steal it!" he snapped. "Nobody owned it!" His expression darkened. "The master chased me, but I escaped. He shouted that he was going t'kill my ma if I didn't come back, but I couldn't stop. I hope someday to . . ."

Silence sat heavy around them for a long minute before Fiona reached out her hand and found the trow's. "Your mother would be happy y' escaped."

He wiped his nose on his sleeve and snorfed. "What

about your parents? How did they—?”

Fiona sighed. “They drowned. They were on their way t’Tangramayne with my uncle, chasin’ after a rumor that someone there had a complete copy of ‘The Lay of Svante.’ They waited at a ferry crossin’ on the River Branwyck, but the rains had come heavy that spring, and the river was high. The . . . bank collapsed.” She hung her head. “My uncle Taveon said he ran along for a mile when they got swept away, but then he lost them, and they were never seen again.”

“I’m sorry,” Soriac said with genuine sympathy.

Fiona shrugged. “I just hope I can pay my respects to ’em properly one day.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, I’d like t’sing ‘The Lay of Svante’ at that ferry crossing and let ’em know I found it.”

“Have you found it yet?” Soriac asked.

Fiona snorted. “If I had, I’d have sung it to ’em already, wouldn’t I? One of the most famous bards in Caith wrote it, Gillan the harper, and every bard knows a few scraps of it, but none I’ve ever heard of knows the whole thing, and they don’t care to share, because each one of us wants to be the first to compile the whole thing.” She sighed. “Fools every one of us, but maybe someday . . .”

“I know a song,” Soriac said when she didn’t continue. “My ma used to sing it to us t’cheer us up.”

Fiona quirked an eyebrow. “A trow song? I don’t know many of those.”

“Then I’ll teach ye.”

“Fine. I could do with a bit of cheerin’.”

Soriac cleared his throat, took a deep breath, then started to clap his hands like he was slapping together two dead fish.

Myyyyyyy mother told me, talk-talk
’Bout Channie Channock, chock-chock
He broke his chains-o, lock-lock
Snapped master’s canes-o, knock-knock

Ate all his pasties, chomp-chomp
Drank all his whiskeys, drop-drop
And that's the song-o, talk-talk
Of Channie Channock, chock-chock!

Fiona cringed as the raucous words echoed off the walls, afraid they would wake every horror in the sewers, but mercifully Soriac stopped after two more verses.

"There's more if you'd like t'hear," he said, when he'd caught his breath.

"Oh . . . well, I think I get the gist," Fiona said, looking away. "But thank you. That has indeed, uh, cheered me right up."

The fact that it ended had been the best part, Fiona thought.

But despite the ridiculous lyrics and terrible performance, the song wasn't exactly bad, and Fiona could see it going over well as a rowdy sing-along at the shank end of a drunken evening. But Soriac had a voice that even the most charitable listener would have had trouble praising, and Fiona was not the most charitable listener. It sounded like cats fighting in a barrel, but not quite as musical.

"Thanks!" Soriac said, beaming. "Maybe I'll become a bard like you after I become an archmage."

"Well," Fiona said, as evenly as she could. "That would be something."

The tunnel brightened a little farther on, and they came at last to its mouth, which emptied into a muddy stream between two farmers' fields. After they climbed the bank, they looked north and saw the walls and roofs of Thuath in the distance, blood red in the light of the setting sun.

"Good t'be on the outside of 'em, eh?" Fiona said.

"Aye," Soriac said with a shiver. "Where now?"

“South, I suppose. But I’m a bit fashed after all of today’s excitement. Wouldn’t mind havin’ a wee kip in a haystack before we move on.”

Soriac took another uneasy look toward Thuath. “Let’s go a bit farther first, aye?”

“Aye,” Fiona said. “Good point.”

Later, nestled in an unsuspecting farmer’s hayloft, Fiona stared up through the holes in the roof at a full moon as bright as a gold coin while Soriac snored like a clogged drain beside her. She couldn’t sleep. The idea of the bard in the purple cloak walking through the night, pulling the songs out of people’s hearts and putting them in his book, wouldn’t let her. What songs would she not remember tomorrow? What pieces of her childhood would be gone forever?

After a while she turned on her side and looked at Soriac, who lay splayed out like a starfish. Uncharacteristically, his book was at his side. He usually used it as a pillow, but it seemed he’d been too tired after their strenuous day to remember. She knew she shouldn’t, that it was a breaking of trust, but her curiosity got the better of her and she slipped the book toward her and set it on her knees.

The old leather cover featured a stylized symbol she didn’t recognize. Opening it, she noticed a note scrawled in a shaky hand on the inside cover. She was about to turn to the title page, figuring the note would be written in the same gibberish as the rest of the book, when the name “Mangar” caught her attention.

Whosoever finds this tome, I implore you to use it in the completion of the desperate task I have failed to finish—the utter destruction of the infamous archmage Mangar the Dark.

Fiona's eyes widened as she read on.

From where he came, I know not. Nor do I know his true nature—man, god, or demon—but two days ago he invaded Skara Brae, his hideous tower appearing overnight like a cancer on the face of the town, and bringing with it snow and ice and freezing cold, though by the calendar it was the middle of high summer.

Though I fought against him and his goblin hordes as best I could, I fell at last to his tricks and cannot escape this room. I know others too sought him and fought him, and it is my hope that they might find my body, and this book, and that its spells might help them succeed against him where I have failed.

May your gods guide you, whoever you are, in this desperate time and give you victory against his corruption.

*Yours in faith and hope,
Soriac, Archmage of Stronsea*

Fiona stared at the name. She had never heard of Archmage Soriac, but her heart went out to him. Even in death he had striven to help Skara Brae and its people. Mangar had been defeated eventually, of course, and the story had become legendary among the bards of Caith, especially because it had been a bard who led the band of heroes who vanquished him, but she wondered if their victory would have been even swifter if brave Soriac had escaped his fate.

She flipped idly through the rest of the tome, unable to decipher most of its contents. Diagrams, charts, mathematical equations, and illustrations of strange creatures filled every page. Fiona marveled at it all and found herself looking at Soriac—the one she knew—with renewed admiration. Certainly, he'd burned a barn down when he'd attempted a spell from the book, but Fiona strongly suspected that was better than she would've managed.

She turned back to the inner cover and reread the handwritten note. Whoever the original Soriac had been,

Fiona doubted he would've expected a trow named Gurgle to stumble upon his book and claim it as his own.

Soriac—Gurgle—rolled over in his sleep, and one arm reached out and patted the straw around him, apparently searching for the book. He whimpered to himself. Fiona held her breath and set it down next to him as quietly as she could. Just as she did, his fingers found it and pulled it to him, then curled up around it like it was a doll. A deep sigh escaped him, and his breathing returned to normal.

Chapter Five

Fiona and Soriac stood in a field of low green vines that she suspected would sprout squash or pumpkins come fall. A thatch-roofed farmhouse stood in the distance, smoke rising from its chimney.

“Same plan?” Soriac asked.

“Aye,” Fiona said. “Wait here while I tell my tale. And I’ll see if I can get us some supper, too.”

They had been doing this for the past two days. Fiona approached a farm or inn or shrine alone and asked after the bard in the purple cloak. Soriac wasn’t pleased to be left behind each time, but he understood that people would be more forthcoming with Fiona if she didn’t have a trow at her side.

So far, their inquiries had been fruitless, save for a handful of apples, two meat pies, a night in a barn, and a jug of ale—almost all of which they had not stolen.

The farmers at this house turned out to be a youngish

couple, not much older than Fiona herself, and they readily offered her a quick meal in exchange for the news of the day. When she had finished both, Fiona asked the question she had already asked a dozen times that day.

“Have you seen another bard in the last few days? He might have been wearing a purple cloak, and he might have been asking to hear a song or two.”

Marne, the wife, her belly swollen with child, shook her head. “Yer the first bard t’visit these parts in a year, I’d say. And I’d have remembered a cloak like that. Must be rich as a noble, this bard.”

Kell, the husband, frowned, thinking. He was handsome, with green eyes, but Fiona could see from his leather skin and stooped shoulders that working the farm had already begun to age him. “Didn’t old Callan say he met a bard or historian o’ some such when we saw him at market yesterday?”

“Did he?” asked Marne.

“Aye,” said Kell, and nodded to Fiona. “You should talk t’ Callan. His farm’s along the south road, just beyond Dinnet.”

Fiona brightened. “Thank you. I’ll seek him out.”

After giving them an old song and an older joke, Fiona left the couple and rejoined Soriac, handing over the cloth-wrapped bundle of bread, cheese, and smoked mutton they’d given her for the road.

“You look like you have good news,” said the trow.

“A rumor of a rumor,” Fiona said. “But it’s more than we’ve had before. Let’s find the south road.”

They came to Callan’s farm that evening and Fiona knocked on his door while Soriac settled into his hayloft. The man answered the door with an axe in his hand and his daughter behind him by the fire, an arrow on the string of her bow.

“What d’ye want?”

Fiona’s heart pounded as she showed her hands. “No need t’fear, master. Just a bard, looking for a bite and a kip

in exchange for a song or two.”

The old man scowled. He looked as tough as shoe leather, and so did his daughter. “Y’ll get no welcome that way,” he growled. “Had our fill of bards here.”

“Ah!” Fiona said. “Then you’ve seen him!”

“Who?”

“The bard who stole my songs,” Fiona said. “I’ve been hunting him for days. Let me guess, he’s stolen a few of yours, too.”

Callan glanced back at his daughter, then sighed and stood aside so Fiona could enter. “Bree’s been singin’ me t’sleep with ‘The Green and the Gold’ since she was a wee bairn, but after she sang it for that old fella in the purple cloak, she couldn’t remember it t’save her soul.” He rubbed his eyes. “Haven’t slept right since.”

“I’m sorry, Pa,” said the girl.

“Isn’t yer fault, lass. But I’d like t’get my hands on the villain who took it from ye. An elf in disguise, I’ll warrant. Seemed like one o’ their tricks.”

“Well,” Fiona said. “Gettin’ my hands on him is exactly what I mean to do, for he’s stolen from me, too. A dozen songs at least, that my mother and father taught me in the cradle. If y’knew anything about where he was heading from here, I’d be more than grateful.”

“Luncarty’s Loch,” said the daughter. “He asked me the way.”

Fiona frowned. “Never heard of the place. Guess I’ll have t’ask the way too.”

“Two days south through Tindrum,” said Callan. “Then west when y’get t’the river Mounth. It’s in a valley just beyond.”

Fiona ducked her head. “Much obliged. Er, I don’t suppose I could have a lie down in yer hayloft, and be off t’Luncarty’s Loch in the morning?”

Callan nodded. “Just don’t stir the coos.”

The next day, two more songs slipped from Fiona's mind as they chased south. She could picture the thieving bard ahead of her, sitting on a stone wall listening as some shepherd sang him a song that they would never sing again, and thus pushed herself and Soriac hard, trying to catch up before any more vanished.

That night, while Fiona tried to sleep, Soriac sat and studied his spellbook by the light of their campfire, chanting softly to himself and manipulating the air with his hands.

She knew he was trying to be quiet, but the sick panic of losing so many songs was already making it hard for her to settle her mind, and he wasn't helping. Finally, she turned to face him.

"Soriac, would you mind—where did that cat come from?"

There was a cat by the fire, a big tom. It turned at her words, bristling, and leapt at her face.

Fiona shrieked and swatted at it. Her hand passed through it and it dissolved as if it had never been.

"Fires of Malefia! What was that?"

"Sorry!" Soriac said. "I didn't think it would do that!"

"You . . . you made that? You made a cat?"

"Not a real cat," he said. "Just an illusion."

Fiona tried to slow her breathing. "Any more illusions like that, and I'll skin the both o' ye, y'ken?"

Soriac's ears drooped. "I said I was sorry."

"Well, next time y'might be sayin' sorry t'my corpse. You near scared me t'death."

Fiona rolled over and closed her eyes again as the trow hung his head, but she managed only short hours of fitful sleep, and woke to fading dreams of chasing wayward songs across the green fields like they were skittish sheep.

The next day, road weary and exhausted, she and Soriac at last reached the outskirts of Luncarty's Loch, a puddle-sized village on the pebbled banks of the small lake from whence it took its name.

"All right," Fiona said. "Wait here and I'll see what's

what. If the bard is here, I'll—"

"I want to come with you," Soriac said.

"What?" Fiona goggled at him.

The trow drew himself up. "If the bard is here, it could be dangerous. I'll protect you."

Fiona groaned. "Soriac, this close to Lestras, you're liable to be burned at the stake before you've a chance t'say hello."

"I don't care. I don't want to wait in the woods anymore."

Fiona started to reply, then stopped, suddenly imagining what it would be like to never be able to walk openly into a town or order a drink at an inn—things she never had to give a second thought to. Certainly, there were some towns that would be less excited to see her than others, but for the most part, she was welcome everywhere she went, because she was a bard, and because she was a Baed. She'd been born in the lowlands. So of course she fit in.

But Soriac had been born here too, hadn't he? Maybe he'd been born in the catacombs below Skara Brae, but Skara Brae was a Baedish city, and he was a native. How strange to be born someplace but not accepted there. No. Not just strange. How insulting. How unfair.

"All right," she said at last. "It's not exactly the best time t'defy all laws and conventions, but then, what time is? Let's go."

"You won't regret this," Soriac said.

Fiona sighed. "Oh, no, I probably will. I just hope you've got a spell of invisibility in that book of yours. Just in case we need to disappear."

"I . . . I'm working on that one."

"Wonderful."

They entered the village together, getting all the looks

Fiona had expected and some muttered words besides, but the town seemed to be in the middle of some sort of celebration, and apparently nobody had time to go fetch their torches and pitchforks, for though they were given a wide berth, they were left alone.

Near the shore of the loch, a makeshift wooden stage had been set up, and a gaggle of children chased each other around it as their parents gathered. Most of the folk were farmers and villagers, but there were others in finer clothes, sitting in chairs and sipping wine. There were also several tents farther from the stage, each with armed guards at their entrances, indicating that nobles were present. Wondering if the bard in the purple cloak was here somewhere, Fiona dragged her gaze in vain across the crowd, searching for the telltale color.

“What’s it all about?” Fiona asked a young woman stringing flower ropes between two poles.

The woman, who had a thin face and curly black hair, looked around, then down at Soriac for a long second, before returning her gaze to Fiona.

“This is the festival of Luncarty’s Leaving,” she said. “We celebrate it every year at this time.”

“I see. And who is Luncarty?”

The young woman took another look at Soriac. “I ken yer not from around here. Luncarty was a local lad who went off t’seek adventure and became the finest bard in all of Caith, and *this* is the day he left home—which is why we call it Luncarty’s Leaving.”

“So . . . you celebrate by telling stories of his life and many adventures?”

“He only had time for a few, actually,” said the woman. “He came back a fortnight later, rich as a lord, and married to a fine lady as well, all for the singing of a song, or so they say. We call his return Luncarty’s Homecoming, and we celebrate it, too.”

“That must have been quite the fortnight,” Fiona said. “What happened? What was the song?”

The woman smirked. “Ye’ll have t’hear that for yerself, won’t ye?”

Fiona smiled. The Baedish certainly loved their bards, at least their dead ones. If she were given half the respect centuries-old bards received, she’d be sleeping indoors every night and taking all her meals for free. Maybe it was the Fatherites’ constant belittling of bards and Baedish songs that did it. People just saw her as an entertainer now, not a keeper of a sacred tradition. They no longer thought she or her kind mattered.

Fiona gave the woman a parting smile. “We’re looking forward to it.”

Fiona had never heard of Luncarty before, which was odd. She’d thought she’d heard of all the Baedish heroes. A sudden fear tightened her stomach as she wondered if perhaps she was losing more than songs. What if her memory of Luncarty had been stolen too?

As evening drew near, an old man, bent with age, stepped onto the stage with the assistance of a pair of strapping young villagers, who settled him into a carved chair. Fiona and Soriac found a spot off to one side and waited with the rest to hear him speak.

“So y’want t’hear the ol’ song, eh?” the old man asked. His voice was as warm and worn as an old sheepskin. Fiona wanted to wrap herself in it. “Th’one m’old granddad taught me, and his granddad taught ’im.”

The crowd clapped. A man called out, “‘Course we want to hear it, Graeme!”

Graeme nodded, stroking his chin. “Suppose I’ll tell it, then.”

This brought some laughter, and Fiona grinned at the old fellow’s sly showmanship.

The old man leaned back and raised his head, and his

voice rang out high and bright, and woke the crowd like a
cockerel's morning cry.

Beyond th'hills, beyond th'lea
Beyond th'gray and shinin' sea
The kingdom o' fair Widdershee
Lies within a great oak tree

And 'neath its boughs did Luncarty
Asleep one night awake to see
A maiden fair as fair could be
Step inside th'great oak tree

So beautiful a lass was she
That Lun he couldnae let it be
And with th'cry, 'Lass, wait for me!'
Jumped into the great oak tree

'Fair maiden let me follow thee
My heart it is no longer free'
The lass she cried, 'This cannae be
No man of men sees Widdershee.'

But by harp and song did Luncarty
Woo the shy and fearful sidhe
And win her heart at last did he
Deep inside th'great oak tree

Alas th'king o' Widdershee
Refused to hear the lovers' plea
And banished heartsick Luncarty
Forever from th'great oak tree

Two diamond tears the stricken sidhe
Did shed and give to Luncarty
And all her father's treasury
Before he crossed again the sea

The tears he wore for all to see
But spent the treasure wild and free
Drunk and mad in misery
For the lass within the great oak tree

A pair of tears like those in the song welled from Fiona's eyes. She'd never heard it before, but it touched her heart and stirred pictures in her mind. What truth had inspired such a tale? Had there been a real Luncarty? And for how many generations had his story been passed down through this old man's family, son to daughter, mother to son, grandfather to grandchild?

She closed her eyes, picturing a gnarled oak tree, its branches stretching out over a quiet, fog-bound loch, while floating fairy lights pulsed throughout the branches. She imagined one of those wisps catching sight of a roguish bard asleep beneath its boughs and . . . and . . . what?

The images in Fiona's mind broke up into formless fragments and were gone, like the remnants of a dream upon waking.

She opened her eyes and blinked. What had she been thinking about?

All around her, the gathered crowd murmured and shuffled, expressions of confusion filling their troubled eyes.

It hit Fiona like a hammer blow. They were experiencing the same thing that had just happened to her. They had been drifting in the afterglow of the song, and then abruptly, it had disappeared, as if it had never been.

The song had vanished.

Stolen.

Heart racing, Fiona looked around, frantically searching the crowd.

"What is it?" Soriac asked.

"The thief," she hissed. "He's here."

She stood on her tiptoes, but it was no use. From their low vantage, Fiona could see only a small part of the crowd.

Clenching her jaw, she squeezed toward the stage.

“Scuze me. Pardon. Sorry.”

In their bafflement, the crowd was in no mood to be gracious, and she caught her share of nasty looks as well as the occasional elbow. Following behind her, Soriac drew more.

Finally she hopped up onto the stage with the trow scrambling behind.

“Who are ye?” asked the old man. “And what is that?”

“Just one bard lookin’ out fer another,” Fiona replied, and turned to look out across the crowd, who gaped at her in surprise.

The song thief had to be here. He had to! She gritted her teeth, unable to see anything suspicious.

The crowd began to boo and wave her down.

“D’ye mind, lass?” said the old man from his chair. “I’ve still another song t’sing!”

“No!” Fiona whirled toward him. “You mustn’t!”

He cocked a shaggy eyebrow at her. “Eh? Are y’daft? I never sing th’first song without singin’ the second. It’s tradition!”

“And you’ll lose that tradition if y’don’t listen t’m,” Fiona said.

The old man snorted. “Away wi’ye! Where are my grandsons?”

The two boys who had helped the old man to his chair now mounted the stage again, angling toward Fiona. Their heavy shoulders reminded her of oxen. She stretched out her hands to the old man.

“Wait. Hear me out! Do y’ remember the song ye just sung?”

“Eh?” the old man asked.

“What are the first words of the song ye just sung?” she demanded. “Tell me!”

The old man opened his mouth, then closed it as a confused expression crossed it. “Y’ know, my mind’s a bit foggy right now, what with yer interruptions and—”

“It’s been stolen,” Fiona said. “Taken from you.”

“What? What has?”

A flash of color beyond the crowd on the far side of the stage caught Fiona’s eye. A figure in a wine-colored cloak, accompanied by two guards in the same colors, strode toward the shore and a waiting boat.

The song thief.

“Stop that man!” Fiona shouted, pointing after him.

She leapt from the stage and plunged into the crowd. Unfortunately, they were in an even worse mood now than before she’d interrupted the show, and they shoved back at her, not letting her through.

“Please!” she shouted. “He’s getting away!”

Finally, she squirmed and elbowed her way through and looked to the shore. The boat was already underway, the thief sitting in the bow with his hood drawn up while his guards joined two others at the oars.

“Stop!” she shouted, and ran down to the water, harp bouncing on her back and Soriac jogging after her. “Come back!”

They rowed on, and Fiona stared after them in helpless rage, panting while little wavelets wet her boots.

“That’s quite th’ tale,” said old Graeme.

She and Soriac sat by his hearth in his small thatched-roofed home, which he shared with his daughter, her husband, and his two looming grandsons, all of whom were making a meal on the other side of the room, stretching their ears to hear what was being said.

Graeme had stared into the crackling fire as Fiona had recounted the story of forgetting songs that should have been impossible to forget, and how she’d come to believe it was the man in the purple cloak who’d stolen them. When she finished, he sat back in his chair and shook his head.

“M’granddad taught me that song when I was so high t’a thistle,” he croaked. “And now . . . sixty years on it’s gone in a snap. T’isn’t natural.”

Fiona saw him swallow hard to hold back his emotion. She gripped his hand. It was rough and hard, like a stone weathered by the sun.

“T’was a beautiful song,” she said.

“Was it?” he said. “I don’t remember.”

Fiona’s heart ached for him. It was folk like him who carried the soul and history of the lowlands in their hearts. Their memories of the songs their parents remembered from their parents were what kept the past alive and preserved it for the future, so that no matter what changed, no matter who ruled or raised temples here, Caith would still be Caith and the Baedish still the Baedish. Though the Swordfather’s blade might adorn people’s front doors, thanks to the wisdom learned from their songs and stories, behind those doors they still thanked the Spring Wife when the first wheat stalks poked up through the turned earth, and still set out dishes of goat’s milk for the trow.

But was that over now? What happened if the song thief stole all the songs? Who would remember how things were done?

“The man who took your song,” Fiona said. “He wore a wine-colored cloak and had an escort with the same colors. Do y’know him?”

Graeme looked at his family. “Did y’see his face?”

They all shook their heads.

He shrugged. “Well, I didn’t see him either, but them’s the baron’s colors.”

“Which baron would that be?” Fiona asked.

“Baron Falmar’s lord here,” said Graeme’s daughter. “Lives over Camnag way.”

This news made Fiona want to hop up and get back on the road immediately. The song thief must be a vassal of the baron. She could confront him there.

“Can ye get it back?” asked old Graeme suddenly.

“My song? Been singin’ it to folk on the day of Luncarty’s Leavin’ for nigh fifty years. Hate t’disappoint ’em next year.”

Fiona had no idea how the song thief snatched songs from people’s memories. She also didn’t know why he was taking them, or whether it would be possible to return them. But now that the old man had asked it, she knew that was what she had to do, was what she’d been set on doing since she’d forgotten “The Feathered Cap” back at the Blue Highwayman.

“Aye,” she said. “I will.”

“*We* will,” Soriac said.

Fiona gave the trow a small smile and nodded.

Tears welled in the old man’s eyes. He squeezed her hand.

The fire cast flickering light through the house late into the night, but there was no more discussion and no songs sung that night.

Chapter Six

The castle of Baron Falmar gleamed above the morning fog like a great white tooth. Like most fortresses in the Baedish lowlands, it sat atop a hill, giving it as wide a view of the surrounding grasslands as possible. Purple pennons flew from its towers, and the gleaming tips of its defenders' spears winked from the battlements.

"Will y' come with me into the castle?" Fiona asked Soriac as they approached it.

Soriac considered the place for a long moment before responding. He'd been especially quiet since Luncarty's Loch.

"No," he said. "Too much trouble if I go."

Fiona frowned. "But yesterday—"

"I know," he said. "But it's one thing t'be brave in a little town, and another t'do it in a castle . . . with dungeons and all."

Fiona nodded. "I take your point. Look for me at noon, then. Hopefully the baron will grant me an audience before

that.”

They parted ways and Fiona approached the castle alone. A handful of armored guards wearing the shield-and-horn sigil of Falmar waited outside the main gate.

“Ho, traveler!” called the captain. “What business have you at Castle Falmar?”

“Business? None,” laughed Fiona, flashing one of her winningest smiles. “Amusement? Plenty. As you can see, I am a singer o’ songs and teller of tales o’ the unknown!”

The guard captain shook his head. “The baron already has a bard. On your way.”

Fiona put her fists on her hips. “So I’ve heard. I’ve also heard the baron’s bard is looking for old and seldom-heard songs, and I just happen to know a few of those. Quite a few.”

The captain’s eyes narrowed. “The bard is indeed looking for songs, but he also told me that a bard with trouble in her eyes might come looking for him—some heathen who still kept the old ways—and if so, I was to turn her away. So off y’go before I set the dogs on ye.”

Fiona swallowed. “Er . . . I see. Well . . .”

A sudden tingling sensation rippled up her spine and through her mind, making her forget the lie she had been trying to construct. It was as though somebody were staring at her. She looked around, then up. Where . . . ?

There.

A glimpse of movement in one of the windows of the castle, two eyes surrounded by darkness, peering at her. Meeting those eyes once more sent the shiver of energy trembling through her.

“Last warning, bard,” said the captain.

Fiona pulled her eyes from the window, remembering with a start the situation she was in. The captain was returning to the gate.

“Don’t be here when I turn around again.”

Fiona looked back to the tower. The eyes were gone, but the tingling sensation was not.

“Er . . . look,” she said to the captain’s back. “Can’t we—”

“I warned ye.” The captain motioned a guard. “Loose the dogs.”

But before the guard could comply, another stepped forward, a sergeant by his insignia. He looked a gruff, hard man, but his eyes were glazed, and he spoke with a strange distance to his voice. “Hold, Captain. The lass doesn’t look a heathen to me. I’ll wager she’s a Fatherite, and I’ll wager I can prove it.”

The captain turned to the sergeant, brows raised. “Are y’all right, Hannock? Y’haven’t won a wager with me yet.”

“Sure I am,” said Hannock. “Is your coin all right?”

“Well, most of it’s yours,” laughed the captain. “And it’s pleased t’have a new owner. What’s yer wager?”

“Well,” said Hannock, still dreamy. “No heathen could sing a Fatherite hymn without turnin’ into a column of fire, ain’t that what Father Unther said?”

“Aye,” said the captain.

“Then have her sing ‘Glory to the Skysword.’”

The captain laughed. “Ha! Y’ve had a good idea at last, Hannock. Either she won’t sing or we get a bonfire, and either way I get your money.”

He turned to Fiona. “Right then, heathen. Give us the hymn.”

Fiona chewed her lip. She still didn’t know what was happening, exactly, but it seemed she had been given an opportunity, if she could take advantage of it. She knew “Glory to the Skysword” well enough. You couldn’t sing in the lowlands without having it in your quiver, just in case there were some paladins in the audience. But at the moment the wager was between the captain and the sergeant. She wasn’t part of it.

“One moment,” she said. “What’s in this for me? If I sing it, will you let me in? Because if not, I’m walkin’ away, and you don’t get your money or your bonfire.”

Laughter spread through the guards. The captain made

a face, thinking about it. Finally, he shrugged.

“If y’can sing the song without burnin’, yer not the lass the baron was worried about, so I suppose y’can go in. But my money’s on ye burnin’.”

Fiona breathed a sigh of relief. She knew the song and all the words were springing readily to mind. All was well. She pulled her harp to her chest and checked her tuning. Normally she’d sooner eat broken glass than sing such a sappy and uninspired ode to the Swordfather, but as her uncle Taveon had always told her, “Pride is the bard’s surest way t’poverty. Give the people what they want.”

“Here you are, then,” she said, and began to sing.

Glory to the Skysword
Rising from the lake
Held aloft by the Blessed Lady’s hand

Shining like the sun star
Lighting up the night
The blade that banished evil from the land

Pure and mighty Skysword
Guide us to the light
With sword and Father ever shall we stand

There were five more verses of the same, and Fiona sang them all without burning—or even smoldering—much to the annoyance of the captain and the delight of the sergeant, who had by now lost his glazed look and distant manner.

“Ha ha!” he crowed. “Pay up, Captain. Seems she’s a Fatherite after all.”

The captain grunted in disgust and threw a few coins at the sergeant’s feet.

“Well?” Fiona said.

The captain waved to his men. “Take her to the baron, but if I’m wrong about this, it’s Hannock who’s going

t'hang."

Fatherite tapestries hung along both sides of the hallway that the guard led her down, all depicting the Swordfather winning battles and performing miracles, but Fiona noticed sunshine streaming through cracks between them and had a look beyond them. Just like in the Barley Brethren Brewery, the tapestries covered a pagan past, suggesting the baron was a new convert to the temple of the Swordfather, just like Fargist—though possibly a more genuine one. A long row of stunning stained-glass windows ran behind them, depicting warriors and wizards battling great giants and titanic creatures beneath lightning-filled skies. One window showed a golden-haired woman singing atop a cliff with tears rolling down her cheeks. Humans, dwarves, elves, and trow all listened to her with expressions of rapture on their faces. Fiona wondered who the woman was. She also wondered if anyone would remember her once the baron got around to replacing the windows.

"Keep up, bard," said her escort.

After some stairways and some twists and turns, they stopped outside a door flanked by two guards. Her escort conferred with them in low tones for a moment. Finally one looked her way.

"What's yer name?"

"Fiona the harper," she said.

The guard went into the room. "Fiona the harper, Lord Baron."

Fiona's escort pushed her forward and they stepped into a luxurious antechamber, fitted out with a small dining table, chairs, and couches. Through a farther door, Fiona could see the corner of an even more lavish bedroom, while on the other side, an archway opened onto a balcony that looked over the courtyard below. A man in a hooded purple

cloak sat on a bench out there, facing away from her and playing softly on a lute, and Fiona wanted to step out and confront him, but the people at the table were staring at her. She forced herself to face them and bow.

“Yer worships,” she said.

The baron was big and broad, dressed only in a loose silk robe, open to reveal a hairy chest and belly. His hair and beard were uncombed, and he was working his way loudly through a plate of river trout, spinach, and eggs, with a mug of ale to wash it all down. An older man in the robes of a FATHERITE priest shared the table with him, eating a more modest breakfast.

“So,” said the baron, between bites. “Y’ve some songs t’sing for my bard, eh? Mighty obligin’ of you. Most times he has t’tavel.”

Fiona hesitated a moment, then bowed again, nervous.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she said. “I did not tell your men the truth. I not here to sing, but to give you warning.”

Falmar paused with a bit of fish halfway to his mouth. “Bold, aren’t ye? All right. Before I have ye thrown off the balcony, what’s this warning?”

Fiona swallowed. She wasn’t sure he was kidding.

“M’lord,” she began, “I have reason t’ believe that a person is traveling across your lands—and all the lands of Caith—stealing songs from your people.”

The baron’s laugh sprayed food across the table. The priest flinched. “Stealing songs, y’say? By the Swordfather, we’re in a heap o’ trouble, then!”

He looked past Fiona and raised a hand as the hall door opened behind her.

“Nitaya! As my astrologer, why did y’not tell me o’ this travesty! Surely the stars cried out a warning!”

Fiona gave a side glance at the new arrival as she crossed to the table and joined the baron and the priest. She was a beautiful woman of middle age, with shimmering black hair streaked with lines of gold. She studied Fiona intently as she settled into her chair, and suddenly Fiona was

certain that Nitaya was the person who'd stared at her from the window above the castle gate. The tingling sensation she had felt returned.

"The stars gave no such warning, m'lord," said the woman.

Long gone were the days when the rulers of Caith could openly host a mage as an advisor to their court. The influence of the Fatherites ran too deep in the country now, especially so close to the southern border, hence the common cover of "astrologer" or "diviner" that allowed the strange sight of a practitioner of the old ways and a priest sitting down to breakfast together in a Fatherite household.

"M'lord," Fiona said, as calm as she could. "When I say that songs are being stolen, I did not mean that pages of words and notes were being stolen, but the songs themselves, removed wholesale from the memories of your people. A song sung to this thief results in it somehow vanishing entirely. No one remembers how to sing it, how to play it, or what it was about. It is gone."

The priest pursed his lips, further creasing a face already full of wrinkles and spite. "My Lord Falmar," he said, "I believe she is referring to local songs related to outdated heathen beliefs. Their absence is no great loss, for they were nonsense to begin with, and have already been mostly abandoned in favor of the epic ballads of the Swordfather."

"No great loss!" Fiona blurted. "You calcified old husk. Y' wouldn't know an epic ballad if it punched y'in—"

"Hoy!" roared the baron, and for a moment the whole room rang like a gong. "You can't insult Father Unther like that! Yer one more word from going over the balustrade."

Fiona clamped her lips shut, but her anger still fumed.

"Now," Falmar continued. "Who knows the truth of this tale? Bard! Is she makin' it all up?"

The bard on the balcony stopped playing and stood, then turned and lowered his hood as he entered the room.

Fiona's heart dropped.

The years had taken a physical toll on her uncle Tav-

eon. His once-handsome features had slackened and coarsened, and his nose was red and veined. A thin white scar she didn't recognize crossed his cheek and jaw, hinting at a painful story. Despite all that, it struck Fiona just how much he looked like her father—except far more sad.

“Hello, Fiona.”

Fiona gaped. “You’re the song thief. But . . .”

“My lord,” said Taveon, bowing to the baron. “This is my brother’s daughter, whom I raised after his untimely passing. It’s been many years since we’ve seen each other, when she stormed off in a fit of youthful petulance. I’d hoped time and worldly experience would have given her wisdom, but clearly it has not. She is still the overly nosy child she always was.”

“How could you?” Fiona said to her uncle. “You loved Baedish songs and the Baedish people. Now you’re robbing them blind? Why?”

“Taveon,” the baron demanded. “What is she on about?”

“She has a fundamental misunderstanding of my studies of Baedish culture, m’lord, and will likely stir unrest against you and our efforts to aid the temple if allowed to walk free.”

The baron nodded. “Aye. She looks the sort. All right.” He waved to the guard who had brought Fiona in. “Lock her up. My eggs are gettin’ cold.”

“Y’ can’t arrest me!” Fiona barked. “I haven’t done anything!”

“I’m sorry, Fiona,” said Taveon. “I will come and speak to you soon.”

“Go piss up a rope, y’son of a goat!”

The last thing she saw as she was dragged out into the hall were the eyes of Nitaya the astrologer, staring at her with the same intensity as they had before.

Chapter Seven

The cell Fiona occupied was little more than a couple of paces square, with rough stone walls, floor, and ceiling, and it was entirely dark. At times, the cold became unbearable, and Fiona knew night had settled around the castle. She shivered so hard that she couldn't sleep.

The only interaction she had—if you could call it that—was when, at long intervals, a guard silently slid a bowl of bread and watery soup through a slot in the door.

“Can I have a blanket, please?” she asked the guard, hating that her voice trembled as she spoke. He either failed to hear her or ignored her.

Despite his promise, Taveon did not come to speak to her.

He had been a part of Fiona's life for as long as she could remember. Her parents and her uncle and her, all roaming the roads together, a family of bards, letting the wind take them from town to town in a chaos of love and laughter and song that gave her a lifelong passion for music.

Everything changed when her parents had drowned in the Branwyck. Fiona had been fourteen at the time, heartbroken and with only her uncle to care for her. He had tried, at least at first, but in his grief he grew bitter, constantly blaming himself for her parents' loss, constantly drinking, and after a few months, had stopped talking to Fiona at all. Then one night, drunk and stumbling, he had swung a knife at her when she tried to stop him from falling in a ditch. Fiona had stormed away in a rage and never looked back.

Now, nearly twenty years later, she found him somehow magically stealing songs from the people of the lowlands. How had he come to this? What had led him down such a dark path—or had he always been dark? In her memory he was the man she knew before her parents died, happy, laughing, full of jokes and songs, or the man she knew after, brooding, silent, and dangerous, but she was never able to imagine those two men as the same person. Sometimes she wondered if it was her who had caused the fracture between them. Was that why he had locked her up—because she was the source of his darkness?

As if things couldn't get worse, more and more songs vanished from Fiona's memory as the unmeasurable time passed. Every time she woke she would try to sing all the songs she knew, as a way to pass the time, as a way to stay sane, as a way to remember who she was, but with each waking she remembered fewer than the day before.

Sometime during her fourth or possibly fifth attempt at sleep, a hissing voice tickled her ear.

"Fiona?"

She lifted her head.

"H-hello?" she whispered.

A flickering light shone through the food slot, then a gnarled gray arm reached through it. A trow's arm.

"Fiona?"

Her heart leapt. "Soriac!"

She rushed to the door and peered through the slot. The arm was replaced by Soriac's knobby face.

He grinned at her. "It's you! I found ye!"

"How'd y'get in here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm a wizard."

"Can y'get me outta here?"

"Stand aside." The trow's face vanished from the slot.

Fiona jumped up and crushed herself into the corner next to the door. "What are y'gonna do?" she asked. "Fire? Lightnin'? Should I cover my—?"

With a crack like thunder, the lock and handle blew off the door and spanged off the back wall, nearly ricocheting into her.

"What was that?" she cried.

Soriac pushed the door open and peeked in at her, beaming and holding a lamp. "Trap zap!"

"If you say so," she muttered. "Let's hope it didn't alert the—"

Questioning voices echoed in the distance.

Fiona froze, then glared at Soriac. "You didn't take care of the guards?"

"Didn't need to. Made myself invisible."

"Well, quick! Do it again!"

He shook his head. "Sorry. The spell takes an hour— and a duck."

Fiona groaned. "Of all the cockamamie rescues. It's going to be both of us behind bars now. Come on, we better—"

The trow held up a hand. "Wait. Look what I found."

He pulled something from the pack where he kept his spellbook and handed it to her.

Fiona's heart leapt. "My harp! I could kiss ye!"

Soriac's face scrunched in disgust.

Fiona laughed. "Just an expression. Let's go."

They stepped into the narrow hallway of the dungeon. Footsteps were coming from the left. Fiona gestured deeper into the cells.

"This way," she said. "Maybe we'll be able to slip by while they search."

They backed down the hall and hid in a shadowy alcove.

The footsteps grew louder, and lamplight began to throw dancing shadows on the walls. Three guards appeared. When they noticed her cell door open, they peered inside.

Fiona held her breath and prayed to the Fian and the Swordfather and whoever else might be listening that all three would go in to investigate. But only one stepped into the cell while the other two stayed outside and looked this way and that. And the investigator emerged only a second later.

“She’s gone, Captain.”

The captain cursed, and Fiona recognized him as the one who had nearly kept her from entering the castle when she first arrived.

“We didn’t pass her on the way,” said the captain, “which means she’s still here. Find her!”

He and the two guards turned in Fiona and Soriac’s direction. She cringed further back into the shadows.

“Any spells handy?” she whispered, looking down at the trow.

Soriac was licking his thumb and paging frantically through his spellbook. “Uh . . . looking . . .”

They needed a way out. Fiona bit her lip, frantically trying to come up with an idea. She thought of the magical song she’d sung to distract the torch-wielding mob outside the Blue Highwayman Inn. It could work, she thought.

Taking a calming breath, she readied her harp and strummed a dark chord. But then, as the guards’ heads snapped toward the sound, the melody that followed fizzled in the air. She strummed the first chord again. Now she couldn’t even be sure it was the right one.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, panic rising in her chest.

She’d forgotten the song. It was gone like all the others.

“You there!” shouted the captain. “Come out where we can see you!”

"Where'd that trow come from?" asked one of the guards.

"Grab them!" yelled the captain.

Fiona looked back over her shoulder. The corridor ended just a few yards farther on. The only possible way to escape was to charge the guards. But unarmed and outnumbered, they stood no chance.

"Got it." Soriac set his spellbook on the floor and held up his hands. His fingers flexed as he spoke strange words.

"Tell me, Soriac," begged Fiona. "Tell me what you're—!"

Sparks emanated from the trow's fingertips as he drew a complicated sigil in the air.

The guards charged.

The air in front of Soriac tore open, and out of a whirling void, a cloud of bees exploded and swarmed at the guards.

They swatted and shrieked as the swarm found and stung every bit of exposed flesh.

"Great work," Fiona said, suppressing a chill at the sight of the screaming soldiers. "Come on!"

She and Soriac ran past, covering their heads with their arms, but they needn't have worried, as the bees seemed to care only for the captain and the guards.

"Which way?" cried Fiona.

"Up the stairs and to the left!" called Soriac.

They rounded a corner and found the stairs ahead of them. Fiona bounded up them three at a time, then stopped at the door at the top to let Soriac catch up.

"Hurry!"

She took his arm and turned through the door—and came face to face with Taveon, flanked by six more guards, who raised swords and shields at the sight of her.

Taveon lifted a hand to halt them.

"Always the clever one, weren't you, Fiona?"

"At least I'm not a thief," she snapped. "What happened to you?"

Her uncle reached into his robes and withdrew a small book with a black leather cover and a brown string wound around it. He held it up for her to see.

"I'm just collecting songs, like all bards do."

"We collect them, aye!" cried Fiona. "But we don't make them vanish!"

"They're vanishing on their own," Taveon said. "More every day. How many have been lost since you were born?"

"So you're making it worse?"

"It's the only way to save them," he said. "If nothing is done, they'll be gone in a generation or two. But keep them here"—he waved the book again—"and they'll be preserved forever."

"Yer mad! Write 'em down if y'must, but what's the sense in stealin' 'em from folks' memories?"

Taveon's back straightened. "Because the folk can't be trusted. They were changing them, watering them down, and so were the Fatherites."

"But you're in league with the Fatherites! I heard y'say so! Yer helping those who would destroy our ways and stories."

Taveon curled his lip at Soriac. "Ha! If you want to know who's really destroying our land, look beside you. Trow, elves, dwarves—every one of them a corrupter and a betrayer and a spreader of disease. They want to wipe us out, you know. They want this realm for their own."

Fiona stared, more shocked by this than anything her uncle had yet said. "But . . . you were friends with elves and dwarves, I remember. You and Mother and Father. You shared songs with them."

Taveon shot a glance at the guards who stood at his back. "Your father did, perhaps, and lured your mother into such wickedness, but not me. I was no dupe like him."

"Don't you speak of my father like that!"

Taveon laughed. "You know nothing of your father, girl."

"I know he was better than ye."

“He was more charming, perhaps,” Taveon said with a snarl, “but no better. He was a corrupter, and corrupted your mother. He had to go.”

His words were like a giant’s punch to her gut. It was suddenly hard to breathe. “What did you say?”

“Did you know I met your mother before your father did? She and I would have been married had he not followed us everywhere and charmed her away with his wit and his smile and the things he learned from the elves. Even after you were born, and we all pretended to be a happy family, I knew your mother would come to love me if your father wasn’t around.”

Tears burned in Fiona’s eyes. “Murderer!”

He turned from her and motioned to the soldiers. “Take her. Kill the trow.”

The soldiers charged forward, swords high. Fiona had no weapons, or any possessions besides her harp. No quick song, magical or otherwise, could save her. She backed toward the stairs, shielding Soriac.

A low boom thundered through the hall, and with it, the air warmed, heating her skin until beads of sweat appeared.

A flash of light banished the shadows and revealed a woman floating between Fiona and the guards. She wore the baron’s purple robes, but her hood was thrown back. It was Nitaya, the baron’s astrologer, power radiating from her like the sun.

“Stand down!” she shouted at the guards, thrusting her arms out, and whether it was by fear or by magic, they obeyed.

Taveon stormed forward. “How dare you, witch? I’m acting on the baron’s orders.”

“And he is acting on your lies.”

With a sweep of her arm Nitaya made a circle before her, somehow tearing reality open and letting bright white light stream into the shadowed hallway.

“Quickly,” she said to Fiona. “Through the portal!”

Fear of glowing holes in the air wasn't going to stop Fiona from getting out of that prison. She pried Soriac—who stared at Nitaya with wide eyes—from her leg, then dragged him through the portal, feeling a tingle ripple across her body as she did. The sorceress swiftly followed, then closed the hole behind them, which cut off Taveon's enraged screams.

They were on a hillside above Camnag, which glowed red and purple in the swiftly fading twilight, but Fiona didn't see it. Her emotions had robbed her of sight. She fell to her knees.

The realization that her uncle was the song thief, that he'd killed her father and possibly her mother, that he hated everything she'd thought he loved, rocked her to her core. She thought back again to when they had all traveled the road together, trying to recall seeing any of the hatred he'd had for her father, or his lust for her mother. She only remembered him happy and smiling and eager to sing songs. Had that been only a mask?

A tear leaked down her cheek.

Soriac took a tentative step toward her, then put his calloused hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry about your mother and father—and your uncle."

Fiona clutched his hand like it was a lifeline, and they stayed that way for a long moment. Finally, Fiona stood again and wiped her tears away.

"Thank ye, Soriac," she said. "Thank ye."

Nitaya stepped forward. "Forgive me, bard, for leaving you so long in the dark. I had hoped to rescue you sooner, without revealing my true nature, but Taveon was suspicious. I was watched."

"Well, I thank you for exposin' yerself t'save me," Fiona said. "But why keep company with such a nest of vipers in the first place?"

The sorceress pursed her lips. "Lord Falmar is not a bad man. I had hoped that by staying, I could free him from the clutches of the . . ."

“Of the Fatherites, aye?” Fiona asked.

Nitaya shook her head. “I fear there are worse things than the sword priests abroad in the world at this moment.”

“What things?”

“That is another reason I stayed,” the sorceress said. “To find that out. Your uncle and Father Unther are both part of it, whatever it is, but I could never learn their purpose or whom they served. Whomever or whatever it may be, it is for them that your uncle steals the songs, not Falmar.”

Fiona curled her lip. “Well, whomever or whatever it may be is going t’be mighty disappointed when I stop him and take ’em all back, aren’t they?”

She looked back toward the castle. “My uncle’s taken my family and the songs I love. But I’m not done. Not by a long shot.”

Chapter Eight

“The songs are held magically within Taveon’s book,” said Nitaya. “That much I know. I have seen the words of many songs appear on its pages as they left the tongues of their singers. Your uncle did not write them down, only had the book open on his knee as they sang.”

“So how do we get them back out?” Fiona asked.

“There’s no such spell in *my* book,” Soriac said.

They were back in the woods outside Camnag, sitting up late beside a low campfire.

“I have learned friends who may know,” said Nitaya. “But it will take some time to find them. In the meantime, it is vital that the book is taken from Taveon. One, to keep him from stealing more songs, and two, to keep him from giving the ones he has to his masters. I am convinced that his purpose in taking them is darker than just keeping them for himself.”

“Can’t you just open another door in the air like you did before?” asked Soriac. “So we can run in and grab it.”

"No longer," said Nitaya. "Falmar's priest has warded his castle against me now."

"Then I'll get the book from him," Fiona said.

"How?" Soriac asked.

Fiona growled. "You keep asking the hard questions, don't you?"

The next day, after saying goodbye to Nitaya in the morning and breaking down their meager camp, Fiona finally had an idea.

It wasn't a great idea, as far as ideas went, but it was better than storming Falmar's castle single-handedly, or somehow separating Taveon from his guards the next time he went out and hitting him over the head, or training an owl to swoop down and steal the book, which had been her earlier ideas.

"Aha!" she said.

"Aha?" Soriac asked.

Fiona pursed her lips in thought. "D'ye remember when we were in Luncarty's Loch, hearing about the feast of Luncarty's Homecoming?"

Soriac frowned. "Er . . . it celebrates the day Luncarty came back from his adventures, just like Luncarty's Leaving celebrates the day he left."

"Exactly," Fiona said. "And it's just a bit more than a week away."

"So?" the trow asked.

Fiona fixed him with an anxious smile. "We are going t'host a singing contest!"

So began a week of frantic preparation.

First they returned to Luncarty's Loch and spoke secretly to old Graeme. He didn't think for a moment that

Fiona's idea would work, but he was not about to say no to a singing contest honoring Luncarty's favorite son. He agreed to prepare the village for a potentially huge crowd and sent the townsfolk in every direction across the lowlands to spread the word. Critically, some went to Castle Falmar and invited the baron and his court to the festival, assuring them that there would be accommodations and seating fit for the gentry, as well as a singing contest that might interest their bard.

Fiona and Soriac hit the road, too, traveling from town to town to sing a few songs and spread the word that a great festival was coming with the full moon, and that every bard in Caith was invited to come and vie for the honor of being named the greatest singer of the age.

Soriac did his part by launching magical fireworks into the sky to illustrate how exciting the event would be. And though Fiona was loath to admit it, his conjurings had grown more confident and assured with each show, and he was getting much better at keeping the unintended consequences to a minimum. He set things on fire only twice, and only once terrified an entire town with an illusory dragon.

Six days later, with the full moon only two days away, Fiona and Soriac returned to Luncarty's Loch, exhausted but cautiously hopeful that their scheme would work.

"I know y'invited 'im," said Graeme. "But what makes y'think yer uncle'll come? Or the baron for that matter?"

They were having a meal at Graeme's home, which was unusually quiet, as half his family had not yet returned from their travels across Caith.

"Taveon will come," Fiona said. "He won't miss an opportunity to steal more songs. And besides, he'll have been told by now that it's me behind it all. So he'll come to drag me back to my deep, dark cell. And the baron will come to laugh as it happens."

"And what's to stop that from being exactly what happens?" Soriac asked.

Fiona squirmed. This was the weakest part of her plan.

“It won’t,” she said finally, pretending calm. “At least not without my uncle joining the contest first. His ego won’t let him decline, and that’ll be my chance to get the book and toss it to you before they carry me away.”

“Ah,” the trow said, and concentrated on his dinner.

The morning of the festival, hundreds of people from all across Caith descended on Luncarty’s Loch. Streets that normally saw only a few sheep and the occasional wedding procession were suddenly packed with families and food sellers, beggars and beer stalls, wanderers, merchants, pick-pockets, and, of course, bards by the score, all sizing each other up and ostentatiously tuning their instruments.

Fortunately, the villagers had risen to the occasion, rebuilding their shoreside stage to be larger and sturdier, and festooning it with banners all showing the baron’s coat of arms. They’d also built a shaded viewing stand just for the baron and his court.

Now, if only he would come.

As soon as the sun was fully above the eastern horizon, Graeme opened the festival by singing “Luncarty’s Homecoming,” then welcomed everybody to the town and began the contest. It was like no other Fiona had ever attended. Usually the old favorites were trotted out and you heard a dozen versions of “Snow in Summer” or “Across the Seven Realms,” but today those songs were gone—stolen—and the bards were forced to play their strangest and most obscure numbers. This made the quality a bit mixed, as these songs were not their most rehearsed. They were also unfamiliar to the crowd, which consequently didn’t cheer the way they did for better-known songs, so it was a quieter contest than Fiona had hoped.

She had a hard time concentrating on it anyway because she kept looking around for any sign of Taveon or the

baron.

Finally, just as lunchtime was starting to slide into midafternoon, a rich carriage rolled through the town, trailing a large entourage of guards and attendants.

Though she had been hoping all day that this moment would come, now that it was here, Fiona's gut tied itself into a knot.

"Here we go," she muttered to Soriac.

The trow's ears flattened in fright. "Good luck."

The carriage stopped near the viewing stand and the baron stepped out. He was wearing formal robes in his usual purple, embroidered in gold with his shield-and-horn sigil, accompanied by a beautiful young woman who might have been his daughter—or possibly not. Father Unther followed him, and Taveon took up the rear, carrying a fine lute case.

Fiona breathed a sigh that was half relief, half terror when she saw him, and she made the sign of the Spring Wife, hoping all her planning would bear pleasing fruit.

"Right," she said. "Time to face the music."

As the baron and his entourage took their seats in the viewing stand, Fiona bowed in welcome.

"My lord, lady, yer worships," she said. "Welcome to Luncarty's Homecoming."

The baron smiled. "Ah, the songbird who escaped her cage. You know we'll be arresting you later."

"Why not now?" Taveon said, glowering at her.

The baron slapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, bard. She arranged this whole thing for our benefit. We might as well see what she intended, eh?"

The baron leaned on the railing of the stand. "What's the plan, eh? A trap door in the stage? Do you plan to steal Taveon's little book and run off with it?"

"Not steal it, my lord," Fiona said. "Win it."

The baron's eyes widened. "Win it? And how are you going to do that?"

"Another contest, just between my uncle and myself, after the singing contest is done."

“What manner of contest?” asked Taveon, suspicious.

“It’s simple,” Fiona said. “I challenge you to a true bard’s contest. We will each sing songs from memory, one at a time. Nothing from a *book*. Nothing *written down*. Each of us sings as many songs as we know, and the first one to run out of songs loses.”

Taveon’s eyes glittered. “I accept.”

Fiona held up a finger. “You haven’t heard the conditions yet.”

“Name them.”

“If I lose,” Fiona said, “I willingly submit myself as your prisoner, and you may do with me as you wish.”

The baron rolled his eyes. “You were going to be our prisoner anyway. What else?”

“I will proclaim my uncle the greatest bard in living memory, better even than my father or mother.”

Taveon licked his lips. “And if I lose?”

“If you lose, you give me the book in which you’ve written all the songs you’ve stolen.”

“No,” said Taveon. “I refuse.”

“Come on, Taveon,” said the baron. “It’s a sporting wager. Take it! You can’t possibly lose, can you? And what’s the loss of a book? You can write them down again.”

“My lord—”

“Take the wager!” snarled the baron. “I command it.”

Taveon bowed, looking very grim. “Very well, my lord. I accept, but I too have a condition.”

Fiona narrowed her eyes suspiciously and waited.

Taveon smiled. “My niece is a great collector of songs and has gathered them from all over, but in honor of you, my lord, and our proud Baedish heritage, all the songs we sing must be from the lowlands.”

“Granted,” Falmar said. “A capital idea.”

Fiona’s heart sunk. Her uncle’s condition had been a brilliant double stroke. First, it would allow his book to steal dozens more Baedish songs, which seemed to be his primary focus, and second, it robbed her of more than two thirds

of the arrows in her quiver. She knew many Baedish songs, true, but just as many Fichti peans and Einarr chanties, certainly far more than her uncle, who had been the most Baedish of bards. He had stolen her greatest advantage. Still, now was no time to show weakness.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ve been collecting since we parted, and I’ve still got twice as many songs in my head as you’ve so far stolen. And you can’t use any from your book.”

“I will still win. I have been collecting since before you were born.”

“Good,” said the baron. “That’s settled. “Now, let’s watch the singers, and someone bring us some ale!”

A deep sense of guilt settled on Fiona as she watched the competition, for she knew every song was a sacrifice to her uncle’s sinister book. Each time a singer finished singing, their song faded from their memory. Without fail, every bard who stepped off the stage wore a look of confusion and loss where there should’ve been joy.

“What if y’ lose?” Soriac said, at her side.

“I won’t,” Fiona said, determined.

“But what if?”

When Fiona didn’t reply, he continued. “What if we leave instead? Never come back. Ye don’t need t’do this.”

Fiona shook her head. “I do. This is a wrong only a bard can right. Bards tell songs and preserve the past. That is the whole of our job. My uncle and his book are swallowing our songs and past whole. If he wins, the Baedish won’t be the Baedish anymore. They won’t be anything.”

“We don’t have t’be what we were born,” Soriac said.

Fiona glanced at the trow. He was certainly proof of that. “Aye, but it still shapes us. For good or ill, we grow from the soil that bore us. Taveon and his mysterious masters want to make that soil barren, a salted field. That can’t

happen.”

Soriac sighed. “Well, good luck.”

“Thanks,” Fiona said. “But listen, if I fail, do me a favor and give us some big distracting fireworks so we can make a run for it, aye?”

Soriac brightened. “Y’ mean—?”

“The bigger the better,” she said with a grin.

Soriac’s lip curled with sinister delight. “I’ll be ready.”

Finally, the singing competition ended and the winner was announced, a young man from Tangramayne with a high, pure voice that tugged at the heart and brought a tear to the eye.

Graeme took the stage again.

“An’ now, we’ve somethin’ special fer ye. A contest to see who can sing the most songs from memory, between the baron’s bard, Taveon, and she who put this day together, Fiona the harper!”

A burst of cheers washed over Fiona as she took the stage. She grinned and waved, though her stomach churned. Not from stage fright, just utter terror that her uncle would win.

Her uncle joined her, to lesser applause. “You’re a fool,” he muttered through his fake smile. “You cannot win. Let go of this righteous quest of yours.”

“Ye disgust me,” Fiona muttered back, still waving. “Regardless of how this ends, you’ll answer for killing my father. Did y’ kill my mother, too?”

Taveon looked at her now, and she saw the answer in his eyes.

“Bastard,” she said, no longer muttering. “I thought y’ loved her?”

“She dove into the river after I pushed your father in. Took me an hour of running down the bank to find a place to hook her out, but when I tried, she spit in my face, so . . .” He sighed. “I just stepped away.”

Fiona balled her fists. The world was red around her. She could hardly see or hear or think. All she wanted to do

was tear her uncle's throat out. "Murderer!"

"Get on with it!" yelled the baron.

Taveon gave Fiona a sweet smile. "You first."

He stepped to the side of the stage and the crowd quieted as everyone waited for Fiona to begin, but her uncle's perfectly timed revelation had scrambled her head. She could barely remember her name, let alone any songs. She took a deep breath and tried to pull herself together. With shaking hands she cradled her harp and adjusted the strings. There was one advantage to being a Baedish bard in a situation like this—the Baed had plenty of sad songs, so she sang one she'd learned from a weaver north of Earrann: "The Road to Talford Town."

Glad I woke upon the morn
Remembering the vow I'd sworn
To love and honor and obey
My love upon my wedding day

But as I yawned my dreams away
My love beside me did not lay
Nor in the house did she I find
Nor note or word of any kind

Friends and neighbors heard my cry
And said they'd seen her walking by
Barefoot in her wedding gown
On the road to Talford town

There were many more verses, each sadder than the last, and it all ended in blood and madness and death, as a good ballad should. The crowd howled its approval, but by the time Fiona took her bow and stepped to the side of the stage, the song had already vanished from her memory. She'd known, of course, that it would happen, but it still broke her heart. It was like sacrificing a child to save the rest of her family, and it would be the same with every song. Nor

did the fact that she might get them all back if she won give her heart, as it was just as likely that she wouldn't win.

Across the stage Taveon smiled to himself and tucked his damned book into his doublet.

He received less applause than she had, which she hoped rankled him, though, veteran that he was, he showed no sign of it.

He took a moment to tune his lute, then plucked a chord and sang. It had been many years since Fiona had heard him sing, but as soon as he began, she couldn't help but remember how much she'd once loved to hear him. He had a deep voice, powerful and moving, and it was hard to think that the heart behind it was as cold and dark as a cave.

The song he sang was one Fiona had planned to perform, one she hadn't thought he knew. Another sad ballad, this time about a boy who pines for a girl who loves a man blessed with elven glammers. The parallels with Taveon's love triangle with her father and mother couldn't have been plainer, and though she knew they were meant to upset her, and thus she should ignore him, she could not, crying hot tears at the last tragic verse.

The crowd cheered loudly when he finished—far more loudly than when he'd begun—and Fiona had to admit that he might indeed be one of the finest bards in Caith. As well as a murderer and a knife-twisting manipulator.

"A dirty trick, you bastard," she snarled at him as she took his place in the center of the stage.

"Every song has its perfect audience," said Taveon. "I taught you that."

Back and forth they went, song after song, digging into their deepest reserves. After each song, Fiona prayed to the Fian that her uncle would be tapped out. He might have more years on her, but she had dedicated her life to learning as many songs as she could, so she had hope.

Hours later, with the sun long down and the moon rising, Fiona stepped once again to the middle of the stage and realized, with a sickening sinking of her stomach, that she'd

run out of Baedish songs.

The ones she'd already performed had been consumed by Taveon's book, and all the others she could remember were from the Inshriach, the Einarr Isles, or some other region, and didn't count.

The worst of it was that she knew her uncle had run out, too. The last song he'd sung had hardly been a song at all, more a nursery rhyme as much associated with northern Lestrass as it was with southern Caith, and his look when he had finished was one of terror and apprehension. If she could squeeze out just one more song, she would have the contest won. But how?

The crowd waited patiently while Fiona tried to scrape one last melody from the bottom of her mind's barrel, but after she had stood silent for nearly a minute, they began to mutter to themselves.

Taveon curled his lips in a victorious smile. "Cat got your tongue, lass?"

One Baedish song did come to mind, but that was "The Lay of Svante" by Gillan the harper, and she didn't know enough of it to pretend it was an entire song. She didn't even know a whole verse, just a few scraps, and with her defeat looming, she didn't dare risk losing that tiny bit. If she lost everything else, she would at least keep that.

In the viewing stand, Baron Falmar stood and put his hands on his hips. "Well, harper? Is that it, then?"

Fiona chewed her lip and looked around, hoping to find some reason to stall, and saw Soriac, hunched in the shadows on the far side of the stage staring at her with sad, desperate eyes.

Like a lightning flash, it came to her.

"Not yet!" Fiona shouted. "I have one more!"

The crowd cheered, and Taveon gaped.

"All right, then," said the baron. "Let's have it. I'm missin' my dinner."

Not daring to hope, and praying to whatever Baedish gods might be listening, Fiona sang the last Baedish song

she knew.

Myyyyyyy mother told me, talk-talk
'Bout Channie Channock, chock-chock
He broke his chains-o, lock-lock
Snapped master's canes-o, knock-knock
Ate all his pasties, chomp-chomp
Drank all his whiskeys, drop-drop
And that's the song-o, talk-talk
Of Channie Channock, chock-chock!

Stunned silence greeted her for the first verse. The crowd stared at her in utter confusion, and she feared she had lost them, but when she started the second verse she added hand claps, and they began to clap along, tentatively at first, and then with gusto, laughing at the silly lyrics and echoing the shouts at the end of each line.

The crowd erupted with applause at the end, louder than anything yet, and Fiona grinned at Taveon, whose face was red with rage.

With a growl, he strode on stage and addressed the baron. "M'lord, that rubbish doesn't count!"

"Why not?" Fiona demanded.

"The conditions were that we would sing only Baedish songs!"

Fiona's eyes narrowed. "It *is* Baedish."

Taveon laughed and addressed the baron. "That pathetic noise was not a song of our homeland. It a trow song! If you can even call it a song!"

He sneered at Fiona. "Did you learn it from that filthy dog that follows you around? The miserable creature should be put down for uttering such nonsense in civilized lands. And you're no better if you think you can convince Lord Falmar that such drek is Baedish!"

"Yer uncle is correct," Baron Falmar declared. "The song is not a Baedish song, and therefore, yer forfeit. I declare Taveon the Troubadour the winner!"

Fiona opened her mouth to protest. “M’lord, the trow have lived in these lands longer than—”

“Stop talking,” said Falmar. “I told you, I’m missin’ my dinner, so this nonsense is done. Taveon is the winner. That song you sung is—is—”

He paused as the feeling that had swept through the crowd so many times that night touched them all once again. The trow song wobbled in their memory, then faded away, leaving a hole where it had just been. Fiona could see by the crowd’s faces, and by the faces of Taveon and the baron and the rest of his court, that her uncle’s book had once again worked its evil magic.

A surge of triumph rose in Fiona.

“You say the song isn’t Baedish, uncle?” she cried. “That it isn’t a song at all? Well, it seems your book disagrees!”

She turned to the baron. “I know you’ve felt it, m’lord—Taveon’s book has been stealing Baedish songs since we started. Every song y’ heard today, along with so many more over the past couple o’ weeks, has been taken from your memory and the memories of your people by this song thief!”

Falmar scowled. “I don’t know what you—”

“Can you remember the song, m’lord?” Fiona asked. “The one I just sang? Any of the day’s songs? There were scores of them! Can you remember even one?”

Falmar scratched his beard, looking like a confused bull.

“The book steals Baedish songs, m’lord, and the trow song is gone. Thus it must be a Baedish song!”

“A trow song cannot be a Baedish song!” shouted Taveon.

“You’re wrong,” Fiona said, “Whether y’ like it or not, my friend Soriac, who taught me that song, is as much a part of this land as either o’ us. He and generations of trow before him were born in the lowlands and are as Baedish as you.”

She looked behind her to find Soriac staring with wide

eyes. She motioned him forward.

“Soriac taught me that song,” she said. “And I would have lost this contest if not for him.”

The crowd cheered and started chanting “Fiona wins! Fiona wins!”

Fiona looked to the baron and saw him considering all she’d said. Finally, he grunted and stood and raised his hands.

“Who am I to deny my people? The song stands! Fiona the harper wins!”

The cheers became roars. People leapt and clapped and hugged each other. A tear leaked from Fiona’s eyes. Taveon steamed with fury. He spun on his heel and started for the back of the stage.

“Oy!” Fiona called to him. “You’ve forgotten something!”

“Not while I breathe,” Taveon said without looking back, and ran.

A sudden forceful wind knocked Fiona to her knees. The whole crowd gasped and turned.

Fiona watched in amazement as the wind lifted her uncle into the air, carrying him back to the stage and dropping him with a grunt in front of her. Beside Fiona, Soriac stopped chanting, and she realized he’d cast a spell to ensnare her uncle. He hurried forward and pulled the book from Taveon’s doublet, then turned and, with a small bow, presented it to Fiona.

“No!” Taveon shoved Soriac aside and grabbed for the book.

“Now, now, Taveon,” called the baron. “Y’agreed t’the conditions, aye? Don’t be a sore loser.”

Taveon growled but lowered his hand.

Falmar raised his goblet to Fiona. “There, now, lass. Y’ have your prize. And if you’re right about it, I’d burn it here and now. I’m missin’ some of those songs already.”

“No, my lord,” came a voice from the crowd. “Destroy it and the songs will be lost forever.”

All eyes turned to see who had spoken. Stepping through the crowd was a familiar woman dressed in rags.

"Nitaya," said the baron, his eyes narrowing. "I thought I banished ye."

"On the advice of a traitor," said Nitaya. "And I believe you've seen enough tonight to prove my previous concerns about Taveon were correct."

"My lord," said Taveon, stepping forward. "You cannot take the word of this witch against mine!"

The baron waved his guards forward. "Hold him. We'll sort this out later, but what about this book?"

"Yes," Fiona said. "If we can't destroy it without risking the songs, how do we get 'em back?"

Nitaya stepped onto the stage and held out a hand to Fiona. "May I?"

Fiona handed over the book, and the astrologer peered at it in the moonlight. "I traveled far to learn what was known of this book, and found the answer at last in a friend's library. The book is like a maze, trapping the songs within. They must be led out, called to, with a song."

"A song?" Fiona said. "But if you sing the book a song, it will take it!"

"Aye," Nitaya said. "But the *right* song, sung with a collective strength greater than that of the book, could free what it has imprisoned."

Fiona's heart, which had momentarily soared with hope, now sank again. She knew of no more Baedish songs. Everything that might've helped had already been stolen and locked in the book.

Except . . .

Pulse pounding, Fiona turned to the crowd.

"Bards, will you help me? I heard many touching and powerful voices today."

"You lied to us," cried a voice from the crowd. "We lost every song we sang!"

"Tis true," she replied. "You have a right to be angry with me. But I think I have a way forward, so I'm begging

you, help me. I need your collective strength.”

A couple of bards near the back of the crowd threw rude gestures in her direction and walked away.

“The Lay of Svante!” she called.

The retreating bards paused. Every singer, harper, troubadour, minstrel, and dirt-poor poet stared at her. Like her, they all sought that long-lost song. Even Taveon, now shackled, was paying attention.

Fiona handed the book to Soriac, then lifted her harp into her arms and strummed a chord.

“Join me if you know any more,” she said, and began to sing.

Lady Svante
Young throughout the years
Lady Svante
Never sheds a tear

She stopped when she ran out of words and watched the crowd as she strummed through the chords again. “Anyone else?”

The crowd was silent.
“Anyone?” Fiona called.

Lady Svante
Lives but for today . . .

sang a voice from the crowd. It was the young bard from Tangramayne who had won the contest. He stepped forward and Fiona strummed along with him, encouraging him to continue.

Lady Svante
Hides her heart away

He finished, and that was all. He shrugged, but another older bard stood.

To Skara Brae she came
To hear a harper sing
To lure him to her bower
To tie him with a string

A female bard with a northern accent added another part.

The harper had a wife
But Svante did not care
She would take what she desired
For all in love is fair

Fiona played on, and one by one, bards from all over the crowd sang bits and pieces of the song. Some weren't in the right order, some didn't quite fit the meter, but it was coming together. She could feel an energy building in the air, but it was not strong enough—not yet.

The harper cursed fair Svante
For toying with him so
“My wife she died a-doubting me
And never will she know”

“Around again!” Fiona called as someone sang what seemed to be a final couplet.

This time, as they went through it, voice joined voice, harmonies were sung, meter was corrected, and words were put in the right order as the bards stood and signaled each other across the crowd, working as one to recreate the lost song.

Soriac held up the book excitedly as they sang. “It’s working!”

The leather-bound tome quivered in his outstretched palms, and suddenly the cover burst open, flapping its pages as though they were caught in a heavy wind.

Light and sound erupted from the book, filling the night with a symphony of harmonies, each perfectly accompanying Fiona's harp.

Memories of a hundred hundred songs flooded into Fiona's mind. Tears rolled from her eyes, but she forced them to wait, for she had to finish the lay.

The bards sang on, also weeping and wiping at their eyes, finishing the last verses with hoarse voices and trembling notes.

Lady Svante
Mourns throughout the years
Lady Svante
Sheds a thousand tears
Lady Svante
Would all her riches pay
Lady Svante
To take back just one day

When it was over and all the songs had returned to Fiona's memory, the leather book crumbled to ash and the crowd cheered once more, louder than ever before. Fiona shared a weary smile with Soriac.

She'd never been happier in her life.

"I'll be needin' a new court bard," said Baron Falmar a little while later.

Fiona stood with him behind the stage along with Soriac, Graeme, and Nitaya. The festivities continued without them as more bards took the stage to sing the songs they'd lost and found again.

"Are y'offering me a job, m'lord?" Fiona said.

"Aye," he said, "I believe you proved t' be the greatest bard in Caith tonight."

Fiona felt her cheeks burn. “Well, I appreciate the compliment, but I think I’ll decline. I want t’find out more about who ordered my uncle to steal our songs, and I think that will take me on the road for a while.”

The baron nodded. “Fair enough. And if y’want t’ask him a few questions, y’ll know where to find him.”

Fiona bowed. “Thank you, m’lord.”

Baron Falmar turned to Soriac. “And you, master Soriac? Y’ were instrumental”—he chuckled at his own humor—“in helping Fiona. What favor can I grant ye?”

Fiona thought Soriac’s ears might incinerate judging by how red with embarrassment they turned. “Nothing, my lord. I need nothing.”

The baron smiled. “Well, that’s mighty humble of ye, but I’ll wager there must be somethin’. And there’s certainly a favor y’can grant me.”

Soriac whimpered. “A-aye . . . my lord?”

“The harper tells me you toiled for a necromancer in Skara Brae. I’d like t’hear more about this villain, and what he had y’do. So ye’d honor me if you called upon me so I could hear more o’ your story.”

Soriac bowed convulsively. “I . . . I’d be happy to, my lord.”

“And,” said Nitaya, “now that I am returned to my lord’s service, I could use a worthy apprentice, if you are interested.”

Soriac’s eyes widened. “Me?”

“Surely someone as naturally gifted as yourself deserves to learn the arts properly. Just don’t tell Father Unther.”

Soriac staggered and looked around. “I think I need to sit down.”

Nitaya motioned him toward the outdoor ale garden that had been set up nearby. “Come, let us sit and talk.”

Fiona smiled as the two practitioners walked off together. All was right in the world.

Except—

She turned back to Falmar. “Actually, m’lord, there is one thing y’could do for me.”

“For the woman who caught the song thief, anything!” he replied.

“Well,” she said, scratching the back of her head, “Soriac and I sorta burned down a barn north of Skara Brae. And we might have gotten a friend arrested in Thuath. Both were accidents, but—”

The baron laughed. “I’ll have the barn rebuilt and a word with the authorities of Thuath. And though you might be traveling for a while, everyone needs a home over their head, so I’ll see that ye have enough funds for a cottage t’hang yer harp in, wherever you like.”

Fiona bowed. “Thank ye, my lord. Thank ye!”

Graeme cleared his throat. “Now, lass, I can’t offer y’ money or houses, but y’deserve some reward for all that y’returned to us, so what can I offer ye?”

Fiona grinned. Knowing the people of the lowlands had their songs back was the best reward she could ever hope for, but something else did come to mind.

“Y’ know,” she said, “I could really, really use a drink.”

The Lay of Svante

A hunting went the lady
In search of human hearts
To catch them and to keep them
She used her secret arts

To Skara Brae she came
To hear a harper sing
To lure him to her bower
To tie him with a string

The harper had a wife
But Svante did not care
She would take what she desired
For all in love is fair

Between she and his wife
She bid the harper choose
Then upon him laid a glamour
To be sure she would not lose

Lady Svante
Young throughout the years
Lady Svante
Never sheds a tear
Lady Svante
Lives but for today
Lady Svante
Hides her heart away

Ere the harper could make an answer
Came winter like a knife
It shivered Lady Svante
And felled the harper's wife

"Dear wife," the harper cried
"You know I love you best"
But his wife she did not hear him
She had passed into the west

The harper cursed fair Svante
For toying with him so
"My wife she died a-doubting me
And never will she know"

The heartbreak of the harper
In which she'd played a part
At last pierced Svante's armor

And broke her hidden heart

Lady Svante
Mourns throughout the years
Lady Svante
Sheds a thousand tears
Lady Svante
Would all her riches pay
Lady Svante
To take back just one day

The lady served the harper
'Til the end of his short life
And bade him beg for her forgiveness
When next he saw his wife

And when beside his wife
He was finally laid to rest
Svante prayed for their reunion
Together in the west

And now she walks among us
Her beauty veiled away
To help us and to heal us
And eternal penance pay

Yes, now she walks among us
Until this very day
To help us and to heal us
And eternal penance pay

The End