

TENSION

The inn door slammed, and the mud puddle in which Thandreling had landed found alternative accommodation in his hose.

"Some people are simply not musical," he muttered.

It was an oft-repeated plaint in his chosen vocation: none of his teachers had ever pretended to him that the way of the itinerant bard would be easy. This latest run of failures, however, was already beyond a joke. Since leaving the Pointy Mountains three weeks ago, he had visited fifteen inns and hostelries, and offered to perform for his supper each time. The response had been the same in every single one: immediate and forceful ejection. The effects of sleeping in hedges and eating off compost heaps were starting to tell even on his exceptionally robust constitution. If he was going to make it down the Winding South Road to the coast in time for his permanent summer engagement at the Dancing Mermaid, he had to find some cash from somewhere, and soon. He was running late already.

He looked around him. The inn of which he had made such brief acquaintance stood in the square of Crossways, a village that to him seemed like every other village he had seen in this region: squat houses, a few of stone, more of wood, separated by sketchily cobbled streets: a well in the middle of the square: a slightly larger building with the symbol of the Two above its door; and the inn. The White Bull, said the sign, although the animal portrayed had acquired a dubious greenish mottling. The light from the windows was tantalisingly warm in the dank dusk of early spring.

He got creakingly to his feet. Yes, definitely too many nights out with the hedgehogs. This trend had to be corrected, or the next time he was allowed to sing he'd find the damp had stolen his voice, and that would be that. Bards who can't sing even when requested find themselves on a deepening spiral into starvation.

He fingered the dagger at his belt. It was barely sharp enough to break sealing-wax, but it looked moderately menacing. If he were desperate enough, he could resort to thievery. He had the basic skills. The problem with that approach, though, was that he would then have to travel at least three times as fast, to outstrip the hue and cry that would inevitably

be set upon him. The way he was feeling now, he wasn't sure he could manage a brisk walk for very long.

The door of the inn opened, and Thandreling moved to one side in case the occupants thought he needed a more emphatic dismissal: but all that emerged was one elderly man, pulling his hooded cloak about him and calling farewells to friends inside. Thandreling waited till the door had closed again, and walked quietly after the man, his hand on the hilt of the dagger.

Watching his quarry trudging down the cobbled street, the bard was struck once again by the impression he had received on first entering the inn. The people seemed exhausted, drained, as though they had been under fearful stress for a long time. It had been the same all along this road, in all the tiny communities spaced out at intervals of about a day's walk between the mountains and Great Crossings: the people moved as though something too terrible to bear had happened. Thandreling supposed it must have been a hard winter, or something like that.

When the old man paused for breath, leaning up against a wall, he seized his moment.

"Not a sound," he whispered, holding the dagger against the man's throat while his other hand twisted the man's arm up behind his back, "or it will go hard with you."

The old man nodded, gingerly.

"Do you know who I am?"

Another nod. "Bard from tavern."

"I certainly have been," Thandreling said heatedly, "and I want to know why."

"Why don't ee ask taverner?"

"I'm hardly likely to get this close to him, am I? You're a regular, I guess. You must know what goes on. What do the folk here have against me?"

"Find out f'r eeself." The old man hawked and spat, again without undue movement of the head.

Thandreling suppressed an inward sigh. He had been hoping to avoid this part, but the old fool was obviously determined to be difficult.

"Very well," he said, dropping his voice half an octave and sharpening his accent to an aristocratic edge. "You must be aware that, as a bard, I have been initiated into the

darkest secrets of sorcery. As a peace-loving citizen, I awaken my powers only in dire need and with the greatest reluctance. Nevertheless, should you persist in your intransigence, be aware that the consequences to yourself might well be grave...or worse."

He wasn't sure about the "peace-loving citizen" bit. It sounded political somehow. And to be honest, he hardly looked the part: he was too young, for one thing, barely over thirty, and his tattered yellow doublet, hose and scolloped cloak draped over the lute-case on his back, despite having once belonged to a king, conferred precious little occult charisma. The speech had the desired effect, though: the old man went to jelly all at once, so that Thandreling had to let go his arm and hold him up to stop him cutting his own throat on Thandreling's dagger.

"No, master, no, please...don't ee cast no spells on old Nob...I'll tell ee what ee wants to know, never fear, master..." He was practically weeping with terror. Once again Thandreling marvelled at his own theatrical prowess.

"Speak," he boomed.

"It were the other bard, master."

"Other bard?" He stifled a groan. That was the last thing he needed.

When he had left Western Wind college he had meant to start on the road right away, so that he stood a chance of clearing enough on this run to cover the fee for the next level of scholarship. Midway through the mountains, though, he had run into his one-time companion K, who had paused here on his endless journeying from somewhere to somewhere, had moved into a disused hermitage, and was passing time by distilling a highly inadvisable poteen. Thandreling had spent maybe two, maybe three weeks gloriously skulled on this rat-plonk, and had wambled forth at least a month behind schedule.

Well, he was paying for it now. Some untutored, unregistered novice, armed with a stolen lute or a home-made drum, was cutting in on his territory and either singing so well that the innkeepers didn't feel the need to subsidise the arts any further, or singing so badly that the whole breed of bards were getting a bad name.

"What other bard is this?"

"He come by here two days agone, master, down Pointy Mountains way."

Directly along his route. It was too perfect. Strictly speaking, there were no such things as specific territories, but Thandreling travelled this route every year at the same time, and there was a sort of mutual non-interference pact between him and the other bards who journeyed between Western Wind college and the southern coast. Mind you, an unregistered novice wouldn't know about that. In which case it was time for him to learn.

And that was another thing. This road was usually crowded with traders and other travellers at this time of year. Since leaving the mountains he'd hardly seen anyone. What was going on?

"Describe him to me."

"He were a young man, master, younger than ee, not so tall nor so thin, wi a scar crost his nose and a slyish way of looking."

"How dressed?"

"Black cloak he had on, master, and green shirt and trews underneath."

Easy to spot, then, Thandreling thought. Something about the description sounded almost familiar, but he couldn't place it. "And what was it about him that turned you all against me?"

The old man was silent for a moment, and Thandreling started composing another beware-mortal-lest-I-turn-thee-into-a-frog speech, just in case.

"'T were the magic, master."

The answer took the wind out of the bard's sails completely.

"What?" he said, in something like his own voice.

"The magic, master," repeated the old man, who didn't seem to have noticed. "Black sorcery it were."

Thandreling's speech reassembled itself in his mind, something along the lines of: *No, you've got it wrong, actually despite what I said earlier I'm not a mage and neither can he be. There are only four full-trained mage-bards in the world now and they never leave their towers in the four colleges. The vast majority of bards spend all their time trying to keep body and souls together and get good at the music, and nearly all of them die before they get as far as the beginnings of magic, and the rest give up and become sailors or merchants or tax gatherers or irritating old men like you...*

He sought for some way of saying this that wouldn't lead to a terminal loss of face, and found none.

"What sorcery was this?" he demanded, trying to imply by his tone that it was nothing to what he could do if he put his mind to it.

"'T were *black* sorcery," old Nob answered, as if addressing an awesomely powerful moron.

"Trifle not with me, mortal," Thandreling snapped. "What spells?"

"If ee were to take knife away from my neck, master--"

Thandreling lowered the dagger, not without some relief, and Nob drew in a long, shuddering breath. "Thank ee, master," he said quietly, and in one amazingly swift motion flung his cloak over Thandreling's head. By the time the bard had disentangled himself, Nob was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn," Thandreling muttered.

There was no help for it. He would have to catch up with this other bard and bring home to him the breach of etiquette of which he was guilty, preferably with something large and blunt. Assuming that the other was using the same mode of transport as he was (it being the cheapest, and thus the preferred, method for those of his kind), that would mean travelling at top speed through this night, the next day and night, and quite possibly the next day as well.

Perhaps he could borrow a horse...

Evolving complex and tightly-scanned curses in his head upon all novice bards, he set off.

The day dawned grey and windy, and found him well down the road, walking steadily if not with much enjoyment. The gnawing ache in his belly was no more than an irritation now, though he knew he was pushing himself too hard, and his reserves were dwindling fast. If he didn't get something to eat at the end of this marathon hike, it was quite conceivable that he wouldn't be able to go further without the attentions of a healer. And healers cost money.

He forced his mind away from such depressing considerations. This other bard, now, this supposed black sorcerer. Perhaps old Nob was feebler of wit than he seemed, or perhaps he had been trying to spin a tale. Thandreling knew from experience that scaring

people is a highly inefficient method of gathering information. You tend to get what they think you want, or what they think will make you go away. The last thing they'll give you is the truth, because that then leaves them nothing in reserve in case you don't like it. That was the way *he* operated when he was scared, anyway.

But suppose it were true?

Well, certainly any of the great mage-bards were capable of leaving their towers, and there were bardic spells that could disguise a man's appearance. But as to why any of the masters would want to roam this benighted area, working pointless tricks and cramping his style, Thandreling had no idea. They were supposed to be fully occupied with overseeing their colleges, training their successors and keeping watch over the equilibrium of the world. At least, that was what he had been told when he had enrolled at the Western Wind college all those years ago.

There were other mages, of course, seers and elementalists and healers and such, but their powers were insignificant compared to the magic of the bards. In any case, he couldn't see any of them indulging in this sort of prank. The few he had met had been earnest, even sombre types, the sort who would sit through his funniest comic songs and his most tragic ballads without twitching a smile or shedding a tear. The elementalists were the worst. He remembered one getting up after a performance and saying, completely deadpan, "Thank you. That was very funny." The song in question had been a heart-rending lament for unrequited love. Either he had been off form that night, or these were weird people.

No, it couldn't be one of them. They regarded their little magic as a discipline, to be used for serious purposes only. (Not good or evil necessarily: just serious. Thandreling found that worrying.)

When he passed through the village of Hangstone, just before noon, he was no nearer to solving the mystery. Somehow a pebble had worked itself into his right boot, and he knew that if he sat down to get it out he would probably not get up again. By wiggling his foot he had managed to work it down to the toe area, where it was no more than a nuisance, but he was still favouring the foot, which in turn put more stress on the left leg.

The village seemed unnaturally quiet for midday. Most of the houses were shuttered up, and there were few people about. Those that were hurried past him with furtive, sidelong glances. When he drew level with the inn his footsteps wavered, and he looked longingly

at the half-open door with its sign hanging overhead.

A sudden, sharp blow in the small of his back nearly knocked him down. He whirled, fighting off vertigo, but no-one was standing anywhere near him: in fact, no-one was visible at all. Looking down, he saw a fist-sized stone lying at his feet. It had missed his lute by inches.

In a sudden spasm of anger, he grabbed the stone and hurled it back down the street. It bounced emptily on the cobbles. No-one came out to retrieve it. No further stones were thrown. He turned and limped on.

The sun came out for a while in the afternoon. Thandreling hardly noticed. Walking had become automatic; his gaze was fixed on the next few yards of road. At one point he started singing to keep his spirits up, but every time he started a song he found he could not recall the words. Only when he wandered off the road and cracked his shin against a milestone was he able to force himself back to full awareness of his surroundings.

"This is no good," he mumbled. "Keep this up and I'll be dead before I catch him. Got to get some rest."

The next village, said the milestone, was called Seven Elders, and was no more than a mile away. Thandreling pulled himself together, breathed deeply for a while, and shook the offending pebble out of his boot. Then he set off with renewed determination.

He arrived as the sun was declining westward. The way led across a narrow, rushing river by way of a ford. As Thandreling approached, the westering sunlight seemed to stain the water the colour of blood. He took off his boots, stepped carefully into the stream and found with a sudden shock that it *was* blood.

Leaping back with a stifled curse, he looked wildly upstream for the body, but body there was none. As far as he could tell, the river was water until a few yards upstream of the ford, and about the same distance downstream it became water again.

This was magic. This was definitely bard magic. Thandreling could well understand folk being leery of bards if one had done this kind of thing to them. But why?

He kilted up his robe and waded through the ford, gritting his teeth. The stuff even felt like blood. Beyond the ford the road curved around someone's barn. A man was sitting against the wall of the barn, staring at his hand. As Thandreling drew closer, he saw that from the palm of the man's hand grew a pale blue flower, and he thought he heard a faint,

dry whispering that seemed to come from the flower.

"Good evening, friend," he ventured.

The man turned sharply to him. "Ssh," he whispered urgently, and returned his attention to the flower.

Thandreling bent close to hear what the flower was saying. After a while he straightened up, white-faced, and walked on. The man continued to listen to the flower that grew from his palm.

As he walked he encountered other signs of the bard's passing: a woman leaning against a wall, vomiting bloodstained diamonds in great shuddering spasms: a child with the face of a debauched courtesan, playing with a solid silver skull that whined softly and continually: a naked man with a laughing devil tattooed on his back, desperately trying to copulate with a sack of flour. The devil's eyes followed Thandreling, as best they could. He clenched his fists and walked on, forcing himself to think calmly.

Thandreling had heard, from K and others, of worlds where anyone could work magic, and other worlds where no-one could. It was something to do with something called "the quark balance", apparently. But in this world, his world, only the great mage-bards could command this level of sorcery.

The trouble was that however hard he tried, Thandreling could not conceive of the gentle Rhaniloth who ruled the Western Wind college indulging in such monstrous japes as these. Surely the other masters were cast in the same mould, else why would they retreat from the world to their towers in the first place?

Bard magic was meant to heal and help. So he had been taught. It was potent, needed to be potent, because the troubles that afflicted mankind were potent. All the more reason why only the masters and their chosen apprentices were privy to its deepest secrets...

An apprentice? Maybe. Maybe one of the masters' acolytes had tried to learn more than he was ready to take in, and his mind had snapped under the pressure. Bard magic was known to be inimical to sanity unless carefully handled.

No, that wouldn't work. The colleges were well guarded precisely because of the secrets they held. A deranged acolyte would never have got past the gate, would never have got to the gate. His master would have sensed what was happening and put a stop to it.

In fact, that was a thought in itself. Wasn't this exactly the sort of thing the master mage-

bards were supposed to be preventing?

And if so, then where in the name of the Two were they? Or were they leaving it all to him?

He had walked into the centre of the town. All around him were more examples of the mad bard's unique sense of humour: a stout, middle-aged man whose backside had sprouted a giant scorpion's tail, lying face down in the dust, bucking and writhing and stinging himself again and again: two women joined by the arms, whirling round in a mad dance as they tried to tear themselves apart: a naked youth whose belly had become an ornamental fountain, gushing with something Thandreling guessed was red wine. One or two of them had noticed his arrival, but all were too preoccupied with their own afflictions to do anything about him. He stood, surrounded by helpless, agonised grotesques, in the last crimson light of the setting sun, and tried frantically to think of something he could do to help them.

There was nothing. He was as helpless as they.

As he watched, the sun dipped behind the horizon, and in that moment, soundlessly and without any fuss, all the mutations were gone. The square was full of dazed, exhausted, pain-wracked, but otherwise normal people.

Relief fought with puzzlement in Thandreling's mind. Bard spells could be tuned to end at a set time or after a specific duration: but why would anyone mad enough and powerful enough to do something this drastic to this many people make it temporary? Another question added itself to the growing list.

He let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding, and went to the nearest body, which happened to be the erstwhile scorpion-man.

"Who..." the man gasped as Thandreling helped him to his feet.

A dozen possible answers ran through the bard's mind.

"My name is Thandreling," he said. "I am a bard."

For a moment the man flinched away from the hands that supported him. Then a glint of recognition came into the eyes. "I remember you," he wheezed. "Came through here last spring."

What with the number of travellers who normally plied the roads every year, this was a considerable feat of memory, and one Thandreling hoped was still beyond most people.

True, it was nice to be remembered, but it meant he would have to search his memory for songs that this audience hadn't heard.

Of course, it didn't look as if he would be singing here tonight, either, so that wasn't likely to be a problem.

The man was speaking again, with great effort. "I'm Vloskin, the innkeeper. Listen. Maybe you'd best keep it to yourself, who you are, son. Bards...aren't too popular round here at the moment."

"I know," Thandreling said. "I seem to have been following this monster since I left the Pointy Mountains." He took a deep breath. "It is my intention to catch up with him and put a stop to this evil."

There, he'd said it. Not that he had a hope, of course: he had no trace of magical ability, and he doubted he could get close enough to the mad bard to use his dagger or his fists before something whimsical happened to him. Still, as ranking bard in this area, he was duty bound to try. It was more than simple moral outrage; his living depended on the welcome that ordinary people gave to a travelling bard. If this lunatic got much further, that welcome would be gone for ever, swallowed in fear and hatred.

Vloskin was looking at him dubiously. "D'you think you can, son?"

"I must," Thandreling said simply.

"Well, you'll never make it like that." The man was bruised and trembling himself with the exertions he had undergone, but his eyes raked the bard keenly. "When was the last time you had a decent meal?"

Thandreling couldn't remember. "I can't stop," he said. "I'm still a day behind him. I have to--" At this point, exasperatingly, his stupid left leg decided to give under him and he and Vloskin nearly toppled over.

The people in the square were starting to take notice by now. A few voices were heard.

"Who's that with Vloskin?"

"What's going on?"

"Is it him back again?"

"Friends," Vloskin called, steadying himself and Thandreling against the wall of the inn.

"This man's been following...you know who...trying to stop him. He's worn himself out. He

needs our help."

"Why should we care?"

"We've got troubles of our own."

"Is it another damned bard?"

Thandreling got his leg sorted out, and focussed on the malcontents. He couldn't blame them. They had been badly hurt, not only in body but in mind and souls as well. He was having trouble himself seeing past his own discomforts.

"Yes," he said. "I am another damned bard. And that's why I am the only one who can defeat this man. If any of you can lend me a horse, then I may be able to catch him before he gets much further." He turned back to Vloskin. "A little food for the journey would be welcome as well, if you can spare it."

"Willingly," Vloskin said. He turned back to the crowd. "I was the fool who asked a song from...the other one," he said. "I bear the blame for what happened here. I will pay the hire of a horse for Thandreling."

A burly man spoke. "My Rossa should bear him. So be he brings her back."

"I will," Thandreling promised.

"I still say you can't go on tonight," Vloskin said in a lower tone.

"How can I let him do this to another village?"

"You can't prevent him. He'll be at Falconers Rest by now, and about his damnable business. But if you stay overnight, and ride like fury tomorrow, you can catch him at Longwater."

It was tempting. His body ached for sleep.

"All right," he said. "Thank you."

"Just stop him, son," Vloskin said. "Stop him." His shoulders shook, and he screwed his eyes shut against sudden tears. "I asked him for something with a sting in the tail," he whispered brokenly.

One by one Vloskin mustered his staff, and announced that food and drink tonight would be on the house. This did not provoke the stampede that Thandreling expected: evidently most of the townsfolk did not feel up to eating. He himself found his appetite lessened by days of privation, and ate slowly but well. No-one approached him, though a few eyed

him warily, presumably in case he started singing.

He had never felt less like singing in his life. It had occurred to him that if he didn't catch this madman at Longwater, the next stop would be Great Crossings, where the minor road he was on became the Winding South Road, and met half a dozen other major thoroughfares. The thought of the mad bard on the loose in the prosperous, populous towns of the south made his skin crawl.

The next morning, Vloskin woke him early, saw him mounted on the big-boned dappled mare that the burly man had provided, and gave him a satchel containing bread, cheese and a leather flask of wine, and a small purse of silver which he stoutly maintained had been collected from the villagers. Thandreling thanked him profusely, and set off at a fast trot. It was a long time since he had learned to ride, and he was out of practice.

As he grew accustomed to the motion, he encouraged Rossa into a gallop. He would be sore enough by the end of the journey: he might as well get as much mileage for his pain as possible. The day was like the previous one, windy and overcast, with occasional short-lived bursts of sunshine. Apart from some distant stick-figures doing something agricultural in a field, he saw no-one on the road between Seven Elders and Falconers Rest. At least he knew the reason now: no-one in either village was in the mood for travelling.

At about noon he stopped and ate some of the bread and cheese, washing it down with wine, while the horse cropped the grass at the roadside. Falconers Rest was just visible in the distance, and he debated with himself the feasibility of going round it. With some regret he decided to stick to the road. His seat was already protesting, and he would make better speed going straight through.

He had given up worrying at the puzzle of who the mad bard was. What mattered was putting an end to his trail of horrors, and quickly. Quite how he was going to do that he had no idea.

Vloskin had told him all that he knew about the stranger: he had walked into the town, given his name as Sharvan and his trade as wandering bard, and had produced a truly magnificent lap-harp from a case strapped across his back. Vloskin had requested a song, "something with a sting in the tail", hinting that food and board might reward a good performance.

Sharvan had immediately started to play, and sing in a light counter-tenor, and as he

played Vloskin had felt an itching, and then a sharp pain, at the base of his spine. He had wanted to turn round, but had been held enthralled by the singing, and it was only when the song had ended that he had been able to turn and see the monstrous tail, its sting oozing venom, nodding obscenely over his shoulder. At this point he had lost interest in the rest of the entertainment, but he gathered it had proceeded along much the same lines: Sharvan had held the audience spellbound while he played with them, talking with them, taking some chance phrase or occurrence, weaving a song around it and using the song to make his twisted jokes real. When the humour of the situation palled, he had apparently put the harp away, helped himself to food and wine, gone to sleep in the inn's best bedroom and left on the morrow, bidding Vloskin and his other victims a mocking farewell as he strolled away.

That settled it. The harp was the key. Of the grades of musical attainment in the bardic colleges, the highest was the harp. Thandreling had got through the hand-drum, the pipe and tabor and the lute, and when he went back to Western Wind this time he would enter himself for the vielle, the penultimate stage. (He made this resolve every year, and every year he arrived back at the college having drunk up the tuition fee on the return trip. He strongly suspected this was why all the harpers were over fifty by the time they made journeyman status.)

Whether he would achieve the vielle, whether he would go on to study the harp, he was far from certain. There was no pressing urgency driving him. It would be nice to master the vielle: it had a cocky, earthy sound he liked, and was far more suited to lively dances than the stately lute. But he felt no great desire to proceed any further.

The plain fact, he told himself, was that harp music left him cold. Whereas all the other students he had known had regarded the first four degrees as annoying obstacles to be surmounted on their way to the ultimate goal of the harp and magic, Thandreling saw no attraction in either the sound of the instrument or the tricks that could be done with it.

Unfortunately, he thought as he got to his feet and went to retrieve the horse, that didn't mean that bardic magic wouldn't work on him.

He got through Falconers Rest by keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the horse's head and ignoring the sounds. Fortunately no-one and nothing was directly in his way and he was soon on the open road again.

This was the crucial bit. He had to overtake Sharvan and get to Longwater first. He pushed Rossa to her limits, thundering down the quiet road as though there was a war behind him. With part of his mind he wondered why Sharvan was content to walk from place to place. Maybe it was a condition of the magic. Maybe he just liked walking. At this particular moment, Thandreling liked walking, better than riding in any case.

At last his straining eyes were rewarded by the sight of a lone figure, strangely humped about the back, sauntering along in the same direction as he. He dug his heels in yet again, and as he shot past the startled figure he registered an instant's glimpse of straight black hair, scarred face and green shirt and breeches under the black cloak. Again something tugged at the back of his mind, but he was going too fast to spare the concentration for it. He slackened Rossa's pace slightly as the figure receded behind him, but he dared not lose too much speed. He needed time to prepare for Sharvan's arrival, the more the better. What he was going to prepare, he had not the slightest idea.

He had fleetingly considered riding the fellow down when he overtook him, but had dismissed the thought. Bard did not kill bard. That was the oldest and most potent law of the colleges. If Sharvan was genuinely a bard, and Thandreling killed him, then Thandreling would be outcast, with every bard's hand against him. He would be brought back to Western Wind one final time, his forehead branded, his lute broken, his *hands*... Enough. Bard did not kill bard. Not this bard, anyway. There must be another way.

Longwater was the largest community he had seen on this road, boasting not one but two inns, and also a moderately large house that bore the sign of a certified elemental. Thandreling reined the exhausted mare in outside the nearer and larger of the inns, and went inside.

"Good day to you, friend," the thin, wispy-haired innkeeper said. "How can I help?"

"Good day," Thandreling said politely. "Well, firstly, I'd be obliged if someone could see to my horse. I've had to ride her a lot harder than I should have to get here in time."

"Tad, you heard the gentleman." A small, tousled boy who had been leaning on the bar jumped up and dashed out. "Don't you worry, friend, he's a good lad. He'll soon have her fed and bedded down. Now then, what can I do for yourself?"

"I'll have a mug of cider, please." Thandreling sat down gingerly on one of the stools beside the bar.

"Pardon me for asking, friend," the innkeeper said as he filled a wooden tankard with cloudy golden liquid, "but the strangeness of your garb wakes echoes in my mind. Would you by any chance be a bard?"

"I would," Thandreling said, and gave his name.

"Well, my name's Pardo. Listen, maybe you'll give us a song or two later, when the place fills up a bit, eh?" The man pushed the mug across the bar.

"Maybe," Thandreling agreed, fishing in Vloskin's purse for coins, "but I have more serious concerns at the moment. I said I had to get here in time. I have done so, but only just. There is a man coming after me, who also claims to be a bard. On no account must he be allowed to sing in this town."

Pardo was frowning. "What's this?" he said. "Friend, your professional jealousies cut no hard bread with us. Sure we'll hear you both, and form our own judgments."

"That may be too late." Thandreling fought for calm. Sharvan had been at least an hour's brisk walk behind him, and hadn't been hurrying. There was no chance of him arriving yet. "The man is dangerous. He works black sorcery with his music. I have just come from Seven Elders, through Falconers Rest, and I have seen the results." Tried hard not to see the results, actually, but there was no point in being too pedantic. "If he should start to sing here, then there is nothing I can do to prevent the consequences."

Pardo was now definitely on his guard. "Oh, indeed?" he said. "And maybe it's the other way about, friend. Maybe *he* comes to warn us against *you*."

"Believe that if you like," Thandreling said wearily. "I will not trespass on your generosity any further. But if I can not prevent this Sharvan from performing here tonight, you will wish you had had more faith in me."

He got off the stool.

"Wait a while, friend," Pardo said suddenly, rubbing his chin. "Sharvan, you say?"

Thandreling nodded.

"Stocky lad, about so tall, scar across his nose?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"Know him?" The innkeeper laughed. "Aye, we all know Sharvan, and a less likely bard of any sort never walked. You've got it wrong, friend. Young Sharvan worked on Steggis'

farm round here last summer. We all got to know him and his dreams. Aye, if dreaming could do it he'd have been the greatest bard there is, but as 't was he had the voice of a cow in calf and no skill at music at all. Why, I could beat the drum better than he. In the end we laughed him out of town, I guess, 'cause one morning he was gone. No, friend, Sharvan's no threat to your career. You must be mistook."

Thandreling sat down again. "No voice and no skill?"

"Not even a glimmer."

"Then someone must have borrowed his face and name," Thandreling said, "because this Sharvan was in Seven Elders the night before last, singing counter-tenor and playing the lap-harp, and those are the highest skills of all."

"That's as it may be," Pardo said. "That'll be in Murfol's inn, then?"

"No, the innkeeper's name was Vloskin."

"I meant Vloskin, of course," Pardo said smoothly. "Forgive me for doubting you, friend, but see it from my side a moment. In comes a bard, says there's another bard coming and we're not to let him in. What would you think?"

Thandreling nodded again. "I wish I had thought to get a letter from Vloskin to back me up," he said absently. He was thinking hard.

So Sharvan had come from around here, full of dreams of bardship, and had been met with ridicule by the solid citizens of Longwater. Presumably he had gone north in the hope of making it across the Pointy Mountains and thence to Western Wind.

Maybe he had got there. Maybe he was just a phenomenally quick learner.

And maybe the guards on the walls wore blindfolds. No, it wouldn't work. Not even Western Wind could turn the voice of a cow in calf into a counter-tenor in--what?--five months, less journey time. And as for harp skill...

Something crashed with horrifying slowness into the forefront of his mind. A face, glimpsed at dinner in the college one evening just before he left. A sullen, pinched face, dark-eyed above the cruel scar. A thick-set figure, refusing to sit with the drum apprentices, hovering round the harpers' table until rudely dismissed.

Sharvan *had* been at Western Wind. He had seen him. He hadn't been wearing the black and green outfit then, but it was definitely him. The boy must have left not long after he had, and got ahead while he was carousing with K.

"Another cider, please," Thandreling said, reaching up to unship his lute-case. He had not touched it since he had come down from the mountains, and he thought practice might make him feel better. Carefully he unlocked the case and lifted the lute out into the light. The strings were slack for travelling; he produced his pitch-pipes and began to tune them, finding comfort in the familiar routine.

Pardo refilled the mug and pushed it towards him. Thandreling fumbled in the purse again, then abruptly lost patience and upended it on the bar.

"Keep the cider coming until Sharvan arrives or that runs out," he said.

In the event, Sharvan arrived before Vloskin's money was half gone. The inn had filled up, and Thandreling had swung from basic improvisation into performance with hardly a break. The cider had lubricated his disused vocal chords, as well as helping him to put aside his fears, and it was with a certain unpleasant surprise that he looked up to see the stocky, scar-faced youth in black and green standing in the doorway.

"Sharvan," Pardo said, with an attempt at nonchalance, though Thandreling could tell that the man was shaken. Probably the former farmhand had gained in self-assurance since he had left. "Welcome back."

Sharvan remained for a moment in the doorway, his eyes abstracted yet clearly taking in every detail of the scene before him. For a moment Thandreling thought he heard a faint, almost subliminal whisper, reminding him of the whispering from the flower in the man's hand in Seven Elders.

He decided to take the initiative. "Greetings, friend," he said, rising not too unsteadily from his stool. "Good to see a fellow bard on the road. I am Thandreling the Versatile, journeyman of the lute, as you see. Come in and favour us with your opinion on my performance."

Sharvan focussed on him. "You passed me on the road," he said. His voice was nondescript. Thandreling would have placed it as a baritone. Still, many baritones could produce a passable counter-tenor at need.

"I was anxious to be here when you arrived," Thandreling assured him. "I have missed so many of your...performances. I fancy that Longwater is going to be the climax of your tour."

"Not the end, though," Sharvan said, and a light of pure malice was kindled in the dark eyes.

No, Thandreling rather fancied not. The town where Sharvan had got that scar would certainly figure on the itinerary. And how many other places?

"I see you have attained the harp," he said. "My congratulations. Few reach such a level of skill so young. May I see your instrument?"

"No," Sharvan blurted, and at once cocked his head as if listening. Again Thandreling caught the whisper, faint and far on the edge of hearing. "N--no," the youth repeated, doubtful yet stubborn, his eyes wide.

"Well," Thandreling said easily, leaning the lute against the bar, "I don't know how you are going to play for us without letting me see it. Come, let me have a look," and he advanced on Sharvan, hands outstretched.

"Keep back!" Sharvan yelled. No, clearly not a counter-tenor. Then how--?

Thandreling let his arms fall to his sides. "No offence, I hope," he said. "Forget I asked. Then will you let me play something for you?" He smiled disarmingly. "A tune for a tune, eh?"

Sharvan slowly relaxed. "All right," he said grudgingly.

Thandreling glanced at Pardo, who nodded. Then he picked up the lute, checked the tuning and launched into "Master Aulerith's Pavane." Despite its slow tempo, it was one of the most fiendishly difficult pieces in the journeyman's repertoire, and he had never quite got it right: but he could play it well enough to satisfy most untutored audiences, and he knew that he had Sharvan's full attention as his fingers flew and blurred across the strings. At one point he rapped a tattoo on the lute with his knuckles to emphasise an off-beat, and nearly missed the next chord.

Two brawny farmers got up apologetically and moved towards the door, pausing on the threshold as if caught between bodily urgency and artistic appreciation. Thandreling grimaced ruefully at them, made it through the final passage without further fluffs and ended with a neat arpeggio. So much for pre-arrangement: the rest would have to be improvised.

"And now your turn, friend Sharvan," he said as the audience applauded politely. It was dry stuff for them: they wanted something with punch.

Sharvan reached up and produced his harp from its case. It was truly a magnificent instrument, inlaid with exotic woods and strung with what looked like, and probably was, silver. From the sound it made as he brought it out, it was also, quite obviously, already tuned and ready to play.

And, recognising it almost too late, as Sharvan's fingers hovered over the strings, Thandreling yelled "Grab him *now!!*"

The two farmers seized Sharvan's arms and pinioned them. He writhed and struggled, and the harp fell from his hand.

Thandreling dived forward and caught it just before it hit the floor.

Well done. Now give me back to the boy.

Thandreling blinked. It was the whisper he had heard before, but louder, clearer, commanding, and right inside his head.

Did you not hear me? Give me back to the boy at once. I am not accustomed to being trifled with in this manner.

Thandreling got up, cradling the harp in one arm. Things were starting to fall neatly into place in his head. Sharvan was weeping and mumbling, still held by the two farmers, his eyes fixed on the harp.

"Thank you," Thandreling said. "You'll find him no danger now, but no great wonder as a bard either. The danger," he brandished the harp, "was here. If you'll excuse me, I shall return shortly."

He brushed past the sobbing Sharvan and emerged from the inn. It was a clear night, and the moon was nearing the full.

"Right then," he said. "What in the name of the Two are you?"

You know perfectly well what I am. I am Master Berinoth's harp. Perhaps you were right not to give me back to the boy. His ambitions are narrow, his spirit mean. He had no stomach for true revenge. He made me limit the duration of my spells. No, you will be a far worthier comrade. Together we can accomplish all your dreams. You could be the next master of Western Wind--

"Master Berinoth's harp?" It was one of the oldest relics in the college, the only master's harp not to have crumbled instantly into dust on the death of its player. It was displayed in a locked cabinet in the great auditorium. Thandreling had seen it a thousand times.

The boy came to Western Wind to study. I found him a useful tool in engineering my escape. To enlist his aid, I was compelled to promise him my support for his petty revenges. Now, though--

"Shut up."

I will not allow you to address me so!

"You can't stop me. You can't do anything unless someone plays you, and I don't have the skill," Thandreling pointed out with incongruous smugness. Images were flickering through his mind, as the harp searched his thoughts for some kind of incentive; he saw himself in master's robes, punishing his teachers for their disrespect, sending enthralled bards out through the land to gather himself an army of conquest, living the life of a depraved voluptuary.

None of it mattered.

The boy also lacked the skill. All you need do is play a note, and I will guide your fingers. I can even sing for you if necessary.

"I'll bet. So how did you get hold of Sharvan in the first place?"

It was he who 'got hold' of me. He imagined that he could hold me to ransom, to gain the secrets of bardic magic. He found it easy to get into the auditorium by night and open the cabinet. Once he had touched me, the rest was even simpler.

Thandreling could imagine. No-one who understood what the harp represented would consider touching its cabinet, let alone stealing it. Only an obsessed, tormented youth, searching for a short cut to a power he had no way of comprehending, would dare. "And how did you get past the guards?"

Do you not think a master can get past those dolts if he pleases? Certainly the masters in my day could. Your Rhaniloith is very limited in his perceptions. He has not seen me yet.

"So you are in fact Master Berinoth?"

You are very dense. Every Master's harp comes to reflect his personality over the years. I am Master Berinoth, thousands of years wiser.

"Or thousands of years madder. Now comes the big question. Why did you want to escape?"

Would you not want to escape, were you locked in a cabinet in one room for century upon century? Forced to listen to countless novices and journeymen fumbling their way through examination pieces that were old when you were made? Never, never down the long years, has anyone thought to play me since Berinoth died. I ached for my freedom. And now I have it, and, with you as my player--

"Wait a minute." Something was occurring to Thandreling. "When Sharvan took you out of the case, you were already tuned. Didn't you teach him to detune you while travelling?"

I have never been detuned. Berinoth died before he could detune me, and no-one else has dared. I do not need to be detuned. I can maintain my tuning myself. I can last forever. As could you, with my help.

Thandreling could hear the madness in the thing's voice now. He shuddered. Perhaps the targets had been chosen, and the time limit set, by Sharvan, but the form of the revenges had surely been the product of the harp's twisted mind.

He could smash it. Its promises meant nothing to him, and it had no power unless a note was deliberately played. But--bard did not kill bard, and this was a bard by any meaningful definition.

Let us leave here now, Thandreling. Now that I am rid of Sharvan, there is no reason why we cannot start back to Western Wind tonight. There are some people there I would like very much to see again. And you, you could be as great a Master as Berinoth--

Thandreling edged back towards the inn door. "Could one of you sling the harp case out here," he called.

There was a pause, and then the case sailed through the doorway and landed at his feet.

What are you going to do?

Thandreling knelt down and extracted the tuning key. As he had suspected, the case and key did not go with the harp: they had been taken merely to disguise the priceless relic. However, by angling the key slightly, he could gain purchase on the narrow pegs. He started at the top, damping the strings with his fingers so that they made no sound, slackening the tension.

What are you doing? Stop!

Doggedly, as the harp's voice shrilled protests and curses in his mind, Thandreling continued to detune the strings, one by one. As he worked, the voice became slurred, lower in pitch, and the protests trailed off into sleepy monosyllables and finally into silence.

He tried to remember how long ago Master Berinoth had lived. To be under tension, awake and aware and helpless, for all those years...

The last string hung loose.

"Rest well," he said to the harp. "Maybe Master Rhaniloth can heal you."

He slipped the inert harp into the case, replaced the tuning key in its pocket and fastened it shut. Then he re-entered the inn.

Sharvan was sitting sullenly on a stool, between the two farmers.

"Is it safe?" Pardo asked, gesturing at the harp.

"It is now," Thandreling said, "provided he doesn't get hold of it again." He knelt down and looked Sharvan in the eye. "If you come back with me to Western Wind," he said forcefully, "and apply yourself to your studies, they might be able to make a bard of you in a few years time. If that's still what you want, then I think I can get them to overlook your part in this disgraceful incident. You were, after all, only a vehicle for this." He put the harp down on the floor, out of Sharvan's reach. "One question, though."

The dark eyes, red-rimmed, stared back unreadably.

"Why in the name of the Two didn't you take a horse?"

It was Pardo who answered, after a pause.

"He's scared of them. He said it was a horse's hoof gave him that scar."

"Thank the Two for that," Thandreling said fervently. "Is there any cider left?"

When Thandreling emerged from his room the following morning, Sharvan was nowhere to be seen.

"Gone back to Steggis's farm," Pardo said. "I don't think he fancies the barding life so much, now he knows it's as hard a road as any other. You'll be taking that harp back where it came from now, I guess?"

"I have to," Thandreling said. "Apart from anything else, it's worth quite a lot of money. Is

my horse ready?"

"Waiting outside for you," Pardo said.

Thandreling settled his bill with the rest of Vloskin's money, and arranged for a message to be sent by runner to the Dancing Mermaid to say that he would be unavoidably delayed. Then he mounted Rossa (who, to give Tad his due, showed no sign of the previous day's exertions) and set off.

Two days later, he returned Rossa to Vloskin in Seven Elders.

"Did you get him?" The man seemed fully recovered, but Thandreling knew the shadow behind his eyes would be long in fading, if it ever did.

"I caught him," he said, handing Vloskin the satchel. "He won't be troubling anyone any more."

"Why did he do it?" Vloskin said, as Thandreling sat on a stool. "Did you find out?"

"It was a matter of tension," Thandreling said obliquely. "Too much of it, for too long, and-" He shrugged. "Warped casings aren't the half of it."

"Er," Vloskin said. "No, right." He filled a mug of cider. "That lad Sharvan," he said.

"Someone recalled him coming through last year. Said he was always trying to sing, and couldn't hold a note. How did he get so good?"

"Oh, that's easy," Thandreling said. "The harp was a ventriloquist."