

I

WOLF

A SHEPHERD was gathering firewood by the old Pellinor Road when a strange sight caught his attention. A horseman dressed in black, mounted on a magnificent black horse, was trotting briskly along the disused course—a clear, small figure in the pale winter sunshine.

To see a stranger at all was noteworthy. Since the sack of the School of Pellinor ten years before and the bad times that had followed, few travelers came this way. The days when Bards and merchants had ridden easily to Pellinor, making the road bright with their fine clothes and singing, had vanished so completely they now seemed like a time of legend. But the sight of a stranger, even one so ominously cloaked, was not what made the old man clutch his bundle of faggots to his chest and step warily behind a thicket of brambles, fearfully making the sign against the evil eye. His eyes were fixed on the beast that accompanied the rider: a large, white dog. If it was a dog, that is. It was like no dog the shepherd had seen. It was taller than a calf, and seemed bigger because of its thick winter pelt, which stood out around its head like a ruff. It kept pace effortlessly with the horse, running at an easy lope that revealed the strong muscles of its shoulders and haunches. If it hadn't been with the rider, the old man would have thought it a wolf; but he had never heard that a wolf would run with a horse.

As the strange trio came nearer, the shepherd's heart chilled and he crouched down behind the brambles, his hands trembling. His eyesight wasn't what it was, but he knew a wolf when he saw one. He began to regret having strayed so close to

the road, even on so fair a day, and all the rumors he had heard of uncanny events, of evil creatures and dark sorcerers crowded into his head at once. If anything should happen to him, his wife would never know; and she would be quite alone, as their son had left the hamlet, looking for a better life. The shepherd crouched closer to the ground, hoping he would remain unnoticed, and held his breath as the hoofbeats came closer and closer. To his alarm, they slowed to a walk; and then they stopped altogether.

"Where is he, Maerad?" A man's voice rang clear on the cold air, although he spoke in a low voice.

Even though he was so frightened, the old man was confused: to whom was the stranger speaking? He had seen no other with him. Did he converse, as the black witches were said to do, with spirits of the air? The shepherd held his breath, clutching his bundle of faggots so tightly to his chest that his knuckles were white.

"Over there, you think?"

The shepherd heard the man dismount and begin to walk toward him. In his agitation, the old man dropped his firewood with a clatter that to him sounded like thunder. He turned to run, but tripped over a tussock and fell over. As he scrambled onto his hands and knees, he found himself face-to-face with the wolf, and groaned in terror. Instinctively he hid his face in his hands, so he should not see his own death.

But he did not feel the wolf's teeth meeting in his neck, as he had expected. Instead, the stranger was speaking to him. At first the shepherd was too terrified to hear what he said.

"I beg your forgiveness," the stranger was saying. "I swear by the Light that we mean you no harm."

Slowly, the shepherd took his hands from his face. There was no sign of the wolf, and instead the stranger was standing before him, offering his hand. He helped the old man to his feet

and gently brushed down his jerkin. Then he silently picked up the firewood and carefully heaped it in the shepherd's arms. The old man regained his breath. The stranger had a kindly look; but there was something else about him, an air of grace, that reminded the shepherd of better days. It had been a long time since his kind had been seen here.

He thanked the stranger gravely, in the formal way he once would have thanked a Bard who did him some healing or said the spring rites over a crop. The other gave him a sharp look.

"It's been many years since I've seen a Bard around here," said the old man. Now that his fright was over, he wanted to talk.

"There is little reason to come," said the stranger. His eyes met the old man's, and they both looked away at the same instant, as if reading in each other's faces a sadness they didn't wish to name.

"Does this mean that the School of Pellinor will come back? Will there be Bards again?"

The Bard hesitated. "I don't know," he said.

The shepherd shifted the firewood, as it was getting heavy. "I am hoping that they do," he said at last. "It's hard with them gone. The winters bad and the lambs born awry and all else gone wrong."

"Aye," said the Bard. "Much else, and not only here. These are hard times for many people."

The shepherd nodded, and sniffed unhappily. But the stranger reached forward and touched his brow briefly, and for a moment it was as if a soft sun bloomed in the old man's forehead, and spread its golden warmth through his whole body.

"The Light go with you," said the Bard.

"And with you," answered the shepherd, in the proper way. He watched as the stranger walked back to his horse, which stood patiently on the road awaiting its rider. The white

wolf sat on its haunches by the horse, looking no more dangerous than a big puppy. The Bard mounted, raised his hand in farewell, and rode away. It was only then that the old man realized that he hadn't asked his name.

He didn't stay to watch the horseman vanish in the distance. His wife would be waiting. The warmth from the Bard's touch still ran through his veins, and he hummed an old song as he walked home. His step was light: for the first time since he could remember, hope stirred in his heart.

"You almost made that poor old man die of fright, Maerad," said the Bard, glancing down at the wolf.

"I didn't mean to, Cadvan." The wolf answered him in the Speech. She was silent for a time, and then added, *"He did smell of fear. But if he planned to attack us, he would have been frightened anyway . . ."*

"I suppose so. It's as well to be wary, but I think we were lucky his heart didn't give way." Cadvan said, shrugging. "No harm done in the end. I hope. Still, it worried me that he had seen through the glimmerspells and was hiding from us. He should have seen only an empty road. He knew I was a Bard, you know."

"I heard him. Did he have the Gift?"

"A little," said Cadvan. "Not the Gift of a Bard, but enough to have a little Bardsight. I imagine that he's good with beasts. Probably he runs the healthiest flock in the district. Or did once, anyway, when this was a populous and pleasant region. It oppresses my heart, Maerad, to ride through it now."

He sighed and looked ahead, over the hills before them. It was not long after Midwinter Day and, despite the sunshine, there was little sign of spring. The wild was reclaiming the land, and leafless brambles and other weeds crept over what had once been stone-fenced fields.

The trio traveled swiftly; the sun reached the height of its short day and began to descend to the horizon. Every now and then they saw an abandoned farmhouse, and once passed through a deserted village where doors hung off their hinges and pans left many years ago by the side of the overgrown paths rusted in the mud.

The wild no longer seemed desolate to Maerad, as once it had: a landscape untamed by human hands had its own meanings. But here the land was neither tame nor untamed. It just felt abandoned and sad and eerie. Her questing nose picked up the scent of old sorceries: evil had been done here, evil had driven these people from their homes. Perhaps it still hid among the crumbling farmhouses and overgrown orchards, watching as they passed, waiting for the shadows to fall and its powers to grow strong. At the thought, her hackles rose, and she gave an involuntary growl.

I do not like it here, Maerad said, speaking directly into Cadvan's mind.

Nor I, replied Cadvan in the mindspeech. His earlier words had seemed too loud. *It has a deathly air.*

Darsor, Cadvan's mount, seemed to agree; although he said nothing, he quickened his pace to a steady canter. They continued in silence, and Maerad remained alert and uneasy. Toward sunset the sky clouded over, and a thick mist began to rise from the ground, muffling her sense of smell. This bothered her more than the darkness; she depended more on her nose than her eyes.

They didn't stop until it became too dark to move on. Cadvan found an overgrown copse where he might conceal a fire easily with a little magery, and unsaddled Darsor, then rubbed down his rough coat. Maerad watched him as he worked, her eyes glowing. She had eaten the day before, and was not hungry, but the water rose in her mouth as Cadvan cooked himself a meal and ate it. He glanced at her.

"You should say if you want something," he said.

Maerad was slightly offended and turned her head away. She would not ask; it was up to him to offer. Cadvan laughed.

"I swear, Maerad, you behave more like a real wolf every day. I can't always remember wolf etiquette. Would you like a bite?"

Maerad stared over his shoulder, ignoring him, and he shrugged and finished his meal. When he had cleaned the pot, he glanced at the wolf again. She lay on her belly, just at the edge of the circle of firelight, her massive muzzle resting on her paws, and watched his every movement. Her ears flickered back and forth, but she betrayed no other sign of uneasiness.

"I worry that you will forget that you are human if you are too much wolf," said Cadvan. "I know nothing of these powers. Are you ever afraid that you will forget how to become Maerad again?"

Maerad's ears pricked up, but she did not answer. Her gaze turned inward as she pondered Cadvan's words. She had traveled in wolf form for a week now. The ability to transform was part of her Gift, an Elemental power that was outside the usual capacity of Bards, and she knew that Cadvan was not wholly at ease with it. Her human self was present inside her, but it was true that the longer she stayed in wolf form, the more distant it seemed, like a dream she had once had. But she dared not change into the young girl she was, not so close to the mountains.

I don't think I'll forget, she said at last. But even so, I can't change now. The Winterking would find me at once.

Cadvan nodded, and seemed about to say more, but checked himself. Instead he asked Maerad if she would take the first watch. They had traveled hard since they left the burned ruins of Pellinor on Midwinter Day, heading south to haven in the School of Innail, and he ached with exhaustion. He

wrapped himself in his cloak and a thick blanket against the deep chill of the night, and fell asleep at once.

Maerad was tired, but not unpleasantly, and she didn't feel the cold at all. She seemed to doze, but she was by no means asleep: her keen senses registered the smallest twitch of a twig, the tiniest shift of the air currents. She thought about Arkan, the Winterking, the Elemental being who had captured her in his mountain fortress and from whom she had so recently escaped. The reason she dared not change into her human form was not because she feared Arkan—although she did—but because she didn't trust herself. The thought of him opened a hollow inside her, a mixture of fear and desire. If Arkan said her name, she thought with contempt, she would even now turn and run to him. She didn't understand him—he was as beyond her understanding as the mountains themselves—and she didn't even like him; but something burned inside her that she couldn't control or ignore. Perhaps her desire for him was her Elidhu blood surging within her, like responding to like; perhaps her fear came from her human self. At this point, she shifted impatiently. It was always confusing thinking about her different selves.

It was simpler to be a wolf.

The night deepened. Maerad smelled rain coming, perhaps the next day. The clouds were heavy overhead, and neither moon nor star lifted the utter blackness. The damped-down fire gave out little light, and even that illuminated only the curls of mist that gathered between the tree trunks. But sight was only one of Maerad's senses. She heard an owl hoot in the distance and the soft swirl of its wings as it swooped on a small night creature that squeaked briefly and was silent. A light wind soughed through the bare branches, rattling the dead winter leaves that still clung to them, and she heard Cadvan's soft breathing and Darsor as he shifted while he slept; but there was

little other sound. There seemed to be nothing amiss, but she felt more and more uneasy. She stood up and prowled noiselessly around the copse, her muzzle tilted upward, tasting the air.

There was nothing to smell, nothing to hear, nothing to see; but still the hair stood up on her spine. Some other sense prickled her alarm. She paced restlessly back and forth, waking Darsor, who put his nose down to hers and blew out of his nostrils.

Something is wrong? he asked.

Yes. No. Now she was bristling all over. *Yes, but I don't know what it is.*

Darsor lifted his head and sniffed the air, and a shiver went through his skin. *There is someone approaching,* he said. *Someone well cloaked. You must wake my friend.*

Maerad nosed Cadvan and he was alert at once, his hair ruffled with sleep, reaching for his sword. *What is it?*

I don't know, said Maerad. *Darsor says someone is here. Someone cloaked.*

Cadvan was already standing. *Darsor would know,* he said.

His stillness and intensity told Maerad that Cadvan was listening with his Bard hearing. She felt a sudden frustration: the sharpness of her wolf instincts were matched by the dimming of other senses. While Cadvan could feel the working of magery, or the presence of the Dark, Maerad's abilities were blunted.

Do you think it's a Hull? A red flash lit Maerad's eyes at the thought: Hulls were Bards who had allied themselves with the Dark, giving their power to the Nameless One in return for endless life. They filled her with a mixture of contempt and fear.

Most likely. I hope it is, because if it isn't, it is probably something worse. I wish that you were a Bard right now.

Maerad paused, and then asked, *Should I change?*

Cadvan studied her thoughtfully for a moment, and then shook his head. *No,* he said. *I think we don't need to risk calling down more trouble on our heads and attract the Winterking as well. In*

any case, you're dangerous enough as you are. A ghost of a smile fleetingly lit his face, and then he turned away from the fire and was swallowed in shadow.

For some time, nothing happened. The moments passed with agonizing slowness: the approaching menace neither grew nor lessened. Perhaps, thought Maerad, whatever approached knew that they were aware of its presence. Her hunting senses were fully alert, and she didn't move a muscle. Nearby she heard Darsor shift his weight and breathe out heavily. She wondered fleetingly how many times she and Cadvan had stood in just such suspense, waiting to be attacked: it was more often than she liked to think.

Then something infinitesimal seemed to shift, although her acute senses couldn't trace what it was. She glanced quickly at Cadvan, and saw his hand tighten on his sword. Then a blast of light seared across the clearing where they were camped, hitting a tree behind Maerad which burst into instant flame. Darsor didn't even flinch, but Maerad crouched low to the ground, growling in her throat, the shadows from the flaming branches flickering over her coat. Cadvan didn't strike back; he swore instead, and she turned in surprise. It was a moment before she understood why. It wasn't a Hull attacking them, after all: no Hull used white fire.

That was a Bard, he said.

Or Bards.

No, only one, I think. Cadvan sighed heavily, and strengthened his shield. *I would say not a particularly powerful Bard. It explains the cloaking charm. It takes a powerful Hull to cloak its presence so thoroughly; Bards find it easier to hide themselves. But even if this Bard desires to kill us, I do not desire to kill any Bards. Though what a Bard is doing around here, I cannot begin to imagine . . .*

They probably think you're a Hull, said Maerad. *You should stop wearing black . . .*

At that moment, another blast of white fire flashed above them. It followed the last almost at once; their conversation had flashed between them as swiftly as thought itself.

The white fire had broken the Bard's cloaking charm, and now Maerad could sense exactly where their attacker was. He was a few spans from them, just outside the copse; he was definitely a man, and definitely a Bard, and alone. But there was something wrong, all the same: even Maerad's muffled Bardic instincts could tell that there was something amiss in his magery.

Can he harm us? she asked, as another bolt of white fire flashed over their heads.

I don't believe so. Though he may be holding something in reserve.

Shield me, said Maerad. *Perhaps I can overpower him without hurting him.*

Cadvan nodded, and as he cast a shield of magery to protect her, she felt the prickle of it in her skin. Then he lifted his hand and sent a blast of white flame over the Bard's head to distract him, as Maerad began to move noiselessly out of the trees, circling behind their attacker so she could stalk him. Before long she was behind him, readying herself to pounce: his silhouette jumped out briefly, black against another flash of white fire. She felt her puzzlement deepen as she watched him. He reminded her of nothing so much as a boy throwing stones at a tree, and his attack was about as effective. It made no sense at all.

She mindtouched Cadvan to warn him that she was about to attack, readied herself, and then leaped upon the Bard's back, knocking him to the ground and winding him. Falling without even a cry, he was taken so completely by surprise that he could do nothing to defend himself. He lay struggling for breath beneath Maerad's weight as she pinned him to the ground.

Within moments Cadvan had joined Maerad. He froze the Bard with a charm, rendering him utterly unable to move or to

work magery. Maerad lifted her paws from his shoulders and sat on her haunches nearby. Now that there was no danger, she was overwhelmed with curiosity.

Cadvan waited until the Bard had stopped gasping, and then roughly sat him up and loosened the charm so he could speak, setting a small magelight before his face for illumination. It was difficult to tell how old he was, even given the difficulty of estimating any Bard's age. He looked like a man in his late fifties, but he was skeletally thin and his face was so seamed with suffering it made any guess impossible: he might have been much younger. He had a grotesque tic, so that he seemed to be always grimacing, and his flesh shone white through the rents in his filthy clothes. Although he must have known it was no use, he struggled violently against the freezing charm.

Maerad looked once into his eyes, and then turned her head away, battling an overwhelming animal panic. *He's mad*, she said to Cadvan.

Cadvan said nothing. He seemed to be bracing himself.

"It is no use trying any magery against us," he said to the Bard. Although he spoke harshly, Maerad could hear the pity in his voice. "And I don't recommend it."

The man stopped struggling and met Cadvan's gaze. His eyes glittered with hatred.

"Kill me then," he said, and spat.

"I do not wish to kill you," said Cadvan. "That's the last thing I want to do."

"Then I will kill you." The Bard's face twisted. "Get your monstrous beast to tear me to pieces. I will kill you if you do not kill me. So kill me."

"I don't want to kill you," said Cadvan again. "And you can't kill me." He paused. "What is your name?"

The Bard cackled, and Maerad jumped. It was a horrible sound, an expression of such despair that she went cold.

"Name? You ask my name? I don't have any name. What's yours, you spawn of the Dark? I know that such as you have no name either, so why do you ask me?"

"I have a name," said Cadvan. "And so do you." A halo of starlight began to bloom gently about Cadvan's form, and he leaned forward and pressed his palm against the man's forehead. After a time, Cadvan sighed deeply and took away his hand, and Maerad looked again at the Bard. His face slowly relaxed as the pain and hatred ebbed from his expression.

"Now," said Cadvan calmly, "what is your name?"

There was a long silence before the Bard answered, as if he had to search through his memory before he could find the right answer. "Hilarin," he said. "Hilarin of Pellinor."

Cadvan's face went white. "Hilarin of Pellinor?" he repeated.

Do you know him? asked Maerad.

I have heard his name, said Cadvan. *Hilarin of Pellinor was a famous singer, once.*

"My friend, what has happened to you?" Cadvan spoke with a grieving gentleness and took his hand, but Hilarin snatched it back, rubbing it with his other hand as if the touch had soiled him. "It was thought that you were dead. Where have you been?"

"I don't know. I've been—I've been hunting . . ." Hilarin's words were confused, and Maerad saw the shadows gathering in his face again. Even Cadvan's magery couldn't keep his madness at bay for long. "There was a School here once and it has been taken and hidden. But I know where to find it. It's buried beneath the earth. They took it, those dark ones, the dark ones like you, I'll kill them all, you disgust me, you traitors . . ." He trailed off into a string of obscenities, and then began to weep helplessly. Maerad looked at Cadvan in bafflement.

What does he mean?

Cadvan's face was grim and sad. *Not much, I fear. Nonsense. I guess that the sack of Pellinor drove him mad. Or perhaps something else.*

Maerad stared at Hilarin. This man, she thought, had once been a proud Bard of Pellinor. This drooling, broken man. She wondered how he had survived. She suddenly wanted to be sick.

What can we do with him? she asked at last. *We can't leave him like this.*

She felt the agony of indecision in Cadvan's mind. *No, he said. But neither can we take him with us. Our quest is too urgent to risk it with a madman. I wonder what happened to him . . .*

A vivid image rose in Maerad's mind: she saw again how her mother Milana, also a proud Bard, had been broken by Enkir, the First Bard of Annar, during the sack of Pellinor. It was Enkir, a traitor to the Light, who had led the assault on Pellinor when Maerad had been a small child. What he had done to her mother was one of Maerad's most painful memories. She thought she knew what might have happened to Hilarin.

Can you heal him? asked Maerad.

Healing this is beyond my Knowing, said Cadvan. *I can but offer a little relief, a little rest. And perhaps set a thought in his dreams, to lead him where he might find some respite. Lirigon would be the closest place . . .*

He sat down next to Hilarin and began to weave a charm, murmuring words from the Speech in a low voice. The Bard at once sank into a deep sleep; but that was only the beginning of Cadvan's magery. Maerad watched him for a while, and then, realizing that he would be some time, she wandered back to the fire.

Darsor was a seasoned warrior: knowing that the skirmish was over, he had already fallen asleep again. Maerad didn't wake him. She lay with her nose to the fire, as deeply depressed

as she had ever been. She wasn't sure if she had seen anything more pitiable in her life. *Hilarin of Pellinor was a famous singer, once. And now . . .*

Cadvan returned later, his face grey with weariness, and laid his hand lightly on Maerad's pelt.

You should sleep, she said, turning to him as he sat down beside her.

Soon, he answered.

Will Hilarin ever heal?

I don't think so, he said. *Something is so deeply broken in him that I think it will never mend. I have done what I can; he will sleep for a long time, and I have shielded him so he will be safe. And when we are far from here, he will wake up and make his way to Lirigon, where there are healers who might be able to soothe his suffering, if nothing else.*

What happened to him is like what has happened to this country, said Maerad.

Aye, said Cadvan. *It is. The Dark does its work thoroughly.*

What can we do against such wills that work these things?

Cadvan picked up a stick and stirred up the embers of the fire; sparks flew up into the night. *We do what we can,* he said.

But is there any hope?

Cadvan said nothing for a while. When he spoke, his voice was harsh. *There is always hope,* he said.