

SONG OF THE FAR ISLES

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For Mary, Will and Andy

Also by Nicholas Bowling

Witchborn
In the Shadow of Heroes



THE FAR ISLES

The Tuning Rock

Great Horn

Little Horn

Little Drum

Tusk

Great Drum

Spit

THE GREAT GULCH

Fiddlehead

THE ENDLESS SEA

NORTH

Harp

The Five Fingers

WEST

EAST

SOUTH



THE GREYING SEA





O ran hauled hard on the mainsheet and brought her little boat around to face home. It was almost dark. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction now, forcing her to tack left and right over the swells. She could hear her cithara case colliding with the hull every time she turned. The waves were larger too, and slopped over the edges of the boat. Sometimes the prow would strike one of them head-on and send a blast of foaming, freezing seawater into her face. It felt good.

She looked behind her to see the sun inches from

the horizon. Tusk was well behind her. Ahead of her the sky was a thunderous blue, the same colour as her cithara, and on Little Drum people were starting to light lamps in their windows. Oran hoped one of them was her mother's. If she was at home, that meant she hadn't gone out looking for her.

The wind changed direction again, and she ducked under the boom as it swung around. She let the rigging play out through her fingers, which were pink and raw from practice. She didn't mind. It was a sign of a day well spent.

The boat scudded and dipped and again she heard her instrument thump against the wooden sides.

'Sorry,' she shouted over the snapping of the sail, 'but it's better to have you down there than risk you going overboard.'

The cithara seemed to go quiet after that.

She could see the harbour now and the flames of the lighthouse. Way above, on the clifftop, a farmer was herding her flock home with a reed pipe before the weather turned. The quayside was crowded with brightly coloured fishing boats, sloops, and a very handsome three-mast schooner. Oran wondered whose it was. Visitors from the Headland, it looked like, but they hardly ever came out this far.

The sun disappeared and the waves turned black. The thunder began like the purring of some great

animal. Oran cursed and shivered. She'd been out in worse conditions than this, but her arms were getting tired from tacking back and forth, back and forth, and if she didn't get home quickly her mother's anger wouldn't be the worst of it. She'd be letting the whole island down.

The thunder cracked, urgently this time, and it started to rain. The wind still couldn't make up its mind where it wanted to go, but Oran wrestled the sail into position again and again and zigzagged her way to the harbour. The surface of the sea hissed, furred with raindrops, and the light of the lighthouse became a hazy orange globe. Everything else disappeared in the downpour. Before long there were three inches of water in the bottom of the boat, so she picked up her cithara and held it tightly in her lap.

'You'd better still be dry,' she muttered to the box. 'You owe it to me, remember? After your string snapped? Last week?'

As usual, the instrument didn't reply.

The boat limped into the harbour, carrying so much water it seemed moments from sinking. Oran leapt out and tied up the boat with a clumsy knot. The quayside was deserted apart from two or three ghaists whose forms shimmered in the pouring rain. That was one good thing about being dead, she thought. You never got wet.

‘Good evening!’ she said. She pushed a strand of wet hair out of her eyes. ‘Well, not really, is it?’

They looked at her in surprise. No one else spoke to the ancestors like she did. The older folk thought her disrespectful, but she didn’t care. She was happy to see them, and imagined they were glad to have a bit of conversation.

‘Is Alick with you?’

They shook their heads slowly.

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘He may be in the Barrow,’ said one, and his voice was like a gong, softly beaten.

‘Oh well,’ she said. ‘I suppose I’ll find him later. Whose is that swanky boat over there?’ She gestured to the frigate, though it could hardly be seen through the pouring rain.

‘Visitors,’ said another. ‘From the Headland.’

‘We know not what they bring.’

‘They came on an ill wind.’

Oran looked from one pale face to the next. ‘Right-o,’ she said. The ghosts were prone to these sorts of grave announcements. She never paid them much attention. ‘Well, I’m not getting any drier out here. I should go and get ready for the dance. Nice talking to you all.’

She gave them a quick bow, and they bowed back, bemused.

Oran took the coastal path away from the harbour. On the top of the cliffs, the lamps still glowed in the windows of her parents' cottage. She knew her father would be experimenting with a pot of stew, and her mother would be fussing over the torcs or tuning her fiddle. Granny would be knitting the same blanket she'd been working on since Oran was born – it should have been ready for Oran's cot, but her grandmother had got carried away and now, fourteen winters later, she was still clickety-clacking away in her armchair.

Oran smiled and set off up the steep, slick path towards home.

She'd taken the cliff path thousands of times but still had to watch where she put her feet, particularly when it was dark and the weather was as bad as it was. She looked down rather than ahead, and halfway up the cliff she collided with something huge and immovable and soft around the edges. She lost her balance and nearly toppled over backwards. Two strong hands shot out and held her upright.

Oran peered through the rain. 'Oh,' she said. 'Hullo, Da.'

Her father was wearing his thick sealskin coat, whose pockets contained a variety of spoons and ladles and spatulas. His bagpipes were slung on his back.

‘Oran!’ he cried over the noise of the storm.
‘Where on the Four Seas have you *been*?’

She shrugged. ‘Practising,’ she said, then added:
‘You’ve got some food in your beard.’ She tugged at his bristles.

‘Practising? Where?’

‘You know. Here and there.’

Her father narrowed his eyes. ‘Let’s see your hands,’ he said.

She showed him her palms.

‘Unless you’ve drastically changed your technique,’ her father said, ‘these are *not* the kinds of blisters you get from playing the cithara.’

‘I just took a boat out for while . . .’

‘You sailed to Tusk, didn’t you?’

Oran didn’t reply. She looked at her hands as though she’d never seen them before.

Her da sighed and ran his scarred fingers through his beard. ‘Love, you know how dangerous that is! Sea’s teeth, what is it about that old rock?’

‘It’s just quiet there,’ she said. That was at least *half* true.

‘You know how your maw feels about you sailing on your own, especially when the weather’s like this.’ The lightning lit them both for a moment, and was followed by a grumble of thunder. ‘Listen to that! If you’d been any later you’d be on the seabed by now,

and I'd have a ghaist for a daughter.'

'Sorry,' she said.

'Tell that to your maw,' he said.

'She doesn't need to know, does she?'

'She knows you're late, that's for sure. That's why she sent me down here.'

'We've got ages, haven't we? If she's still at home—'

'She's not at home. Granny's at home. Your mother went ahead to the Broken Bottle an hour ago.'

'An hour ago? Why?'

Her da looked grim. 'Because that was when the dance started. You're meant to be on stage right now, Oran.'



The Broken Bottle was aptly named. The tavern was – against all odds – the oldest on the island, but after hundreds of years of misfortune hardly anything of the original building remained. From where Oran was standing, it looked like five or six different buildings thrown together in a heap. Parts were wooden, parts were stone. The roof bowed in the middle, and there was a turret inexplicably projecting from the southern end. The windows were all wildly different heights, pouring light and noise out on to the puddles in the town square.

The story went that it had originally been called simply 'The Bottle', but whoever had built the place had woven disaster into its very timbers. Even in Oran's lifetime, the tavern had suffered three fires, had twice lost its roof to the winds, had been crushed by a falling fir tree, and had collapsed at one end due to a particularly industrious family of moles who had taken up residence beneath it. But the people of Little Drum always came together to rebuild the place, and it had long since become an emblem of their hardiness and optimism. There were other taverns that were cleaner, brighter, that served better food and more sophisticated selections of whisky, but none of them were held in as much affection as the Broken Bottle.

And nowhere, not on Little Drum, or Great Drum, or the Five Fingers could you find better or louder songs.

From outside Oran could hear that things were, indeed, well underway. 'The Lover's Leap', it sounded like. The islanders were stomping and singing and joining in on their instruments, and her cithara had already started to hum on her back. Oran looked at her da and he raised his enormous eyebrows. She swallowed. She was very late.

She followed him through the open door and was struck with a wave of noise and sweat and steam.

These days Oran had to stoop under the crooked doorframe to get in – her maw had always said her daughter had the long, thin fingers of a cithara player, but now her arms and legs were following suit. She was already taller than all of the boys and girls her age, and her growth spurt showed no signs of stopping.

She left her da and made her way to the stage, laughing as she manoeuvred around the dancers, their faces red and gleaming from too much wine and too much leaping. Some of them stopped and pointed at her, others applauded and clapped sweaty hands on her shoulder. There were ghaists too, loitering in the tavern's few dark corners, who smiled and inclined their silver heads.

Oran always did her best to restrain her pride, because she knew it wasn't good for her soul or for her playing, but her heart was ready to burst. They were all there for her, she knew.

'You decided to come then, did you?'

Her mother popped up in front of her, thrusting the bow of her fiddle under Oran's nose.

Oran did her best sheepish grin. 'Hullo, Maw,' she said.

'Don't "hullo Maw" me, young lady! Where've you been? Off daydreaming no doubt. Talking to the sea cows!'

Oran didn't reply. Better that her mother thought

she had been away with the sea cows than sailing over the stormy sea to Tusk. She hadn't told her about Bard, either. How could she even begin to explain about Bard?

'You need to start thinking straight, girl. You're not a child any more. You got responsibilities.'

'I'm here, aren't I?'

'You're over an hour late! Just because you happen to be the best player on the island doesn't mean you can swan in here whenever you want.'

'But—'

'And just because these folk will wait to hear you play, doesn't mean they *should* wait. You got to respect your audience, Oran, no matter how good you are.' Her mother glared at her with her fierce, sea-grey eyes. 'Now,' she said, putting her fiddle on the bar, 'give your maw a hug.'

She squeezed Oran so tightly that the rainwater seeped out of her daughter's cloak on to the floorboards like she was a giant sponge. Oran squeezed back. She wished Maw worried less. It made Oran behave strangely – it made her want to disobey her parents *more*, and yet at the same time made her feel *worse* for disobeying them. She knew she was doing it out of love, but she couldn't quite say how this figured.

When her mother released her, she was smiling again.

‘Now, then,’ she said, ‘have you thought about what we’re going to play?’

In all honesty, Oran hadn’t given it any thought. That was what people said was special about her. She played *unthinkingly*. Never needed to rehearse. Never needed to read the music. Could pick up a tune and turn it into something that brought tears to the eyes before she’d even heard the whole thing once through. Only Bard knew how to find and train that part of her intuition.

‘What about,’ she said, “‘The Red Duchess’?”

“‘The Red Duchess’! Absolutely not. I can’t believe you even *know* that song. At your age!’

‘But they’ll love it, Maw!’

‘They’re drunk enough to love anything, Oran,’ said her maw. ‘Songs like that will get you into trouble. Besides, it’s new. The ghosts won’t thank you for it.’

‘Maybe “Three Merry Widows”?’

‘A bit tame.’

Not the way Oran played it, it wasn’t.

“‘The Sea Cow’s Daughter’?”

‘Aye, that’s good. A good old song. We’ll have a bit of fun with that.’

Oran’s mother picked up her fiddle and they moved away from the bar towards the stage. The air was like warm soup, and within it there were strange

odours that moved in complex currents and eddies. As Oran climbed the steps, the room erupted into applause, accompanied with hoots and stamps and little musical flourishes. Oran grinned and stared out at the packed tavern. The crowd looked on with pink, expectant faces, their birth instruments held aloft or clutched to their chests – fiddles, drums, reed pipes, bagpipes, seahorns, citharas and more.

She set the case of her own instrument on her lap and opened the clasps.

The frame of her cithara was like a crescent of autumn sky. The lacquer was a deep blue, inlaid with a curling detail of golden leaves. As was tradition, it was the ghosts who had chosen which instrument she should play. But the cithara itself had been made by both her parents while she was in her maw's belly, and she loved it like she loved them.

She lifted it carefully from the torc-wool lining. It was dry, even after it had been caught in the storm. She polished its frame roughly with a cloth, more out of ritual than necessity, and began to tune its seven strings. The audience began to settle as she made minute adjustments to the pegs, her eyes closed, waiting for that indescribable feeling of rightness as each string settled into its pitch alongside its fellows.

When she opened her eyes, the room was bright-eyed and silent. Her mother looked at her and gave

a wry smile, as if to say: *I know you're enjoying this, but don't enjoy it too much.*

Oran adjusted the cithara on top of her thighs, cracked her long fingers and shaped the first chord.

*When the world was young and the sea was new
A man sailed oot wit' his lady true
The fairest maid loved this fine laird:
A sea coo blessed wi' a seaweed beard.*

Her mother had been right, though Oran didn't like to admit it. 'The Sea Cow's Daughter' went down a storm. The ghosts loved it, drifting out from the dark nooks of the tavern to whirl in amongst their descendants. They didn't look silver and hazy, like they usually did. The music made them blaze gold. They looked more *there*, more alive even than those who hadn't yet passed on.

Oran played and grinned, improvising snatches of new harmony and melody that made the whole room roar with surprise. There was no feeling like it. She looked at her maw, and her maw rolled her eyes.

The song twisted and turned through some twenty verses. There were hundreds in total, because different singers kept adding their own parts to the tale, but no one knew them all. Well, maybe Bard did. She seemed to know every song under the sun, even though in

the months that Oran had known her she had never left her island. The heart of the story followed the fisherman who fell in love with a sea cow. They had a daughter, who lived both above and below water. Oran loved it. She liked to think there was something of the sea cow's daughter in her, a girl of both the sea and the land. A girl who was a little different.

She finished her final verse and the dancers collapsed into their chairs, laughing and clapping. The ghaists beamed, outshining the blubber lamps. Oran looked to see if her friend Alick was among them. He wasn't there. That was fine. Alick played the barrow fiddle, and barrow fiddle players were notoriously antisocial.

'Another!' shouted someone in the crowd, though she couldn't see who.

The rest stomped their feet in approval. Oran looked at her maw again. Her face was red and pouring with sweat from keeping pace with her daughter. She gestured with her bow.

'If you've got it in you, my love,' she said. 'I'll have to sit this one out.'

"The Red Duchess"!

Another whoop of approval. Her mother shook her head. Oran turned back to her audience and smiled. She began to play it anyway.

She didn't know why Maw worried so much.

Little Drum was so far removed from the Headland that the Court, the Duke and the Duchess were just the stuff of stories. They were a good way to get weans to behave. If you misbehaved, the Red Duchess would come for you . . .

*Hark to the song of the Red Duchess
The fount of all the seas' distress;
A cruel and murdering fiend, no less,
Her crimes too many to confess!*

Oran was halfway through the song when she realized that the room had gone quiet. She looked up from her instrument, her fingers still finding their own way through the tune. The ghosts had withdrawn into the shadows, and the rest of the islanders were mute. Her mother's face had turned from red to white.

The door to the Broken Bottle was wide open and still quivering on its hinges. There was a tall, slim woman standing just inside, wearing a black dress bound in tight hoops of whalebone. She looked as though she had just come from a funeral. Her hair was scraped backwards and clasped out of sight, so her head was a perfect white oval: an egg balanced on a candlestick.

Next to her was a tiny man holding an umbrella.

He was wearing enormous heels but still had to stand on tiptoes to protect the woman's head from the rain. In fact, Oran would have sworn he was a child, were it not for the circular goatee beard in the middle of his circular face. He wore the distinctive pantaloons of the Headland, and over one shoulder a sash with a red and black family skein she didn't recognize.

But the strangest thing was this: neither of them was carrying their birth instrument. She'd heard that Headlanders did not play as much music as the islanders, but this was astonishing to see. They may as well have walked in completely naked.

The man and woman were followed by a handful of guards in matching sashes and pantaloons and feathered caps, and finally by the island's mayors, a husband and wife. They fanned out through the tavern. Oran looked at her maw. Her maw was glowering at her.

The tiny man stepped forward and cleared his throat. 'Her Grace,' he said, 'Duchess Samhair of the Headland, and of the Near and Far Isles.'

The silence that followed made Oran's ears ache. She clutched her cithara so hard she thought she might break it. The stories were true, then. She'd misbehaved, and the Red Duchess had come for her.



The woman moved stiffly among the scattered tables of the Broken Bottle, followed by her assistant and the two mayors. She gave suspicious, or perhaps fearful, glances to the ghastrs. Did they have ghastrs on the Headland? Oran didn't know.

A murmur passed through the tavern. The too-loud scrape of a chair on the floorboards. The drip, drip, drip of the leaking roof. The Duchess lifted her skirts and came up on to the stage, where she stood between Oran and her maw, ignoring both of them. The mayors stood awkwardly to one side.

Oran looked the woman up and down and tried to convince herself there had been some mistake. It *couldn't* have been the Red Duchess. She looked nothing like the woman from the song. Her hands weren't bloodstained, her eyes didn't blaze like hot coals. In fact, nothing about her was red, apart from a small patch of her family skein pinned to the front of her dress.

'Have they finished?' the Duchess said to her hanger-on.

'Yes, Your Grace.'

She bent a little closer to him, as though she hadn't heard.

'Yes, *Your Grace*,' he said, louder. 'Not a note.'

Oran frowned. She watched the Duchess put her hands to her ears and pluck out a pair of bejewelled earplugs. The Duchess handed them to the little man, who cleaned them discreetly with a black and red handkerchief and put them in an oyster shell.

'Good evening,' she said to the room, sounding as if she wished them anything but. Her voice was lower than Oran had been expecting. She could have sung bass in the fisherwomen's choir. 'It would normally be my custom to address you formally in your town hall, but since, apparently, you have no town hall . . .'

That wasn't strictly true. They had a hall, but it was currently being used to store apples and pears and

root vegetables in readiness for the Festival of First Fruits.

‘Your mayors suggested I speak to you here’ – she gave an uncomplimentary look to the bare rafters of the tavern – ‘since it is such a popular occasion. So. Here I am. And here you all are.’

There was a nervous wheeze from somebody’s bagpipes.

‘To begin, I would like to apologize for my absence since the tragedy last year at the Court.’ She paused and looked out at the crowd, as if challenging someone to give voice to the rumours about how, exactly, that tragedy had come to pass. ‘I am aware that no Duke or Duchess has come to visit the Far Isles in decades, and were it not for events at home I would have visited my tenants a good deal earlier.’

Oran frowned. Tenants? What did she mean by that?

‘Unfortunately, the loss of so many members of the royal family threw the Headland into no little chaos, and a tour of the islands was out of the question. Now the Headland is settled, though, so I have been able to venture further abroad, and for the past several weeks I have been giving the Near and Far Isles the attention they deserve. How sad that Little Drum should be the last destination on my itinerary.’ And then she turned and fixed Oran with a stare and Oran saw that,

yes, her eyes *were* coals: bright, blue coals that left you frostbitten. ‘I fear,’ she said, ‘it should have been my first.’

There was a long pause. The Duchess’s gaze never faltered, and Oran was forced to look at her feet. Had the Duchess heard the song, or hadn’t she? There was more anxious muttering from the patrons of the tavern. People laid gentle hands on their instruments to calm them. One of the mayors coughed.

‘It is our honour and our, um, pleasure, to have you as our guest,’ said the husband. He was a portly man who played the bombard. He fiddled with the valves of his instrument as he spoke. ‘Perhaps you would join us for tonight’s dance? I mean, you don’t have to, um, dance. You can just listen. If you would like. Oran here is our most talented singer and musician, perhaps, she could, um, compose something for you here and now. Something to, um, commemorate this, um, wonderful . . .’

The mayor trailed off. Oran could feel her cithara protesting in her lap, a low vibration from the depths of its hollow body.

‘A song would be most inapt,’ said the Duchess. The little man was trying and failing to suppress a smile. She turned back to the room. ‘As well as wanting to apologize, I have come to inform you of several new laws that have been passed through Court since

I inherited the Duchy last year. Firstly, regarding kelp.'

There were bemused looks around the tavern. Some even smiled. Surely the Duchess hadn't come all this way to discuss the price of seaweed?

'There is a glut of kelp and kelp-based products on the Headland. We are therefore limiting the import of kelp to a maximum of one hundred tons per boat per week. I hope this does not prove too much of an inconvenience.'

There were a few barely suppressed chuckles. That might have made a difference to merchants on the east of the Headland, where huge trawlers scoured the seabed clean, but out here a kelp farmer would be happy to accrue a hundred tons in a whole year.

'Secondly. The Opera are still at large and sailing among these isles. Whilst it has always been our strong recommendation that you do not invite them into your harbours, it is now forbidden by law. I hope you will agree that this is a necessary step to protect your homes and loved-ones.'

That was met with a mixed response. Some islanders loved the Opera and their wild performances. Others thought they were little more than musically inclined pirates. While the audience was digesting this, the Duchess quickly made her final statement.

‘Thirdly, and most importantly, is the Bill of Quietude. Effective immediately, my men will be enforcing the cessation of all musical activities, and the confiscation of all musical instruments.’

It took the room a few moments to make sense of she had said. It was like being rolled in a rough swell – darkness, silence, a suffocating weight, then rising to the surface where all was noise and thrashing foam.

The tavern erupted. The islanders got to their feet, shouting and stamping and beating their drums in fury. Some got out of their chairs and surged towards the front of the stage. Some were laughing out loud. The absurdity of it!

‘By the Chorus, this ain’t the Headland here!’

‘The only way you’ll get my fiddle is by taking it from my *dead fingers*!’

‘It’s our life, you bottom-feeding fool! Our whole *life*!’

The Duchess stood and weathered these cries, a stack of granite in a rough sea. She didn’t move or speak. One of her eyes fluttered slightly, as though she was suffering from a migraine. Oran’s fingers twitched restlessly on the strings of her instrument. She wanted to start playing again. Or rather her instrument did. There wasn’t really any difference.

Eventually it was the mayor and mayoress who brought the tavern under control, seeing that a riot

was not the best way to argue their case.

‘Your Grace,’ said the mayor, once the noise had subsided, ‘as you have heard, we cannot give up our instruments, much less our music. May I ask, um, why such a law has been passed?’

The Duchess frowned for a moment, then gestured around the Broken Bottle. ‘Really? I mean, *look* at you all.’

The man with the umbrella laughed, and the room descended into chaos again.

‘Perhaps,’ said the mayoress, raising her voice above the din, ‘you could be more specific?’

Again the Duchess waited for the storm to die down. ‘Thankfully my ears were stopped when I arrived. But I know intoxication when I see it. It’s been the same on all the islands. The same picture of . . .’ She searched for the word. ‘*Dissolution*. Loose tongues and loose morals. This is what singing encourages.’

‘Oh, rotgut!’ said the mayoress.

The Duchess gave another one of her blistering stares. ‘Indeed? I know the kinds of songs you sing out here. I have not heard them personally, nor do I want to. But Lord Magmalley here is kind enough to give me the gist.’

‘They’re just silliness, Your Grace,’ the mayor said.

‘Remind me of the line, Magmalley. Something

about murdering my own parents and feeding them to the lugworms?’

Oran knew the exact verse of ‘The Red Duchess’ she was referring to. She could feel her maw’s eyes upon her from the other side of the stage.

‘I believe it mentioned something of that sort,’ said Magmalley. ‘It brings tears to my eyes even now, Your Grace.’

‘This is not silliness,’ said the Duchess. ‘This is treason.’

The mayors clutched their instruments to their chests, he his bombard, she her seahorn. Oran watched the mayoress take several deep breaths to compose herself, then approach the Duchess with her head held high.

‘I will be the first to apologize, Your Grace, if you have been offended by this shanty, or that ballad. But that is no reason to deprive the islands of music in its entirety. We have a saying here: you are taking a harpoon to fish for minnows.’

‘Then let me explain in terms you can understand,’ said the Duchess. ‘Songs are, indeed, like fish. Slippery things. You think you have caught one, and then it turns up in a bay on the next island along. My dear, I am simply spreading my nets wide enough to ensure that none escape.’

‘But our music is everything to us. *Everything*. It is

the very air that we breathe, out here.'

'Nonsense,' the Duchess said. 'I've never seen a man die for lack of music.'

'But you see, Your Grace,' said the mayoress, quivering with rage, 'that *is* what will happen if you take it away from us. Music is the very heart of our community. It is what defines us, together and as individuals, living and dead. Song is our identity. Our history. Our memory.' More yelling from the islanders, but she spoke over the top of them. 'Without our songs we have no connection with our past. If you take away our music, you will take away our ancestors with it.'

Oran wasn't sure what the mayoress meant by that. She looked around at the ghaists. They simmered, blue and sullen, on the fringes of the hall. She thought of Alick again. Where was he?

'I would suggest,' said the Duchess, 'that you focus more on the *future* than the past. The Headland has been without music for only a few months and the progress we have made has been very pleasing. It's time you joined civilization, I think.'

'And if we refuse?'

'You will be evicted.'

The islanders could bear it no longer. They stood up, jeering and swearing and playing wild flourishes on their instruments. Oran listened hard. Her cithara growled with dissatisfaction in her hands.

The Duchess winced to hear the islanders' instruments and snapped her fingers at Lord Magmalley. He opened the oyster shell and handed over her ornate earplugs.

'You may play and sing to your heart's content tonight,' she said, though nobody could hear her. 'Tomorrow Lord Magmalley and his men will begin their collections.'

In went the earplugs, and she made a sign to her guards. They made a tight cordon around her and escorted her out of the seething tavern. The tip of Magmalley's umbrella was the only thing that showed he had gone with them.