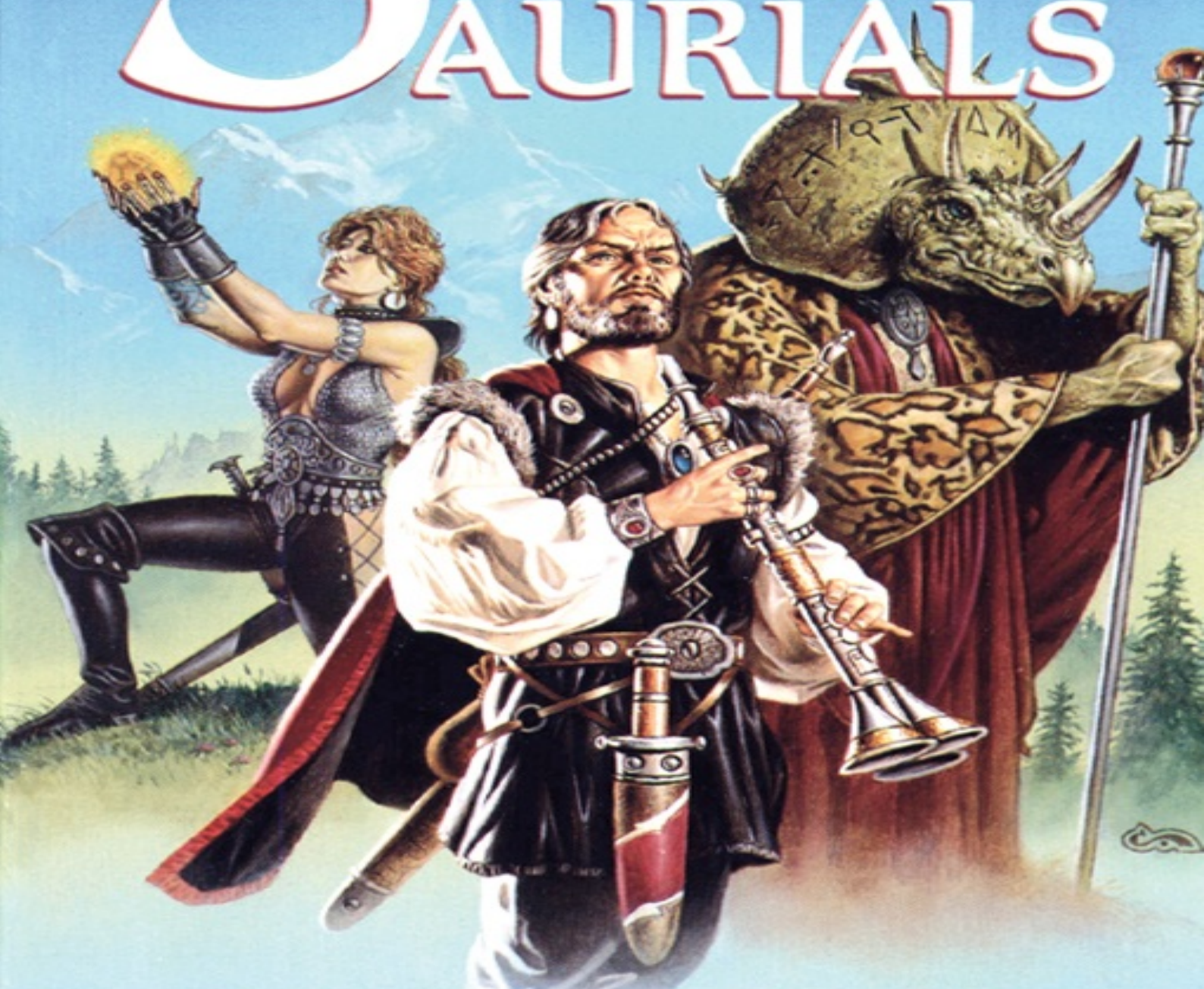


Book Three: The Finder's Stone Trilogy



SONG OF THE SAURIALS



Kate Novak and Jeff Grubb

The three Harper judges waited impatiently for the sage to continue. Elminster rose to his feet and circled around the table till he stood directly before the tribunal. "Three things . . ." he began. Then suddenly his face went pale. He gasped and clutched at his chest.

"Elminster?" Morala cried, rising to her feet.

"Are you all right, sir?" Breck asked, leaping from his seat to come to the aid of the sage. Some invisible force, though, repelled the young ranger. He bounced backward onto the dais at Kyre's feet.

In the span of three breaths, Elminster's body seemed to turn to clear crystal. Then, in a flash of bright light, the sage was gone. In his place stood a huge, hideous beast.

The creature stood as tall as a hill giant, towering over the three Harpers. The long robe and fur cape it wore couldn't hide the inhumanness of its form. It was covered with sickly green scales, and its eyes glittered red in the torchlight. Two sharp ivory horns sprouted from its head, and a third, even longer, horn rose from the tip of its long snout. Around the back of its head grew a bony frill, edged with spikes and decorated with arcane magical symbols. A muscular tail curled up from beneath the hem of its robe and swished back and forth like an angry snake.

In one clawed appendage, the beast clenched an iron staff tipped with a yellow orb, and in the other claw it held out a small blood-red object vaguely resembling a large chess rook. The red object began to glow, and the Harpers could feel heat emanating from it.

Kyre shouted, "Kill it!" Without a second's hesitation, she drew a dagger from her boot and hurled it....



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Tb Frank, Jeff, Dave, Joe, and all the other
denizens of the CMU and Purdue Dungeons
who walked Tbril so long ago

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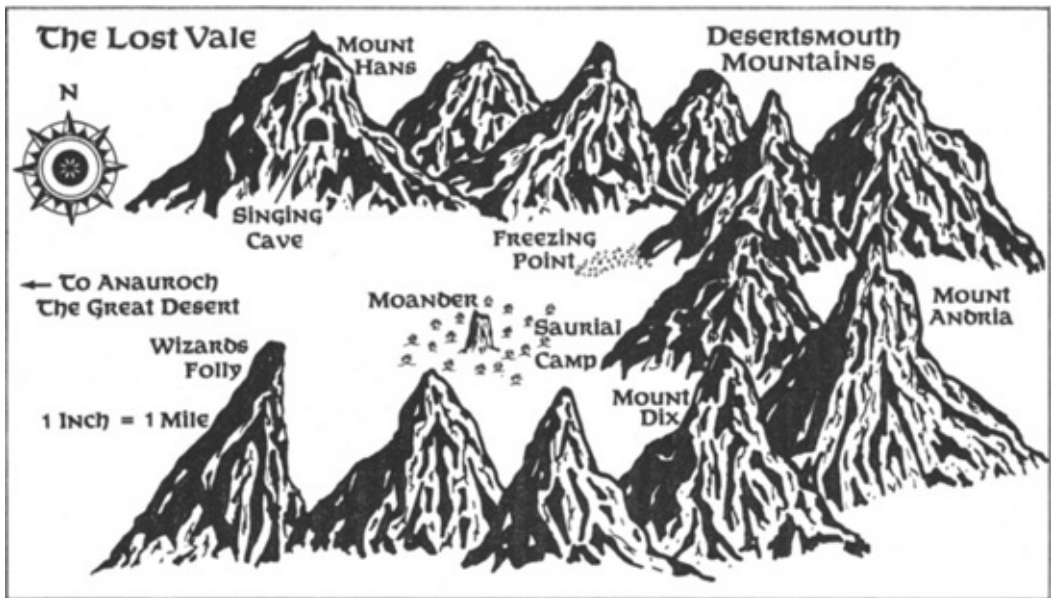
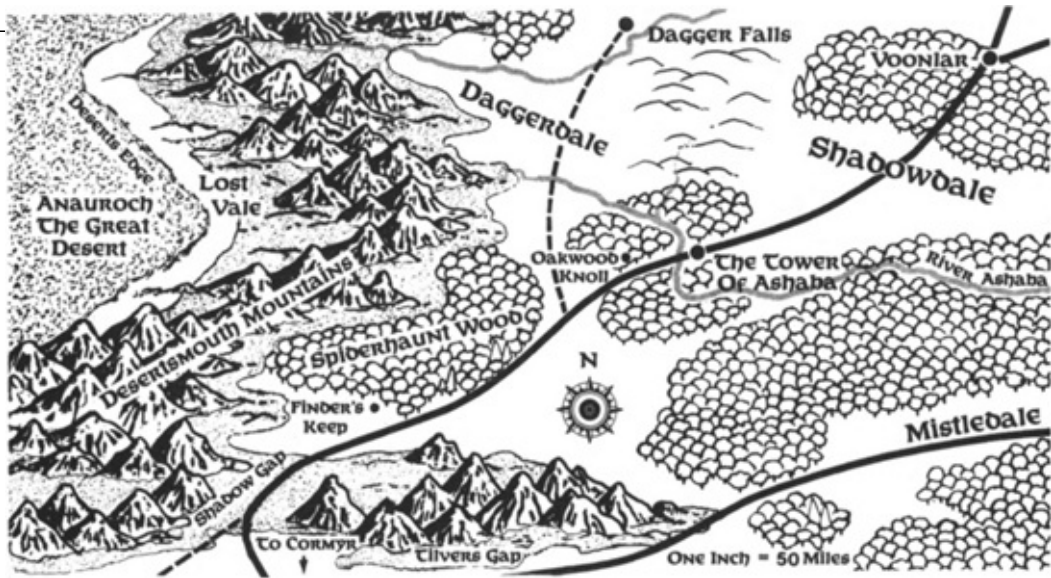
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The Nameless Bard

“Hear what you’ve denied the Realms, what you’ve denied yourselves,” the prisoner muttered as he raised the chordal horn to his lips. His breath flowed through the instrument’s chambers with the steady force of a trade wind, and his fingers danced gracefully over the horn’s holes and keys. Sweet music filled the prison cell, slipped through the iron bars set in the cell door, swirled down the hallways of the Tower of Ashaba, and entered, unbidden, into the courtroom.

The tune echoed along the bare stone walls of the chamber and danced about the Harper in the courtroom. There, seated at a table before a tribunal of three Harpers, sat Elminster the Sage about to offer his own counsel concerning the prisoner. Elminster paused before beginning his opening statement and closed his eyes to listen to the tune. It took him only a moment to catch the gist of the spell it was meant to weave. Ah, Nameless, will ye never change? he thought. A penitent man would plead for his freedom, a righteous man demand it. What seduction all ye knowest?

Morala of Milil, the eldest of the three judges, scowled at the musical interruption. Her eyes nearly disappeared in the wrinkles that creased her face. A lock of her snow-white hair fell forward, and she shoved it impatiently back into the gold hairnet at the nape of her neck. She, too, recognized the spell wrapped within the melody, and when she caught Elminster’s eye, she folded her frail arms across her chest and smiled coldly.

Elminster smiled back, as if oblivious to the ancient priestess’s hostility. He thought with some annoyance, Why did the Harpers have to choose thee for this tribunal? Ye could hardly be considered unbiased. Ye never liked Nameless.

Morala had been one of the judges who had sentenced Nameless at his first trial. Of course Elminster knew that was exactly why she was here now. Someone had to represent the past, someone who knew the Nameless of old and recognized his tricks, tricks such as the one Nameless was engaging in at this very moment.

“It wouldn’t kill thee to enjoy the melody, Morala,” the sage muttered under his breath. “A mere tune could hardly corrupt a pillar of stone like thyself.”

Morala gave the sage a harsh glare, as if she’d heard his remark. Uncertain just how good her hearing was, Elminster shuffled a stack of scrolls across the table as if he were preoccupied with his defense and did not hear the music. When he sensed that Morala had turned her attention away from him, the sage sneaked a glance at the other two judges.

Not surprisingly, Breck Orcsbane, the youngest of the three judges, seemed delighted with the music. The ranger’s head bobbed in time with the music, setting his long plait of yellow hair swaying like a pendulum. Elminster half-expected the brawny woodsman to get up and dance a jig. Morala had already expressed her displeasure that someone of Breck’s simplicity had been chosen for the tribunal, but Elminster was relieved to discover that at least one of the judges knew how to enjoy life.

Only the bard, Kyre, displayed a completely neutral reaction to the music. The beautiful

half-elven woman tilted her head to listen, but Elminster suspected that her technical analysis of the tune precluded experiencing it on any emotional level. The sage wished he could tell what she thought of it. He wished he could tell what she thought of anything. Kyre was so remote and stiff whenever he addressed her that Elminster felt as if he were speaking with the dead, an experience with which he was not unfamiliar. As if to compensate for his reserved nature, Kyre wore a vivid red orchid in her lustrous black hair. To bloom in that climate, the sage realized, the orchid had to be enchanted, but who, he was left to wonder, was she trying to attract with it?

“Heth,” Morala said, addressing the tower page assigned to the Harpers. “Request the captain of the guard to do something about that noise,” she commanded, “and close the door on your way out.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Breck said. “The music’s not half bad.”

Heth hesitated at the doorway.

Morala’s eyes narrowed as she looked to Kyre for support.

Kyre shrugged, indifferent to the priestess’s annoyance.

“The sound does not disturb me,” the half-elf said flatly.

“Elminster? Aren’t you distracted by the noise?” Morala asked, hoping the sage would at least have the decency to admit the inappropriateness of the music at the trial. They had already agreed that Nameless should not appear before the tribunal. Morala feared he might charm the younger Harpers with his wit, while Elminster feared he might disgust them with his ego. It certainly did not seem appropriate to the priestess that the man’s music should be heard. It was just such music that Nameless had used to justify his crimes, and the Harpers had not yet repealed their original judgment that all the prisoner’s music be banished from the Realms.

“I’m sorry, Morala,” Elminster replied. “My hearing’s not what it once was. Didst ye ask if I heard boys?”

Morala let her breath out in a huff. She motioned the page to sit. “Please, continue with your argument, wise Elminster,” Morala prompted.

Having gained the upper hand with Morala on so small a matter, Elminster hesitated before moving on to the more important issue at hand. Do I really dare speak on Nameless’s behalf, he wondered. Nameless’s ordeals don’t seem to have humbled him any. Is he any wiser for all his suffering? The sage sighed to himself and shook his head in an attempt to clear away his doubts. He had said he would speak on the prisoner’s behalf, so he would. He could only hope that the collective decision of the tribunal would prove at least as wise as his own uncertain counsel.

The sage rose to his feet and cleared his throat. “At my request,” he explained, “the Harpers have agreed to reconsider the case of the Nameless Bard. They have chosen ye from among their ranks to represent them and serve on this tribunal. For the benefit of Kyre and Breck Orcsbane, who were not yet born when Nameless was first tried, I will review the circumstances of his trial and the outcome. If it please thy grace,” the sage said, nodding politely in Morala’s direction, “feel free to add to or correct me at any point. Ye kneed Nameless as well as I.”

Morala nodded politely in return, but Elminster realized it was unlikely she would interrupt him. His report would be scrupulously accurate, and Morala was astute enough

know she would only look like a fussy old woman if she began correcting him.

Elminster began his tale. “The Nameless Bard was born three hundred and fifty years ago in a small village in one of the northern nations, the second son of local gentry. At an early age he completed his training at a renowned barding college and graduated with highest honors. He chose the life of a wandering adventurer, and his songs became popular wherever in the Realms he roamed. While he relished his fame, he also put it to good use, attracting other young adventurers to help in any cause he felt worthy. Thus he and his companions became the founding fathers of the Harpers.

“With the blessings of his gods and such aid as magic can give, he lived well beyond the natural span of years given to a human, yet there came a time when his mortality began to prey greatly on his mind. The bard became obsessed with preserving his songs for posterity. He was never satisfied with any other person’s performance of his works, so he would not settle for the tradition among most bards of passing the work on orally or leaving a written record. He began to experiment with magical means of recording his work and thus created the most marvelous piece of magic—the finder’s stone.”

Elminster paused a moment and glanced at Morala, wondering if she would object to his mentioning the name of the magic device. Morala, however, chose to ignore Elminster’s mischief and waved her hand impatiently for him to proceed.

“The stone was originally a very minor artifact that would serve any person as a compass of detection. Basically its wielder needed only to think of a person, and the stone would send out a beam of light indicating a path to that person,” the sage explained. “It also protected itself from theft as well as it could with a blinding light spell. Occasionally it was known to direct its wielder without instruction, as if it had a mind of its own, so that the stone was said to help the lost find their way.

“The Nameless Bard experimented with altering the artifact’s nature, something only the most skilled or the most foolish magic-wielder would dare to try. Into the crystal’s heart he inserted a shard of enchanted para-elemental ice. Having survived such a risky undertaking, Nameless reaped a great reward. In his hands or those of his kin, the stone acted as a rechargeable wand holding those spells Nameless had acquired. Like the blank pages of a journal, the stone could store other information as well. Nameless claimed it could recall for him an entire library of tomes. It could also recall his songs and ‘sing’ them, as it were, in Nameless’s voice, exactly as he sang them. He added other enchantments so it could project the illusion that he was actually sitting there, singing the song.”

“A little stuck on himself, wasn’t he?” Breck noted with a grin.

Morala huffed in agreement.

“More than a little, good ranger,” Elminster replied, smiling at Breck. The sage was pleased that the young man wasn’t afraid to speak out and even more pleased that the failings of others amused rather than annoyed the ranger. “Despite all that he had accomplished, Elminster went on, “Nameless still was not satisfied. The stone’s illusion of himself needed to be commanded when to sing and told what to sing. It had no vital force to sing of its own will, or judgment to choose a song appropriate to the moment, or ability to gauge an audience’s reaction and build upon their emotions. So Nameless abandoned the stone as a failure. He planned next to build a powerful simulacrum of himself. The creature was to have Nameless’s own personality as well as all the knowledge Nameless had placed in the finder’s

stone. So that none would shun it as an abomination, Nameless researched ways to make indistinguishable from a true human. Finally, he intended to give it immortality.”

Breck gave a low whistle of amazement. The priestess Morala shuddered, even though she was already familiar with the story. Kyre’s expression remained neutral—interested, but emotionless. The tune from the prisoner’s cell swelled into a bold fanfare.

Elminster continued. “Having found it useful in his alterations of the finder’s stone, Nameless obtained another shard of para-elemental ice for the heart of the simulacrum.” The sage paused. It was easy enough for Elminster to speak of Nameless’s brilliance and daring and even his obsession and vanity, but the sage’s heart ached to recall the bard’s crime.

It was better he should tell it, though, than let Morala give the account. “Yet, for all his brilliance and natural ability with magic,” Elminster explained, “Nameless was a bard, not a trained magic-user. He recognized his own limitations and tried to enlist the aid of several different wizards, but without success. There were not many people whom he had not offended with his arrogance. Among those mages he counted as friends, many thought his project silly, a waste of time and energy. Some did not believe it would even work. Others thought the creation he proposed to be a heinous act. A few pointed out that the creation could be copied and used by malicious beings for evil purposes. They tried to convince him that he should be satisfied with the finder’s stone’s recreation of his music. Whatever the opinion, every mage he spoke with told him the project was too dangerous. It would prove fatal to himself or some other.”

“He went ahead and did it anyway, didn’t he?” Breck asked, as eager as a child to hear the outcome of Elminster’s story.

The sage nodded. “Yes, he did. With the aid of his apprentices, he built the simulacrum in his own home. As he began casting the spell that would animate the creature, however, something went wrong. The para-elemental ice exploded. The simulacrum was destroyed, and one apprentice died instantly. Another lost her voice, and all attempts to help her failed.”

“She killed herself later,” Morala interrupted with a trace of anger.

“Yes,” Elminster admitted, then hastily added, “but that was after the time of which I speak. When Nameless summoned help for his wounded apprentice, he freely admitted how she had sustained her injuries. The other Harpers were appalled that he had risked his own apprentices in so dangerous a task, all for the sake of his obsession with his music. They summoned him to judgment and found him guilty of slaying one apprentice and injuring another. They determined a punishment to fit his crime.

“His music and his name were to be banished from the Realms. To keep him from thwarting them in this goal, and also to keep him from trying his reckless experiment again, the Harpers removed the bard’s own name from his memory and banished him from the Realms, exiling him to a border region of the positive plane of life, where, due to the nature of that region, he would live in good health and relative immortality. He was condemned, however, to live in complete solitude.” Elminster paused again.

Nameless’s tune switched to a plaintive minor key as Morala, Orcsbane, and Kyre stood contemplating their fellow Harper’s crime and his punishment. It almost seemed as if Nameless was aware of what point in his story Elminster had reached. Morala glanced suspiciously at the sage, but he seemed not to notice the tune at all.

Actually Elminster's attention at the moment was attracted to a fluttering shadow behind the tribunal. The sage made no sound or movement to call attention to the small figure he spotted skulking along the courtroom wall. It was only the halfling, Olive Ruskettle. Elminster could see no harm in her unauthorized presence. After all, she knew Nameless's story already. The sage made a mental note, though, to chide Lord Mourngrim about the quality of the tower guard. In the courtroom, the halfling was nearly impossible to spot. As adept as she was at hiding in the shadows, but she should not have been able to pass through the tower's front gate in broad daylight unchallenged by the guards.

Unaware she had been observed by the sharp-eyed sage, the halfling sneaked out of the courtroom and down the corridor toward the prisoner's cell.

If ye have plans to visit thy friend Nameless, ye little sneak thief, ye are in for a surprise," Elminster thought, suppressing a grin. He focused his attention again on the judges. "Two hundred years have passed since the exile of the Nameless Bard—"

"Excuse me, Elminster," Kyre interrupted, "but are we to continue calling this man Nameless throughout this hearing? Surely we can be trusted with his name. It would simplify things, would it not?"

"No!" Morala objected. "It is we who made him Nameless. Nameless he will remain."

Elminster sighed at the old priestess's vehemence. "It is the purpose of this tribunal to decide not only whether or not to free Nameless, but whether or not Nameless's name should be restored to the Realms. Morala and I have both taken an oath not to reveal the name unless the Harpers decide otherwise. So we must continue to refer to him as Nameless, at least until the end of this trial."

"I see," Kyre replied, nodding her head slightly. "Excuse my interruption."

Elminster nodded and once again began the second half of his tale. "Nameless remained in exile for two centuries. Then certain evil powers deliberately sought him out and freed him from his place of exile."

The tune coming from the bard's prison ceased abruptly. Morala's lips curled ever so slightly in satisfaction while Elminster stroked his beard thoughtfully, wondering just what Nameless was up to now.

* * * * *

In his prison cell, Nameless lowered the chordal horn and glared at his cell door. Something was jiggling in the lock. Elminster had given the guards specific instructions to show the prisoner every courtesy possible, including always knocking before opening his door. The prisoner scowled in anticipation of delivering a scathing reprimand to whichever guard had been so foolish to interrupt him in the middle of his composition.

The door swung open slowly. A female halfling stood in the doorway. Her hazel eyes sparkled, and she winked conspiratorially as she slid a copper wire into her russet hair. "Nice ditty," she quipped. "Has it got any lyrics?"

"Naturally," the prisoner replied, relaxing his angry face. "Would you like me to write them down for you, Mistress Ruskettle?" he asked.

"That'd be great," the small woman said, stepping into the cell. She pushed the door almost, but not quite, closed behind her. Her furry bare feet padded silently across the plush wool Calimshan carpeting. She slipped off her knapsack and her wet cloak and checked to be sure the back of her tunic and pants were dry before seating herself on a tapestry-covered

footstool.

The Nameless Bard lay the chordal horn down on the table. "Come in, Mistress Ruskettle. Have a seat and make yourself at home," he said, though he knew sarcasm was wasted on halflings in general and on Olive Ruskettle in particular.

"Thank you, Nameless," Olive replied. "Nice quarters you have here," she said as her eyes inspected the polished furniture, the velvet drapes, the brass-bound clothes chest, the silken bedspread, the gold candelabrum, the crystal wine decanter, and all the other luxuries Nameless's captors had provided for his cell. "You're looking well," she added, grinning at the fine silken shirt, fur-trimmed tunic, wool pants, and leather boots he wore.

Nameless grinned back as he seated himself cross-legged on the bed. He never could remain annoyed with Olive for long. She had, after all, rescued him from the dungeon of the cruel sorceress Cassana and also helped him free his singer, Alias, from Cassana. It wasn't just gratitude, however, that made him fond of the halfling thief; Olive's brash nerve amused him. It reminded him of himself.

"What have you been up to?" the bard asked. "It's been over a year since I've seen you last."

"Yes. Sorry about that. This summer's been rather chaotic, as you've probably heard. I was staying with friends in Immersea, who talked me out of traveling until the trouble died down. If I'd known you were wasting away in prison, I would have come sooner," the halfling said. From a silver bowl piled with fruit, she plucked a large, juicy plum and ate the delicacy in several dainty, but quick, bites.

"My imprisonment is a mere formality until the new trial is over," Nameless said. "The door wasn't even kept locked until that old bat Morala arrived and caused a stink."

"She's the priestess of Milil?" Olive asked. "The one who has it in for you?"

"You've met?" Nameless asked.

"I've seen her around."

"Have you seen Alias?"

"Actually, I came to see you the moment I hit town," Olive said. The halfling didn't care much for Alias. Olive realized, however, that Nameless thought of the singing swordswoman as a daughter, so in an effort to be polite, she asked the bard, "How is dear Alias?"

"I don't know," Nameless huffed. "She and Dragonbait arrived in Shadowdale a day after Morala, and Morala won't allow me any visitors. How did you get past the guard at the tower gate?"

"You know," the halfling said, pulling out a silver pin from her cloak pocket, "it really is amazing how much respect the local constabulary has for this silly harp-and-moon symbol, even when it's pinned to the breast of a short person with no visible weapons."

Nameless grinned at the irony. He'd given the halfling thief his old Harper's pin. According to custom, Olive would need him to vouch for her until she was accepted by the other Harpers, but he was a disgraced Harper. Now she'd used the pin to break a rule made by Morala—a Master Harper. There was nothing like the chaos a halfling—or a woman—could cause, Nameless thought, and Olive is both. "You realize," Nameless asked aloud, "you'll have some problems being accepted by the Harpers until I have reestablished myself?"

"You realize," Olive retorted, "that I'll have some problems accepting the Harpers if they don't get off their high horses and forget this banishment business. In the meantime, you can't

stay in this dump. I've got a horse and provisions for you hidden at the edge of town."

"Why, that's awfully thoughtful of you, Mistress Ruskettle."

"So let's go," Olive said, hopping up from the footstool and standing beside the bed, tapping her foot in mock impatience.

Nameless leaned forward, reached out a hand, and stroked her hair. Ordinarily Olive couldn't stand having humans patting her on the head, but Nameless hadn't actually patted her, and she liked him more than any other human she'd ever met, so she could forgive him a good deal. She looked up at him, puzzled that he'd even touched her at all.

"Oh, Olive," he said with a rueful smile.

"What's wrong?" she asked, not failing to note he had used her given name, something he had never done before.

"Did you think me incapable of arranging my own escape, Olive?" Nameless asked.

"You're still here, aren't you?" Olive pointed out, growing annoyed.

"Yes, but not due to any lack of skill with locks," Nameless said, holding out his hand and presenting the halfling with the copper wire he'd just slipped from her hair. Dexterously he twirled the shining metal strand through his fingers, then made it vanish so quickly that Olive couldn't be certain if he'd flipped it away or slipped it up his sleeve.

"All right, I'm impressed. Can I have my pick-bone back?" the halfling asked.

"It's in your hair, Olive, right where you put it," replied Nameless.

Olive ran her fingers through her hair and found the wire lodged behind her ear exactly where she'd put it. "An illusion, right?" she guessed.

Nameless did not reply. Instead, his eyes twinkled with mischief.

"I hate it when you do things like that," Olive huffed.

"You love it when I do things like that," Nameless countered. "You just hate that you can't do them yet."

"All right. So you didn't need my help to escape. Why are you still here?" she demanded.

"Because I have no desire to become a hunted fugitive when I don't have to. The Harpers will come to their senses and release me."

"That's what you thought when you turned yourself over to them two hundred years ago," Olive argued. "What makes you think this trial's going to end any different from the first one?"

"Elminster is speaking in my defense this time," Nameless replied confidently.

"You put a lot of store in that old coot."

"The Harpers have grown accustomed to abiding by Elminster's counsel."

Olive sniffed. "And you expect them to forgive all, to take you back into their fold and restore you to your position as a Master Harper?"

"Naturally," the bard said coolly.

"What then?" Olive snapped. "Engagements at all the royal courts? A few noble titles granted in honor of your talents? Wizards begging for your secrets? Flocks of apprentices ready to serve under you?"

"Why should it be any different than it was before?" Nameless asked with a cocky grin.

"You're dreaming, pal!" Olive shouted, completely frustrated with his vanity and unrelenting certainty. "Wake up and smell the bacon! Not even the great Elminster is going to bring Morala around. As for the other two, the ranger might take pity on you, but that halfling

elf bard's got all the compassion of an iron golem. You need—" Olive halted, alarmed at the way her voice echoed through the cell and annoyed that this stupid human had made her lose her self-control. "You need a contingency plan," the halfling whispered. "Just in case I'm right and you're wrong."

"I have too much to lose if I flee now and you're wrong," Nameless retorted heatedly.

"You have too much to lose if you don't. Security isn't going to get any more lax if they condemn you, you know. Since you've already broken out of the Citadel of White Exile, they'll have to find some place even worse—if you can imagine any place worse than that."

Nameless fought to control a tremor in his lip. For two centuries, he'd lived in the Citadel of White Exile, able to scry on the happenings in the Realms but completely unable to participate. It had been torture for him, but he could imagine worse things. He had other objections to trying to escape, though. "You forget we're talking about the Harpers," he said. "They'll have no trouble tracking me down."

"You're a Harper yourself," Olive pointed out. "If you weren't so eager to rest on your laurels, you could keep a step ahead of them. I've got a place where you could hide, too—somewhere you'll be welcome, and no one would ever be able to detect you magically."

"You want me to hide behind Alias's shield," Nameless replied, referring to the misdirection spell cast on the swordswoman, a spell which made her and anyone she traveled with completely undetectable by magical means. "Forget it," Nameless said vehemently. "I'm not getting her involved in this."

"I wasn't talking about Alias," Olive said. "Give me credit for some sense. She's too obvious. I wasn't talking about a magic dead zone, either. That's too obvious, too; besides, there's too much riffraff in places like that. I have someplace even better in mind. With a bit of luck, the Harpers will waste their time checking out Alias and the dead zones and miss you altogether. The Harpers aren't perfect. They make mistakes. Why do you give them so much power over you?"

"Because," Nameless hissed angrily, "they have my name."

Olive shrugged her shoulders and helped herself to another plum. "Big deal. So do I. It's my finder. Finder Wyvernsapur, from the clan Wyvernsapur of Immersea, in Cormyr," she said nonchalantly. She stifled a mock yawn before adding, "Your older brother was Gerrard Wyvernsapur. Your mother's name was Amalee Winter, and your father was Lord Gould. Your grandfather was *the* Paton Wyvernsapur. Sound familiar?"

The bard leaned back against the wall, staring at the halfling with undisguised amazement. Silently, with his eyes closed as if he were reciting an oft-repeated prayer from childhood, the bard mouthed the names Olive had given him.

"Surprised?" Olive asked, unable to keep from grinning.

The bard looked at the halfling and nodded, still dumbfounded.

"I've got something else for you, Finder," Olive said, pulling something from her cloak pocket. She laid it down on the bed in front of the bard. "Recognize this?"

Finder looked down at the halfling's gift. It was a sparkling yellow crystal, multifaceted and roughly egg-shaped, somewhat larger than a hen's egg. The bard gasped. Then he whooped once with pleasure, leaped from the bed, snatched Olive up in the air, and swirled her around, laughing with delight. "You stole the finder's stone! You incredible halfling! I could kiss you!"

“Well, I suppose I deserve it,” Olive said, turning her head and pointing to her cheek. FINDER pressed his lips against her flushed face. Then he laughed and spun around again, with Olive still in his arms.

“I’ll lose that plum I just ate if you don’t set me down,” Olive threatened.

FINDER lowered the halfling gently to the bed. Olive bounced once on the mattress and then she snatched up the crystal. “Is this thing still loaded with magic?” she asked, tossing the stone to the bard.

FINDER caught the crystal with one hand. He sang a short, clear G-sharp and peered into the stone’s depths. “Yes!” he announced. “I don’t believe it. Elminster didn’t give this to you, did he? You *did* steal it, didn’t you?”

Olive grinned. “No and no. Elminster gave it to Alias last year. Maybe he felt she had some right to it, seeing how she’s related to you. We lost it outside of Westgate, but I ran into the man who found it and convinced him to part with it.”

“And my name? Who parted with that?” FINDER asked.

“That’s a longer story. Why don’t we save it for later? Let’s go, huh?”

FINDER sat down on the footstool. “There’s no hurry now,” he insisted. “We can leave anytime. There’s a teleport spell in the crystal.”

“Which won’t work if Elminster’s cast some sort of anti-magic shell around this cell,” Olive argued.

“The finder’s stone is an artifact. Not even Elminster’s magic can stop spells cast from it,” FINDER declared. He picked out a plum from the bowl and took a bite, slurping noisily. “I want to give Elminster the chance to argue my case before the Harpers as he should have done the first time. If he fails to convince them to pardon me, then we’ll leave.”

“I have a bad feeling about this, FINDER. Let’s go now, please,” Olive pleaded.

“Relax, Olive. I have everything under control. Here, have another plum.” FINDER held out the silver fruit bowl toward Olive.

Olive crossed her arms, determined not to encourage her friend’s indifference to his own peril.

FINDER waved the bowl enticingly under her nose. Unable to resist the smell, the halfling chose a second plum.

“FINDER. Such a proper name,” the bard mused as he set the bowl back on the table. The halfling suppressed an unexplainable shiver and bit into her plum.

* * * * *

While Olive Ruskettle was trying her best to convince the Nameless Bard that Elminster might fail to get him freed, the sage himself was explaining to the Harpers how the alliance of evil beings that had freed Nameless had managed to trick the bard into building a new version of his simulacrum for them.

Morala shook her head and bit her tongue, but she could no longer hold back her annoyance. “This is just what I warned him would happen when he was planning the first simulacrum. Evil cannot disguise itself from good unless good looks the other way. Nameless’s own arrogance blinded him to their nature.”

“That may be, thy grace,” Elminster replied, “but he did not hesitate to act against the evil beings when he finally recognized their true nature. He did his best to keep them from gaining control of the simulacrum. He freed her so that she and her companions were able

return and destroy all of the members of the consortium, the sorceress Cassana, the lich Prakis, the Fire Knives Assassins Guild, the Tarterean fiend Phalse, and even Moander the Darkbringer.”

“She? You mean the simulacrum?” Breck asked.

“He succeeded in animating it, then?” Morala asked with a defeated sigh.

“Actually, she’s more than animated. She’s very much alive and possessed of her very own soul and spirit. Not even ye, thy grace, could tell she was unborn.”

“Impossible!” the priestess declared.

“Impossible for Nameless and the evil beings who backed him, but not impossible for god.”

“Moander is the Darkbringer. He could not give her a soul,” Morala insisted.

“I did not speak of Moander,” Elminster said.

“What god, then, Elminster?” Kyre asked.

“I’m not certain. The fiend Phalse kidnapped a paladin from another world to supply the simulacrum with a soul, but the paladin still lives. Somehow his soul doubled, and a shard of his spirit broke off. Both grew inside Nameless’s creation. It is possible one of the paladin’s gods made this possible. I also suspect that the goddess of luck, Tymora, may have interfered in the creation. Nameless still invokes her name on occasion, and the simulacrum seems to have an affinity for Lady Luck. Perhaps it was a joint effort of these gods. Whatever the case, the woman lives.”

“Why did Nameless make this creation a woman?” Breck asked.

“For her own vile reasons, the sorceress Cassana insisted it be made in her image,” the sage explained. “Perhaps that was for the best. Nameless gave the simulacrum much of her personality, but in an effort to make her a more ‘ideal’ woman, in his own view, he created in her a tender and nobler side Nameless himself had never displayed. She has already made a name for herself as a brave and clever sell-sword. The paladin I mentioned before, a noble saurial known here in the Realms as ‘Dragonbait,’ travels in her company, totally convinced of her goodness.”

Breck gasped. “You don’t mean Alias of Westgate!”

“The very same, good ranger,” Elminster replied. “You have met the lady, then?”

“Well, not exactly,” Orcsbane admitted. “I’ve seen her down at The Old Skull tavern though, and listened to her sing. She has a voice like a bird—sings some of the most moving songs I’ve ever heard.”

“She sings!” Morala shouted angrily. “She sings *his* songs, doesn’t she, Elminster? And you’ve done nothing about it!”

“What could I do, thy grace? She is a free woman who has committed no crime. The people of Shadowdale consider her a hero. The time is long past when the Harpers could intimidate ordinary folk into obedience, let alone demand it of heroes.”

Elminster could tell Morala was struggling to control her rage. The priestess was breathing deeply, with her eyes closed and her jaw set. The sage had no desire to anger Morala, but he would not be reprimanded for behaving in a civilized fashion.

“Perhaps we should meet this woman,” Kyre suggested calmly. “Will she speak with us if she is summoned forth?”

Elminster nodded. “She is eager to speak if there is a chance it will help Nameless.”

“Ah-ha!” Morala cried. “She is his creature indeed.”

“No, Morala,” Elminster snapped back, fighting hard to keep his own anger in check. “She is her own creature. She is fond of Nameless, though, as any generous and good woman would be of a father who nurtured her as best he could.”

Morala looked down at her hands, fearing that she had aroused the sage’s wrath. As old as she was, Elminster was many years her senior, and he was the Harpers’ most powerful ally and advisor. “We should hear her speak,” she agreed softly.

Kyre signaled the page and ordered him, “Find Alias of Westgate and request that she come before this tribunal.”

Heth stood up, bowed before the tribunal and hurried out of the courtroom to fetch the Nameless Bard’s singer, Alias.

The Singer

The patrons of The Old Skull applauded enthusiastically as the singer finished her song. Even the innkeep, Jhaele Silvermane, paused a moment from her duties at the bar to show her appreciation. The singer bowed once to her audience and then to the songhorn player who had accompanied her.

The rustic common room was full of farmers who only half an hour ago had been grumbling and cursing the rain that kept them from the season's haying. Now, instead of nursing their first drink for two hours and worrying about how they were going to feed the livestock all winter on moldy hay, the farmers were ordering their second pint and cheering for the singer to give them another song.

The singer, the sell-sword Alias of Westgate, also known as Alias of the Azure Bond, smiled gratefully. She sang to keep herself occupied, since the Harpers would not let her visit her father, the Nameless Bard, and she sang to defy the Harpers, who had tried to wipe out the bard's music. Mostly, though, she sang because she knew the bard would want her to, no matter what happened to him. Secretly, though, she was struggling to think of a graceful way to decline singing any further this day.

"Please, Alias," the songhorn player whispered to the singer. "They need something to keep their minds off this weather."

"Han, I ... I think I'm losing my voice," Alias whispered back.

"Your voice sounds just fine," Han insisted.

"One more at least," a deep voice rumbled from a table beside the musicians' platform, "I'll have to have the watch haul you off for denying the happiness of the good people of Shadowdale."

Alias laughed good-naturedly at the threat. The speaker was Mourngrym Amcathra, lord of Shadowdale, and the swordswoman counted him among her friends. She tossed her red hair behind her shoulders and flapped the bottom of her green woolen tunic in an effort to cool off. "Then I suppose I'd have to sing for the watch, wouldn't I?" Alias asked Mourngrym.

"That's right," Mourngrym replied with a twinkle in his eye. "And then," he added, "I'll have to sentence you to sing lullabies to my son for a year." His lordship bounced the aforementioned baby on his knee and asked him, "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Scotty?"

Although he was far too young to understand the question, Mourngrym's heir responded to his father's enthusiastic tone of voice by laughing and clapping his hands.

"A fate worse than death," Alias said with mock terror.

The farmers laughed and Scotty shrieked happily. Still Alias hesitated. She'd been singing at the Old Skull for three days in a row, and the audiences loved every song she sang. For the first time since spring, however, she'd lost control of her voice and had begun singing strange words and changing Nameless's melodies. She was sure it was only a matter of time before it happened again. Here in Shadowdale, though, she risked more than shocking her listeners. Nameless heard about it, he would be greatly displeased with her.

From the back of the room, she caught Dragonbait's eye. The saurial paladin motioned encouragingly with his hands. Alias sighed inwardly. Nothing's going to go wrong, she told herself. Stop being such a ninny and face the music.

Trying to focus her thoughts on her audience, Alias chose a farming song, the lyrics of which were an old folk rhyme that Nameless had set to music. Han knew the rhyme, but he was unfamiliar with the tune, so he stood silently beside Alias, listening carefully, hoping he could pick up the melody with his horn by the second or third verse. Alias sang out clear and strong:

*"We till the soil, we spread the grain,
We shoo the birds, we pray for rain.
The rain comes down, the shoots spring out,
But so do weeds, and then comes drought.
We haul the water till our backs are sore;
The weeds grow richer, but the crop stays poor.
Then one day Chauntea ends our strife,
And our grain takes root in the river of life.
"The river of life, the river of life:
Every woman's man, every good man's wife.
We should all drink deep from the river of life.*

*"The river of life, the river of life:
Every woman's man, every good man's wife.
We should all drink deep from the river of life."*

Everyone joined in singing the repeat of the chorus. Han played softly, not wanting to spoil anything should he guess a note wrong, as Alias began the second verse:

*"We scythe the grains, we pluck the fruits,
We gather the nuts and dig up the roots.
The days grow cool, the birds fly away,
The beasts grow fur, the pastures turn gray.
We eat our fill and store what's left,
Then the snow comes down and the fields rest.
The darkness grows inside our souls,
And our labor's turned to evil goals."*

Han fumbled with his fingering. The songhorn player had never heard the last two lines before. The version he knew told of preparation for midwinter revels. But something disturbed Han even more than the unfamiliar words Alias sang. The young singer had suddenly switched to a new, eerie-sounding key. Then, without a repeat of the chorus, the swordswoman launched into a third verse with still more lyrics Han did not recognize.

*"We hack the vines, we cut the trees,
We trample the roots and burn the seeds.
When the rain comes down, the soil washes away,*

Leaving barren rock and heavy clay.

We wear chains of green till our bodies rot;

The corpses still move, their minds without thought.

Soon the great dark will devour the Realms;

Death is the power that overwhelms.”

At the first four lines, the farmers began scowling and muttering among themselves. This certainly wasn't farming as they practiced it. It might be the way of those in lands under the sway of evil, like those to the north, controlled by the Zhentarim, but here in the dales they tried their best to live in harmony with the land. At the last four lines, the farmers shifted nervously in their chairs and peered into their ale, confused by the direction the song had taken.

Although Alias had failed to note that Han had ceased accompanying her, she recognized now that she no longer held her audience's attention. She knew all too well what was wrong and her voice failed. Oh, gods, she thought, shaking with fear. I've twisted this song the same way I twisted the others.

She felt Han's hand on her shoulder. "Alias, are you feeling well?" the songhorn player asked quietly.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so tired. I've forgotten the words," she lied. "I think I better go sit down."

Han squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and patted her on the back as she walked away. Anxious to spare her from the stares that followed her, Han raised his horn back to his lips and began playing a reel to distract the audience.

Equally protective of the singer's feelings and eager to break up the unpleasant atmosphere the song had created in the common room, Jhaele nudged her son Durgo and whispered for him to get up and dance with his sister Nelil. Durgo, a middle-aged farmer with little sense of rhythm, had as much love of dancing as he had of crows and weevils, but he was a dutiful son. He grabbed Nelil's hand and tugged her to her feet. The other farmers shook off their uneasiness and began clapping to the beat. A few joined Durgo and Nelil in the energetic dance.

As Alias threaded her way through the tables to the back of the common room, she kept her eyes on the floor, too embarrassed to look at anyone. She wanted to rush up the stairs to her room and lock herself inside, but before she could get past the table where Dragonbait sat, the saurial paladin grabbed her wrist. He pulled her toward him, slowly but firmly. Alias yielded to his strength and sat down heavily beside him.

"That's the fifth time this has happened," she growled through her clenched teeth, made angry by her own fear. "I'm not singing again. You shouldn't have encouraged me."

Ordinarily the pair communicated with a sign language that Alias had taught Dragonbait. It was a variant of the thieves' hand cant, which the swordswoman had learned magically from the assassins who had helped create her. The visual language was capable of conveying quite complex ideas, but it still was inadequate when the paladin needed to comfort the swordswoman. Dragonbait reached out and stroked the inside of Alias's sword arm with his scaly fingers. It was far easier to remind her how much he cared for her by touching the magical blue brand on her forearm—the brand which had bound his life to hers.

Alias felt her brand tingle at the paladin's touch, and her irritation subsided somewhat. H

touch there always filled her with the paladin's own inner calm. Alias laid her fingertips on the front of Dragonbait's tunic, where a similar brand scarred his chest scales beneath it. Alias knew that, despite the layer of fabric, he would experience the same tingling sensation she felt. Considering the misery she still felt, though, she couldn't help but worry that her touch would only disquiet him.

"What's wrong with me, Dragonbait?" she whispered, struggling to keep from crying. "Why can't I sing a simple song without ruining it?"

The saurial paladin shook his head. He didn't know.

Alias sniffed and caught a whiff of the odors the saurial emitted in response. The sell-sword smiled ruefully. She knew the scent of honeysuckle was Dragonbait's expression of tender concern. The honeysuckle scent, however, was intermingled with the tang of baked ham, an odor that indicated the saurial was worried. Like a human's body language, the saurial's odors often gave away more of his true feelings than he would have chosen to reveal.

Someone nearby coughed politely, and the sell-sword and her companion looked up. Lord Mourngrim stood before their table with his son squirming under one arm. His lordship looked down at Alias quizzically and asked, "Is something wrong, Alias?"

"Nothing important, your lordship," Alias said hastily. "I'm sorry I spoiled the song. I've just got a lot on my mind, I guess."

Mourngrim would not be put off so easily, however. Alias looked pale and frightened. With Nameless in jail and no one to care for her but the peculiar lizard-man, his lordship felt protective of the sell-sword. He sat down beside her, balancing Scotty on the table before him. "I'm the one who insisted you sing," Mourngrim reminded her. "I'm the one who should apologize. Now, show that you forgive me and tell me what's wrong," he said, patting her hand.

"I don't know," Alias said, trying to hide her fear with a shrug of her shoulders. "Sometimes this spring I just started to sing strangely. I can sing a few songs just fine, and then one song suddenly turns into something about death and decay and darkness. I don't even know I'm doing it until ... until people start to stare at me as if I'm a monster. I thought I might be cursed or possessed, but three different priests told me there was nothing wrong with me—except that I was arrogant, headstrong, and disrespectful."

Mourngrim smiled. "Well, they got that part right," he teased.

Scotty reached out and grabbed a lock of Alias's shiny red hair. The swordswoman picked the child up off the table and helped him stand on her thighs. Scotty bounced up and down, chortling with delight.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Alias said quietly. "What will Nameless think?"

"Alias, it wasn't a bad song," Mourngrim argued. "Just, um ... different."

Alias lowered her eyes guiltily. "I was upset that the Harpers wouldn't let me see Nameless, but to tell the truth, I was a little relieved, too. I'm afraid the next time he asks me to sing for him, I'll change the song, and he'll be upset. He doesn't like the least little change in his songs."

"Alias," Mourngrim replied, "you can't spend the rest of your life doing everything exactly the way Nameless wants you to. You have to live your own life."

"I know that," Alias said unhappily, "but I don't want to disappoint him by ruining his songs. If I was improving them, I could argue with him about it, but I'm only making the

songs ugly and grotesque.”

Despite her claim to the contrary, his lordship didn't believe Alias understood his advice. The bard's enchantment of her went deeper than any magic. She loved Nameless, and she sang to please him. Trying to reassure her, Mourn grym said, “Sometimes we need frightening songs, whether we like them or not. They remind us what we stand for or against and give us the incentive to take action.”

“But I don't know even know what these new songs are about, even though they're coming out of my own head,” Alias objected. “How am I supposed to take action? Against what?”

Mourn grym had no answer. These were questions for sharper minds than his own. “Have you discussed any of this with Elminster?” he asked.

Alias shook her head. “I don't want to bother him until he's finished helping Nameless.”

Mourn grym shook his head. Alias was losing control of her voice, something that obviously frightened her, but she was more concerned about Nameless's plight. His lordship wanted to tell Alias to forget Nameless for once, but he knew the sell-sword would not heed his words.

Dragonbait chirped and pointed toward the doorway. Alias turned to see a group of travelers entering the inn. There were a dozen or more of them, pulling off their rain-drenched cloaks and shouting requests for drinks and food and rooms to the inn's staff. From their clothing, Alias guessed they were merchants and caravan guards from Cormyr. One man, however, had to be from much farther south. His skin was the dusky hue of a southerner. He wore silken red-and-white-striped robes, and a golden cord banded his curly brown hair. He stood taller than the other merchants and many of the guards.

“It can't be,” Alias muttered. She craned her neck impatiently until the man turned around. In the manner of a Turmishman, he sported a square beard, and to indicate he was married he wore a blue sapphire in his earlobe. The three blue dots on his forehead indicated he was a scholar of reading, magic, and religion. But these things hardly registered on Alias now. It was the familiarity of the man's face that excited her. “It's him!” she gasped. “Dragonbait, it's Akabar! He's come back to us!”

Alias rose to her feet, thrusting Scotty back at his surprised father, and ran to the door of the inn, crying out the Turmishman's name.

A few heads swiveled to see who the swordswoman was calling to, but most of the inn's occupants kept their attention on Han's songhorn music and the dancers on the floor.

Akabar Bel Akash held his arms out to greet the sell-sword in a traditional handclasp, but Alias threw herself into his arms and embraced him like a long-lost brother. From where he sat, Mourn grym could tell from the look of surprise on the Turmishman's face that Akabar hadn't expected quite so warm a reception.

Mourn grym exchanged glances with Dragonbait. The saurian shrugged and turned back to watch the newcomers. His scaly brow knit with concern when he spied a woman standing behind Akabar.

Tugging on the southerner's arm, Alias led Akabar back to her table. She didn't seem to notice the heavily veiled woman who followed several paces behind them. Mourn grym did, however, and he rose to his feet with Scotty seated in the crook of his arm.

“Mourn grym, you remember Akabar bel Akash?” Alias asked. “He was a member of my party when I first visited Shadowdale.”

“The ‘mage of no small water,’ ” Mourn grym said, recalling the phrase Akabar had often

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