

Music Hath Charms . . .

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She was running through the streets of the city, the buildings blurred and indistinct. Ahead of her, another woman strode, silver hair streaming behind her, looking neither right nor left. As her pursuer approached, the leader stopped and turned. She gazed calmly, her green eyes placid, yet alert, jet-black skin stretched over high cheekbones, elven ears poking through silken hair. The elf woman opened her mouth to speak, and the dreamer awoke.

Grey light streamed in through the grime-streaked window. Brianna lay on her side in her bed, a coverlet barely pulled up to reach her breasts, her right hand clenched upon her pillow. Her thick mane of raven-black hair fanned out across the pillow and over her bare shoulder. Her face, normally serene, was worried, her full mouth frowning and her brow creased. She groaned, rolled onto her back, raised her arms over her head, and arched her back into a stretch. Rubbing sleep out of her eyes, she sat up and swung her feet over the side of the bed. Again, that face had haunted her dreams: the face of Veracity, the dark elven warrior who'd led the band of heroes to victory over the Avatar.

Ten days ago the Avatar had appeared, falling from the sky like a meteor and landing with a crash in the Lower Ward. That fell deity swept through the Lower Ward in his wrath like a scythe through wheat, leaving whole blocks of buildings in ruin and the corpses of those who'd opposed him cast aside in heaps, before entering the Armory. And there he'd stayed, plotting, with the Lady herself, the Mistress of Sigil, ancient and ageless, a deity in her own right, seemingly powerless to dislodge him. Oh, she'd waited and watched outside the

Armory, in silence, like thousands of others, not entering the zone of magical death that now emanated from that castle. And, as the Lady had watched the Armory and waited, Brianna had stood nearby and watched the Lady, and the Armory, and the crowd, and waited, wondering who could save her city.

And the heroes had arrived, unexpected. The crowd made way for them as they approached the Lady, led by an elven woman, striding with confidence, black of skin, green of eye, her silver hair hanging to her shoulders. Lithe, graceful, and deadly, one hand resting on the hilt of her sword, she advanced, stopped, and locked stares with the Lady herself. The Lady gazed into the warrior's eyes and nodded. She turned her face towards the Armory and inclined her head in its direction. The crowd murmured; not in living memory had the Lady acknowledged a mere mortal. The elven woman bowed to the Lady, led her companions across the zone of death, and entered the fortress.

With a start, Brianna had started to breathe again, her heart pounding. Her whole attention had been focused on the scene before her, and upon the strong and graceful elf. She could not have described any of the elf's companions; it had been as if they'd been standing in shadows while a ray of light came through dark clouds and illuminated their leader, and Brianna had stood as one ensorcelled. But now that the Lady had sent her champions into the citadel, there was nothing to do but wait. And so, the waiting resumed, the crowd fidgeting and murmuring, the Lady utterly still and silent.

An hour later, a deep rumbling had emerged from the depths and the earth lurched. The pillars of flame that had jetted from each of the corner towers of the castle disappeared. The great doors opened again and the triumphant party marched out. The crowd erupted in cheers and surged to surround them.

Carried on shoulders, the victors were brought before the Lady. Once again, she and the elven warrior gazed wordlessly at each other. Once again, the Lady nodded. She turned and floated off. The crowd parted before her and carried the heroes off to be fêted.

Brianna sighed. Had it really been ten days? She picked up her lute and tuned it, plucking strings and turning pegs, until she was satisfied. She sent her long fingers nimbly dancing over the fingerboard, improvising, the tune reflecting her mood of the moment. Such practice usually calmed her, but for the past ten days she'd been unable to stop brooding on the dark warrior, and today she played a melody both agitated and melancholy.

Brianna put down her lute. She dressed quickly, pulling on a flowing deep-blue dress, hanging a gold hoop from each ear, and slipping on soft leather shoes. Wrapping a thin belt around her waist, she attached her dagger to one side and a pouch to the other. She grabbed her lute and cloak and gazed into her mirror. With a subtle gesture and a word of power, she invoked a minor spell and wrinkles in her garments smoothed, her hair settled attractively over her shoulders, and even the smallest smudge or speck of dirt vanished. Brianna grinned; her reflection grinned back. Stepping into the hall, she pulled the door shut behind her and descended a spiral staircase.

Three flights down, she emerged into the common room of the Red Lion Inn. Wandering across the floor of well-scrubbed grey flagstones, she settled at a table near the window, next to a low stage. Similar tables of heavy, rough-hewn dark wood were scattered around the room, each surrounded by straight-backed unpadded chairs. On the right wall of the room, across the platform from

Brianna's table, a fire crackled. Lighted lanterns hung around the walls, for the looming buildings of the Lower Ward shaded the first floor windows of the inn. Opposite, an archway led to the kitchen.

Brianna gazed around the room. Several small groups of people, mostly transient residents of the inn, ate breakfast. Her eyes settled upon a tall man seated alone at a table near the back wall in the opposite end of the room. He drank from a mug and his floppy hat was pulled down to shade his eyes. The man looked in her direction, pulled on the brim of his hat, and stood. Brianna smiled as he made his way across the room, slipped into a chair opposite her, and plunked his mug down onto the table. He pushed his hat back, revealing sparkling brown eyes. "Hi, Bri," he said, grinning broadly.

Brianna grinned back at her friend. "Hi, Carmac," she said. "Up early, aren't you?"

Carmac covered his mouth with his hand and affected a yawn. "Yes, dearie, I know. You're surprised to see me out before lunch, aren't you?" He sat back in his chair and stretched out his legs. "But, Lady Luck was with me last night." He pulled a bulging pouch off his belt and shook it. It clinked. "I had to help her along, of course," he continued, with a small smirk, "but I'm feeling pretty flush. I haven't seen you in a couple of days. Care to come out and play?" He looked expectantly at her and absently twirled one end of his mustache.

Brianna's smile faded. "I could use a break," she admitted. "I've been burying myself in my work. Anything to keep from brooding. I played here last night. I had a couple of new songs. Nothing special, but people liked them, well enough."

Carmac sat forward and peered at her. "You've not been yourself since the heroes came," he said. "Normally I'd hear your songs all over town, but not this time. Brendan Langley's the bard of the hour, not you. What's wrong?"

Brianna lowered her eyes and flushed. "Well, that's it," she began, before the arrival of Meredith, the innkeeper's daughter, interrupted her. "Your usual?" she asked, looking at Brianna. Brianna nodded and the girl unloaded a plate of brown bread and cheese, a bowl of fruit, and a pitcher of water. She raised her eyebrows at Carmac who tapped his mug, and gestured towards Brianna. "I'll take another, and one for her too, missy," he said. Meredith nodded and departed.

Brianna picked at her food and pondered. She looked up at Carmac. "I haven't been able to talk to them since they arrived," she said. "I hear that the nobles have been falling all over each other to catch their eye, and they've stayed with first one and then another. Brendan's often a guest at aristocratic houses, so I'm sure he's talked to them." She looked up and smiled as Meredith handed her a mug. Brianna took a swallow of the dark ale and turned back to poking idly at her food. "I've heard the stories. I know what happened. I was right there in the Lady's circle when they all came and went into the Armory and came out. I was right there when Veracity came. She wasn't any farther from me than that," she said, gesturing at the fireplace, "and I basked in her presence, just like that fire is warming me now." She closed her eyes and stretched her hand out towards the fireplace. She shook her head, her lips slightly open, and sighed. When she opened her eyes, she saw Carmac smiling at her.

"You're smitten," he said. Brianna lowered her eyes and nodded. Carmac took her hand. "What's with you and elf women, anyways?"

Brianna took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She withdrew her hand from Carmac's grasp. "Jealous?" she asked, gazing into his face. Carmac's eyes glinted, but he remained silent. Brianna stared at him for a while before lowering her eyes again. "My mentor," she began, gazing at nothing. "Silvestra Lanarian..." Her voice trailed off. She bit her lower lip and pondered before looking up and continuing. "I was a slave, Carmac. Born a slave, raised a slave, and with no hope of anything better. I was to be a temple dancer. I was supposed to perform in the rituals and entertain and serve the wealthy patrons. Oh, they educated me well enough; they wanted cultivation and refinement. If only that had been all they wanted." Brianna shuddered and stared into space. Carmac took her hand again and this time she did not pull it away.

"My master was a priest," she said. "One day, he took me with him and his family on a trip to another city – and I escaped. I disappeared into the slums. He never found me. I earned coins dancing in sleazy taverns and that's where Silvestra found me. She changed my life, Carmac. She taught me everything I know about music. She took me with her and we traveled across the land. She taught me ... everything." Brianna's face softened, her eyes full of memory. She sighed and looked down at the table. "And then she left me," she said, squeezing Carmac's hand tightly. "She went back to her homeland and said I couldn't come with her. Only elves could go there, she said. No tieflings." Brianna fell silent.

"So she went home without you," prompted Carmac, his voice gentle and his eyes full of sympathy.

Brianna nodded. "Not without my heart, though." She stared at her friend, squeezed his hand again, and let go. She sat back and took a deep breath. "Well. That was almost ten years ago. I've traveled far since then."

Carmac's eyes crinkled. "And how many other elf ladies have you met along the way?" he asked, slyly.

"Oh, you!" said Brianna, swiping at her friend. Carmac dodged it easily. Brianna laughed. "Never mind," she said. "I'm in Sigil now and so is Veracity. I want her. How do I meet her? Last I heard, she's staying with a noble family."

Carmac studied her face. "You've been a good friend ever since you came to Sigil," he said. "You've helped me, plenty. I can help you with this elf. Did you know that they're not with the nobles any more? The Lady gave them a big house, a mansion, up in the Lady's Ward. They moved in yesterday. I've seen it."

Brianna grasped his arm. "Take me there," she said. Carmac nodded. Brianna gulped down her ale, took a last bite of bread and cheese, and rose. Fastening her cloak around her shoulders, she hoisted her lute, and left the inn with her friend.

The two walked along Newmarket Street in silence, except when an acquaintance would greet one or the other. Even though the street was wide - wide, at least, for one in the Lower Ward of the city of Sigil - the tall buildings of grey stone seemed almost to lean towards each other, the upper floors closer to each other than the lower. Gargoyles jutted from drainpipes and sat atop columns. Metal grates, cast into ornate patterns of plants and spikes, protected the windows on the lower floors; only the uppermost floor, just below the steep slate roofs, had windows that opened wide enough to allow someone to stick so much as a hand out.

As they approached the border of the Lady's Ward, the streets widened and the buildings began to have space between them. Finally, at the intersection

of Lord's Row and Palace Street, Carmac stopped. He gestured to the house on the northwest corner. "That's it," he said.

Brianna walked slowly up the street and stopped in front of the door. She looked up and farther up. Like so many others, this house was of grey stone with a slate roof. It was at least a hundred feet wide and sixty high. On the lower levels, the windows were small and high, but large multi-paned windows were set into the walls of the upper floors. Even here in the Lady's Ward, all the windows were covered with decorative spiky ironwork. The double front doors opened inward to a passage leading to an interior courtyard, where Brianna could see a fountain and some vegetation.

Brianna walked over to the corner of the house and placed her palm on the stone. As she tentatively stroked the smooth stone, several people emerged from the front gate onto the street. A small stocky man, a dwarf, with slate grey skin, a bald head, and a scraggly beard looked up and chattered to a tall muscular clean-shaven man with a square jaw and a noble nose. Veracity, no longer attired for battle, wearing a green and white dress of fine material, perfectly cut to show off her shape and accentuate her green eyes, and bedecked with dangly earrings and a necklace of silver and emeralds, walked in silence at their side.

A young woman, dressed in the latest fashion of the nobility of Sigil, emerged from the door, ran up to Veracity, slipped her hand through the elf's elbow and spoke to her, laughing. Veracity unhooked her elbow. She wrapped her arm around the girl's waist, pulled her close, and smiled at her.

Brianna gasped. Her knees grew weak and she stumbled forward. Her heart pounded and her face grew hot as blood rushed to it. She opened her

mouth, unsure what she was going to say, when a hand grasped her shoulder and she was jerked roughly backwards and turned around to face the smirking face of a sergeant of the city guard. Another guard stepped up to join the one who'd grabbed her. Each held one of her elbows while their leader stuck his face into Brianna's and stared.

"Tiefling," he said, spitting the word, his face as sour as his breath. Brianna bared her teeth and hissed. The man recoiled and scowled. "Aren't you a bit out of place, here in the Lady's Ward?"

"I'm not making trouble," said Brianna. She struggled and the guards tightened their grip on her arms.

"I'm taking you to the station," said the sergeant. "You can explain yourself there."

"Since I'm not doing anything wrong, you should simply take me to the edge of the Lady's Ward and release me," said Brianna, staring into his eyes and putting arcane power behind her words.

The sergeant's eyes glazed and then cleared. He nodded. "They're too busy at headquarters," he said, "so we'll just get you out of the Lady's Ward." He turned and started walking away. His two men looked at each other, shrugged, and marched along, pulling Brianna along with them. Brianna looked back over her shoulder. The dwarf chattered obliviously to the large man, who was staring at the retreating guards, frowning. The girl was pointing at Brianna, doubled over in laughter. Veracity gazed quizzically at Brianna, brow wrinkled, lips pursed. Brianna gave her a brief smile and turned her attention to not tripping over the cobblestones.

After about half a mile, the sergeant stopped. He nodded to his men and they released Brianna with a shove.

“Next time you think to come to the Lady’s Ward,” said the sergeant, “make sure you have business here.”

Brianna glared at him and with a defiant flick of her chin started slowly walking down Redgate Street towards her home. The guards watched her for a minute and then turned and returned to their beat. Carmac slipped out of the shadow of a nearby building and hastened up to her side.

“I saw it all,” he said.

Brianna stopped and wheeled towards him. “Who is she?” she demanded. “Where’d she come from?”

Carmac held up both his hands, palms facing Brianna, and stepped back. “Calm down, dearie,” he said. “Just her latest friend, I expect. Everybody wants to meet her and she’s had her pick. She goes out every night.”

“Oh!” Brianna stamped her foot. She paced back and forth, eyes unfocused, before stopping in front of Carmac. She clutched his arm and peered into his face. “Carmac. Find out who that girl is, please.”

Carmac grinned. Grasping the rim of his hat, he winked at her and said, “Will do, missy.” He hastened off back into the Lady’s Ward.

Brianna gazed after him and then turned with a sigh and settled onto a bench. This was certainly a setback, she thought. She didn’t travel in the world of the rich and famous, although a bard certainly could break into such circles; all it took was a lucky break, a spectacular performance in front of an appreciative patron. That’s how it’d worked out for Brendan; he’d used to play all the same taverns that Brianna worked in now. Brianna scowled and kicked a stone.

An hour later, Carmac returned. "I found the big guy and the dwarf," he said. "Offered to buy them a drink. They liked that idea, so we went into the Rusty Nail and hoisted some mugs."

Brianna raised her eyebrows. "Really?" she said. "How sociable. Where were the women?"

Carmac laughed. "Kress – the big guy – said they were off shopping or something. He said that Veracity would have been happy enough to come drink with us but that no way her little friend would have come to a low-class joint. He and Hazen – the dwarf - and Veracity are all going to the Silver Whistle tonight."

Brianna nodded. "Fancy," she commented. "Best entertainment in the Lady's Ward. So, who's the girl?"

"Sarabet D'Angine. Daughter of one of the high-ups they stayed with," replied Carmac.

Brianna pursed her lips and pondered, brow furrowed. Her face cleared and she smiled. She pulled a coin from her pouch and handed it to Carmac. "Thank you," she said. "That's for the drinks. You wanted me to come out and play? You got it. We're going to the Silver Whistle tonight. Meet me at the Red Lion this evening. I have work to do before then."

Carmac tossed the coin into the air and watched the golden disk spin before catching it and slipping it into his pouch. He grinned. "Sure thing, dearie." He pulled at the rim of his hat, bowed slightly, turned, and went off whistling. Brianna watched his retreating back, stood, and returned to the inn.

In her room, she pulled out a piece of paper and a quill. Chewing on the end, she thought for a long time before writing out a stanza of a song. After carefully adjusting its rhyme and meter, she picked up her lute and composed a

melody, singing the verse along with her playing until it lay easily in her fingers and throat. She smiled. Catchy tune, she thought. Just what I need. And so the afternoon went, with Brianna writing more verses and singing them to her new tune until the ballad was complete and the playing and singing of it was completely natural to her.

By the time Brianna was satisfied with her composition, the light outside was dim. She put down her lute and dressed in her most fetching outfit, a long red skirt with frills and ruffles, a white blouse with lace, golden earrings and a jeweled necklace. She brushed her hair until it shone in the lamplight, applied some color to her lips, and scented herself with a floral fragrance. She draped a cloak of a rich purple edged with gold around her shoulders, picked up her lute, and descended to the common room of the Red Lion.

Carmac rose as she entered the room and came over to her. He looked her up and down and gave an appreciative whistle. "You're dressed to kill, darling," he said, smiling.

Brianna grinned back at him and looked at him appraisingly. He, too, had worn his best outfit for evening, with brown leather pants, a soft shirt with a ruffle at the collar, a wide-brimmed hat with a feather, and a dark cloak. He was freshly shaven, his face was scrubbed, and his long mustache was curled up at the ends. He wore a rapier at his side.

"You look quite dashing, yourself, Carmac," she said. "Shall we go?"

Carmac nodded and the pair left the inn. As they walked towards the Lady's Ward, Carmac gamboled and capered and chattered gaily to her, while Brianna contented herself to let her friend talk, her mind elsewhere. She'd prepared her gambit, but how would it play out? And what to do about Sarabet?

The pair stopped when they arrived at the Silver Whistle. Warm light showed through the many-paned windows in the front, and the ornately carved double doors stood invitingly open. From within, they could hear the dull roar of many voices and the clink of glasses. Few people were on the street. Brianna stopped under a lamp hanging from a pole near one corner of the building. Carmac fell silent and looked at her.

“Are you playing here?” he asked, gesturing towards her lute.

“I mean to,” said Brianna. “I haven’t played here before, but I think they’ll like my performance well enough. The question is whether the right audience is here yet.”

Carmac raised his eyebrows and nodded. “You mean Veracity. Let me check it out.” He turned on his heel and strode towards the door of the tavern, leaving Brianna waiting under the lamp.

The bard looked down the street. In this part of the Lady’s Ward, not many people were out at this hour; most were comfortably secured in their own houses, eating their dinner, and would not emerge for revelry until later. About a block up, Brianna noticed a small company of guards on patrol. She shrank back into the shadow of an alley, away from the lamp, and watched them disappear down a side street.

Up the street came a young woman. Her long blond hair was secured at the back of her neck with a jeweled clasp. Her long low cut dress, of pink silk decorated with sequins, clung closely to her body. A fine cloak trimmed with fur covered her bare shoulders. As she approached the alley, Brianna stepped forth into the street and blocked her path.

“Sarabet D’Angine,” she said.

The girl stopped, startled. She stared at Brianna and her face grew hard. "You!" she said, lip curling. "Didn't you learn your lesson this morning? Daddy pays the guards well to keep riffraff like you away from here."

The blood rose to Brianna's face. She stepped forward, drawing her dagger with one hand, and grasped Sarabet's arm with the other. The girl gasped and grew white. She stared at the weapon and grew silent. Brianna hissed and glared at her.

"Speak for yourself," she said. "You could stand to learn manners from me."

"You better let me go," said Sarabet, still staring at the dagger. "Veracity is meeting me here and she'll take care of you. Just wait."

Brianna looked at her intently. "You are mistaken," she said, staring into Sarabet's eyes. "You were on the way to the Red Hand, down in the Hive."

Sarabet closed her eyes and shivered. She opened them again and glared at Brianna. "Magic," she spat. "You tried to send me to the Hive? You thought you were in trouble before? Wait until Daddy hears about this."

Brianna concentrated again. "What magic?" she asked, making an arcane gesture. "You remember no spell."

Sarabet shuddered and stared at the weapon in Brianna's hand. "Veracity is meeting me here," she repeated.

Brianna released Sarabet's arm and stepped back, keeping the dagger pointed at her rival. "I don't really want to hurt you," she said. "But I think you need to make other plans." She stepped forward and gestured with her weapon. Sarabet gasped and stumbled backwards. "Go," said Brianna.

Sarabet turned and fled. Brianna sheathed her dagger, sank back into the alley, and watched her rival run off. She grinned with satisfaction.

“Bri...”

Brianna turned and saw that Carmac had come out of the tavern and was standing at the corner. He watched Sarabet turn a corner and then rounded on his friend, his face grave and his eyes puzzled.

“You sent her to the Hive? They’ll eat up her up, down there.”

Brianna smirked. “She thinks I’m riffraff? Time she got a little lesson in what real low-life are like.”

Carmac shook his head. “She’ll be robbed, or worse,” he said glumly.

Brianna shrugged. “She’s not going to the Hive, Carmac. She resisted my spell. She doesn’t even remember that suggestion. I just chased her away from here. Good riddance!”

Carmac’s jaw dropped and he gaped at her. “You’re incorrigible, Brianna,” he said. “Good thing I’m your friend, not your enemy.”

Brianna grinned at him. “Good thing! So, what’s happening inside?”

“Ah,” said Carmac. “Yes. Veracity isn’t there yet. I was going to say, neither is Sarabet, but we know that.” He looked sternly at Brianna and continued. “Brendan Langley is in there too. He’s going to play.”

“Good,” said Brianna, smiling. “Shall we go in?” She presented her elbow to Carmac. Her friend sighed and shrugged. His usual smile reappeared on his face and he took her arm. The two walked into the Silver Whistle.

Just inside the front door, Brianna stopped. She unhooked her elbow and looked around. Although similar in function to the common room of the Red Lion, every aspect of the Silver Whistle breathed luxury, rather than mere utility.

The tables, although sturdy, were of finely carved wood. The chairs, also carved, were comfortably padded. Colorful tapestries of fine silk adorned the walls, showing scenes of frolicking rustics dancing to the music of pipes and fiddles. Oil lamps with decorative shades warmly illuminated the scene. The musician's stage was large enough for an entire ensemble, although tonight only a single chair, comfortably padded and upholstered in red velvet, stood upon it.

Small groups of richly dressed people sat around the various tables chattered gaily to each other. At a table next to the stage sat a man holding a lyre. His clothing was as elegant as that of the patrons, and he talked to a pair of admiring young women, gesticulating as he described something or other, his listeners following his every word.

Brianna smiled. She walked up to her fellow musician's table and stopped across from him. As she arrived, the man stopped his story and looked at her. A smile appeared on his face and he leaped to his feet. "Well met, Brianna!" he said, sweeping off his hat and bowing. "Please join us!"

"Hello Brendan," she said, offering him her hand. He placed his lips briefly on it before gesturing to a vacant chair at the table. Brianna unslung her lute and sat down. Carmac slipped into a nearby chair.

"Brendan, this is Carmac Sheary," said Brianna. "Carmac, this is Brendan Langley."

"Pleased to meet you," said Brendan, offering his hand. "A friend of Brianna's is a friend of mine."

"Same with me," said Carmac. The two men shook hands.

Brendan stroked his beard and looked at Brianna. "Did you come to hear me, or to play yourself?" he asked, gesturing to her lute.

“Both, I hope,” said Brianna. “I’ve heard that your latest song is popular, and I thought I’d hear it right from the hands and mouth of the master.”

“Yes,” said Brendan. “Vandis himself told me what happened. Nobody’s written a better account of the defeat of the Avatar than mine.” He preened, as his admirers oohed and aahed.

Brianna looked down at her lute and strummed it. She adjusted some of the pegs, and sent her fingers dancing over the strings, playing a jaunty and complicated little tune. She looked up at Brendan and smiled slyly. “Perhaps,” she said, “but perhaps not. You haven’t heard my song on the subject, yet.”

“Do tell,” said Brendan. His eyes narrowed and he studied Brianna intently. He looked around the room and gestured at the various guests. “Perhaps a little wager? I’ll sing, by and by. You go after me and let’s just see whose song the crowd likes best. Ten guilders say it’s mine.”

“You’re on,” said Brianna. “Let’s wait a bit until the room fills up, and then we’ll see what we’ll see.”

Hoisting his mug, Brendan nodded, and took a swallow. He looked towards the door and smiled. “I think our audience is here,” he said, pointing with his thumb.

Brianna looked in that direction and caught her breath; the heroes had arrived. The same three she’d seen that morning: Kress, the muscular human, Hazen, the cheerful gray dwarf, and Veracity. Brianna’s heart raced as she gazed at the dark elf, who was dressed as alluringly as she’d been that morning. Veracity had a slight frown on her face as she looked from table to table. The dwarf pulled at her sleeve and gestured to an empty table near the back wall, and the trio walked over to it and sat down.

Brianna looked away, her face warm, and found Brendan watching her with amusement. "Not going to be so easy, is it?" he said. "Not when the actors in the story are here themselves to hear it." Brianna shook her head and glanced again at the front of the tavern. She stared in dismay as Sarabet D'Angine walked in through the door.

Brendan stood, straightened his cape, hoisted his lyre, and sauntered up onto the stage. He sat on the chair and plucked some of the strings of his instrument before looking up and clearing his throat. The hubbub died down as the guests in the room looked at him.

"My friends," he said, "it is my honor to present for your delectation the account of the great deeds of the heroes of our city, Vandis and his companions, who saved this great city from destruction by the fell Avatar." He plucked out a melody on the strings of his instrument, stopped, and launched into song, injecting instrumental interludes between the verses of his ballad.

Brianna wrenched her eyes away from Sarabet, who had settled in at Veracity's table and was whispering into her ear. She turned her attention to Brendan and listened with a critical ear. No doubt, Brendan played well. And his full tenor voice filled the room beautifully. The verses of his ballad, well rhymed and metrically regular, told the story well enough, highlighting the deeds of each hero in turn until finally Veracity struck down her foe and the group emerged in triumph into the city. Not bad. Not bad at all, and just the sort of song that bards would likely sing for generations to come to commemorate this episode of history.

Brendan finished his song, stood up, and bowed. Everybody in the room applauded. His friends at the table cheered. Brendan looked down at the table

and caught Brianna's eyes. With a small smirk, he raised his eyebrows and held out his hand towards her. Brianna rose, picked up her lute, and walked up to the edge of the stage, where he took her hand and helped her step up. Brendan turned to the house.

"My friends, allow me to introduce Brianna Sollandry," he said. "She also has a song to share with you." He stepped off of the stage and returned to his table while Brianna settled herself into the chair. Brianna looked down at her lute as she tested its tuning before looking up and gazing around the room.

Although there was some quiet conversation, almost all eyes were upon her. Brianna looked at the table containing the heroes and found Veracity watching her idly with an amused expression on her face. Brianna reddened slightly, but steeled her nerves and spoke.

"Brendan sang of valor," she said. "I sing of passion. I sing of Veracity." Brianna expertly plucked out her melody and launched into song. Looking at Veracity, she saw that she now had the full attention of the warrior, who was leaning on the table and gazing at Brianna's face. Brianna locked eyes with her and the rest of the room seemed to sink into dimness as she sang for an audience of one. Her rich alto voice told the tale of a valiant and sensuous dark elf who battled against a mighty foe and finally took him down all by herself.

Finally, she sang the last word, played the last chord, and the room sank into utter silence - but not for long. Thunderous applause broke out as people leaped to their feet and cheered. Brianna tore her eyes from Veracity's and looked around the room. All eyes were upon her. She stood and took a bow.

Brendan leaped to the stage. "Bravo!" he said. He swept off his hat and bowed low before grasping Brianna's hand. He helped her down off the stage and the two returned to their table.

Carmac stood up and grasped her hand. "Great song, Bri," he said. "Looks to me like you won the wager." Brianna grinned at him and nodded.

"Oh, I don't know," said Brendan. "I'm not sure the two songs were comparable. I think my song gave a better account of the battle. Brianna sang a love song. Which song will bards still sing in a hundred years?"

"Both, probably," said Brianna. "It's not all epics, Brendan. I know plenty of romances, and that's often just what a crowd wants to hear. Like tonight, apparently." She swept her hand to take in the whole room. "And didn't we agree that we'd let the crowd decide which song they preferred?" she asked. "They liked your song, but you didn't get this kind of response."

Brendan sighed. "True. Your song is a masterpiece, but you know – you might be the only one who could pull it off." He raised his eyebrows and gestured with his chin towards Veracity's table. "It was personal and intimate, and was directed towards a specific person." He reached into his pouch and pulled out a stack of coins. He handed them to Brianna and smiled wryly, shaking his head. "Regardless, you must teach it to me."

Brianna took the coins and looked back to Veracity. The warrior was watching her intently with a small smile on her face. Sarabet was pulling insistently at her sleeve. Veracity looked at Sarabet, frowned, and said something. The girl let go of her arm and sat back, her face sullen. Veracity looked back to Brianna.

Brianna stood, her heart in her throat. "Thanks, Brendan. If you'll excuse me?" she said, not taking her eyes off of Veracity.

Brendan looked at her, followed her gaze, and nodded. "Of course. Go see your patron," he said.

Brianna pushed her way through the throng, smiling and nodding as each person she passed congratulated her, until she finally reached Veracity's table.

"May I join you?" she asked.

Veracity nodded and patted the chair next to her. "Please do," she said. "Your song was lovely."

As Brianna slid into the chair, Kress stood up.

"Come on, Hazen," said the large man. He pulled at the grey dwarf's shoulder and the two of them moved off.

Veracity studied Brianna's face, her green eyes gazing calmly at the bard, as if she were memorizing every detail. "I know you," she said. "You were near the Lady when I came to the Armory. And you were outside my house this morning."

Brianna pinkened. "You noticed me outside the Armory?" she said. "Oh, I was well aware of you, but I never thought..." She breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly. "And this morning, I was there when you came out with..." She flushed and fell silent.

"With me," said Sarabet, glaring. "She's with me. And you attacked me outside this tavern this evening." Sarabet turned to Veracity. "She's just a low-class no-account who wants to push her way into the company of her betters, Veracity. She's dangerous."

“Attack is a harsh word, Sarabet,” said Veracity. “You told me about it when you came in tonight.” She looked at Brianna, laid an arm on the table and leaned towards the bard. “Let’s hear your side of it.”

Brianna breathed in slowly and exhaled. “I am dangerous,” she admitted. “As is anybody who’s at all interesting. If somebody here is a no-account, it’d be her.” She gestured at Sarabet.

Sarabet sniffed. “How dare you! My father could...”

“Exactly,” interrupted Brianna. “You can’t do anything on your own, can you?” She looked back at Veracity. “I know what I want, know how to go after it, and have the skill to get it. I have many skills. I gave her a little arcane suggestion, outside the tavern, but she resisted it.”

“You pulled a dagger on me,” said Sarabet. “You attacked me.”

“If I had attacked you, you wouldn’t be sitting here talking,” said Brianna. “That was a threat - and it worked. You went away.”

Veracity slouched back in her chair, eyes narrowed, and studied Brianna. “You’ve studied enchantments, carry a weapon, and are the best musician I’ve ever seen. You like adventuring?”

Brianna nodded. “Most bards do. The best songs come from stories in which the bard herself played a part.” She smiled at Veracity. “I’ve written some very good songs.”

Veracity sat up and leaned forward. She stared into Brianna’s eyes, as if hoping to see through into her mind. Finally, she relaxed. She took Brianna’s hand in hers and looked at it, rubbing her thumb gently across its back, her warm breath playing across the skin. Brianna gasped and leaned towards Veracity until her own thick black hair brushed up against the silky silver hair of

the dark elf. She inhaled and Veracity's scent, sweet and dangerous, overwhelmed her.

Veracity looked up with a small smile. "You're clever," she said. "I like that. You clearly want me – and I like that too." She let go of Brianna's hand, sat back, looked over at Sarabet, and concentrated. "I suggest that you go home," she said. "Remember our fling with fondness, but it's over. You have no gripe with the bard."

Sarabet's eyes glazed and cleared. She looked at Veracity and Brianna, and nodded. "Nice song," she said to Brianna. She looked at Veracity and smiled. She stood up and pulled her cloak around her shoulders. "It's been fun, but, it's time to go home," she said. She nodded to Veracity, strolled over to the door, and departed.

Veracity turned back to find Brianna gaping at her. Her eyes crinkled in amusement. "Like you, I have many skills," she said. "I, too, specialize in enchantments." Her expression grew serious. "I like you," she said. She picked up Brianna's hand again. "And I like Sigil, but my feet are itching to hit the road again. Think of the stories we could make together – and the songs you could write." She looked at Brianna expectantly, the invitation hanging between them.

Brianna's spirit soared. Warmth spread through her and she laughed out loud. She grinned at Veracity and squeezed her hand. "I'd like that," she said. "Oh, yes. I'd like that."