

The Legend of Skara Brae

by Mecandes, June 2001.

*The beginnings of an original work of fan fiction
inspired by “The Bard’s Tale” computer games
created by Michael Cranford for Interplay Productions in 1985.*

*NOTE: This is only the first chapter of a larger – as yet unfinished – tale.
Fairly detailed notes about the planned story arc can be found at the end of the document, though...*

• *The Scarlet Bard*

A bitterly cold wind blew across the snow-covered plains towards the lonely town of Skara Brae, wisps and eddies of white powder flowing in its path, and small rifts and mounds in its wake. The iron bars of the town’s eastern gate did little to dull the wind’s force, and it swept through, pushing gold and orange and red leaves along the strangely snow-free streets.

Pulling his scarlet cloak tighter about himself, Mecandes imagined for a moment that he could feel magical properties in the wind. Of course, that was foolish. Yes, he had heard the rumours and mumblings—a bard can hardly help hearing such things in the taverns of Skara Brae these days—but the idea that the very seasons themselves were conspiring against the town... well, it was beyond reason. A small snowflake settled on his sleeve, and the bard frowned at it for a moment.

Still, one had to wonder why winter had come so early to the lands around the town, and yet the town itself seemed untouched by the snow. It was far cooler than it should be this time of year, to be sure, and most of the trees in the town had changed to their fall colours—but there was still some green to be seen within the walls of Skara Brae, while the land surrounding it looked to be in the dead of winter. Highly unusual, yes. But magical? Mecandes doubted it. It would take a hundred geomancers to weave such a potent spell. Wouldn’t it?

Shrugging off his thoughts about the odd weather, Mecandes turned down Rakhir street as a few local children ran past him. Although the town’s Adventurer’s Guild was nearby, Rakhir was tucked away in the south-east edge of the small city, and a little further away from the town’s guardposts than one might like. It definitely wasn’t an area of town for the unwary, and he was a little surprised at the sight of children. The small homes here were unremarkable, and many of them stood largely empty in recent weeks, but there was a vague feeling of unrest here, like dark clouds on the horizon. The children didn’t seem to mind.

Mecandes couldn’t help but shiver as he walked past the most remarkable thing about this short lane—a twelve-foot tall statue of a strange, heavily armed, foreign warrior. Although he had heard it called “the samurai”—as strange a name as ever he had heard—no one really seemed to know where it came from, or why it was there. The children began running and playing about its huge feet, and it was all he could do to resist the urge to wave them away from it. It just didn’t feel... right.

Well, Mecandes did have to admit there was one other remarkable thing about Rakhir street. It was the home of the Scarlet Bard inn and tavern. His new home.

A traveller from overseas, Mecandes knew very little about the realm he now found himself in, or the strange political struggles that seemed to be at work here in recent months. Having arrived in the small port of Hamelin, Mecandes had learned that the wealthy capital of this land was a large city named Candarr. He was, in fact, on his way there—what better place for a wandering minstrel to earn a few coins?—when the strange winter rolled in, closing the roads to all travel. He had barely made it to Skara Brae before the gates were closed permanently for the winter.

“The Brae”, as the older townsmen sometimes referred to it, was like most towns, and most would find it unremarkable, except for the sprawling and oft-crowded Gran Plaz, which attracted an overwhelming number of merchants and traders. A huge tree-lined square in the middle of town, the grand plaza serves as an open-air

market during the warmer months. Mecandes had been surprised to learn that in the winter, the townsfolk actually pour water on it to intentionally create ice, and then smooth it out, and it becomes the centre of the town's well-known winter festival. He had even heard that they strap blades to their feet to "skate" to engage in sport on the ice—but he'd have to see that with his own eyes to believe it.

In fact, Skara Brae's entire economy was built on trade—and, except for a bit of logging in nearby forests, the town could barely support itself without the constant traffic that passed east and west through the very centre of town. Located in a strategic pass that separated the capital city of Candarr from the city-state of Tangramayne and the important seaport of Hamelin, it was only natural that Skara Brae would become a hub for trade and commerce between the more major cities of the realm.

Still, there was something different about Skara Brae that tugged at a place in Mecandes' heart. This struck him suddenly as he strode down Rakhir street, and he wasn't sure he could put words to it. Perhaps it was the openness and warmth of the townsfolk. Or, he had to admit with a grin, perhaps it was the bulging purses of merchants who sometimes tossed him platinum coins for his performances. At any rate, it felt like home, and it had never really occurred to the bard that he was actually stranded in this snow-enshrouded town.

Standing a floor taller than other nearby buildings, the sturdy stone tavern with dark wooden balconies and deep scarlet roof was an inviting sight to the bard. The golden glow of a large warm fire spilled out onto the street, and Mecandes could already hear the bright sound of laughter, boisterous talk, and glass mugs ringing against each other.

"Hail, Mecandes!" called the innkeeper as the bard entered and began to remove his cloak. "Step to the bar and I'll draw you a tankard."

A kindly man who had been a sea-faring youth many years past, William ran the Scarlet Bard inn just like the ships he used to captain. Even in the midst of a rowdy crowd, barking orders to barmaids and cooks, Captain William was a sturdy fellow who always seemed calm and in complete control of his surroundings. At first, Mecandes had been surprised that the inn keeper did not employ any bouncers, until one night he saw a drunken and rowdy dwarf try to put his arm around a barmaid a little too forcefully. Mecandes watched in amazement as the former sea captain hoisted the burly dwarf clear over his head, and then sent him sprawling head-over-heels into the street. The Scarlet Bard inn might not be the classiest tavern in town, but the Captain's mere presence ensured it wasn't the most disreputable, either.

Making his way through the maze of tables and chairs towards the bar, Mecandes smiled and nodded his head towards the occasional patron who greeted him. He had been performing in this inn on a nightly basis for a couple of weeks now, and had begun making friends among some of the regulars. Sensing that William wanted to talk to him, Mecandes took a stool close to where he was working, and accepted William's foaming mug of ale with a smile.

"I've been meaning to have a word with you, Mecandes," William began. "I know that our original agreement was that you would handle the entertaining here while our regular bard, Corfid, was away; but the fact is, it doesn't look like he is coming back. He told me he'd return in a couple of days, and now it has been weeks."

Mecandes took a long draught of his ale. He suspected that poor Corfid was stranded somewhere outside the city in the snow, just as he himself was stranded within. Under normal circumstances, he would not have been interested in a more permanent position—he was already starting to feel the nagging call of wanderlust—but it didn't look like he'd be going anywhere anytime soon.

Sensing his hesitance and misreading it, William hurriedly added, "Now, I may be able to sweeten our arrangement a bit if you'd be willing to stay on. Beyond the room and board, and the coins you earn yourself, I'm prepared to offer a modest salary. It just wouldn't do for the Scarlet Bard to lack a bard, you understand!"

Scratching his beard thoughtfully, Mecandes replied, "Give me the night to sleep on it Captain, and I'll let you know my decision on the morrow."

That seemed good enough for William, who burst into a wide grin and slapped him firmly on the shoulder with a nod. "Aye, Mecandes, you do that. Well, I'd best get back to tending the bar."

For a time, Mecandes sat and nursed his ale. It was early in the evening yet, and he had a bit of time before he would be called on to perform. He was fingering Fin's flute in his pocket, and trying to recall the final verse

of *The Watchwood Melody*, when he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. He turned to find Gwendolyn smiling down at him.

“Greetings, Mecandes,” she beamed, her raven-dark hair spilling gently over her shoulder. Gwendolyn was a barmaid at the Scarlet Bard, a half-elf, and easily one of the most attractive young women Mecandes had ever known. She slid past him, and tossed a smile back over her shoulder at him as she went about her duties. It was all Mecandes could do to keep his mouth from hanging open.

“A rare beauty, that,” said an old and heavily scarred warrior seated beside Mecandes. “And, she fancies you, I reckon.”

“I believe it may be so,” admitted Mecandes. “When I was a younger man, I would have already dashed off to fetch a dozen statice flowers to weave into a betrothal crown to lay at her feet... but the hand of time writes and cannot erase, and all I would have to offer her is a life of uncertainties. What is your name, friend?”

“I am called Pellis,” the old warrior replied, offering his hand. “At any rate, picking statice would be some feat right now, the weather being cursed as it is.”

“Cursed?” said Mecandes, unable to hide his smirk. He’d heard this one before. “Next, you’ll tell me it’s an evil magic!”

“Don’t mock me, bard,” Pellis warned, “for I know whereof I speak! Skara Brae is not the only place in the realm suffering ill weather. I come from Hamelin, and the port is scourged by thunderstorms the like of which no one has ever seen. There are waterspouts, and whirlpools—ships are unable to make safely to port. I’ve lost more friends to the cursed weather than...” He broke off and turned back to his ale.

“No offence is intended, friend,” soothed Mecandes, “but it seems impossible to me that such things could be the work of magic.” Not really paying attention, the bard watched Gwendolyn over the man’s shoulder.

“I know nothing of magic,” said Pellis, “But something sinister is at work, here and abroad. It is not yet widely known, but the viscount of Hamelin, Lord Garrick, disappeared shortly after the odd thunderstorms began. I’ve come to Skara Brae seeking his abductors.”

Seeing Gwendolyn disappear into a doorway behind the bar, Mecandes claps Pellis on the shoulder, “I wish you luck, friend, but I must be going.” With a wink, he nods after the barmaid, and Pellis grins knowingly as he returns to his drink.

• *Ready adventure*

Opening the door, Mecandes is surprised to see that it conceals a thin flight of creaky wooden stairs. Taking a candle from its sconce at the top of the stairs, he descends into the darkness.

The air becomes musty with old wine. “A wine cellar?” wonders Mecandes aloud. As far as he knew, no other tavern in Skara Brae served wine.

“It is,” says Gwendolyn, emerging from the shadows and startling the bard. “The Captain collected a lot of fine and rare wines during his seafaring days. But I’m not so sure he’d like to find the likes of you—”

A snarl was the only warning Mecandes had as a blur of fur, teeth and drool leapt from the darkness. Stumbling in front of the girl to shield her, he is off balance as the dog strikes, throwing him to the floor and tearing at his arm with its powerful jaws. Struggling to keep sharp, bloodied teeth away from his throat, Mecandes can see a terror in the rabid dog’s yellow eyes.

With a yelp, the animal suddenly goes limp in his arms. Thrusting it away from him, the bard looks up to see Gwendolyn standing with a dagger in her hand. Made of mithril—a sturdy elven metal—the dagger was more likely to be found in the hands of a warrior than those of a barmaid. There was more to this girl than meets the eye, Mecandes realized.

“The Captain keeps some interesting pets,” he says, trying to hide his ebbing fear with a crooked grin. “He must really be eager to keep people out of here.”

“No,” says Gwendolyn, putting out a hand to help the bard up, “this was not his dog. I can hear others down the hall.”

Listening, Mecandes thinks he can hear some soft whimpering. Half a dozen animals, perhaps. “How did they get into the cellar?” he asks.

"I'm not sure, but we can't just leave them to wander upstairs and gore the patrons." Retrieving the candle from where it had landed in a corner, Gwendolyn beckons him to follow her, and starts down the narrow hall.

Ruefully examining the tear in the sleeve of his tunic, Mecandes follows, shaking his head and grinning at the girl's back. Reaching into his pocket, he withdraws Fin's flute.

A veteran of one war too many, Mecandes now preferred to earn his living with his music instead of his sword. Over the years, however, he had acquired a few of the magical sorts of instruments that made bards so highly sought-after by those seeking to form an adventuring group. To the ears, the music played by the bard sounded normal enough, but a true bard was able to more than just *hear* the music—they could literally *see* its power, and, using the proper notes and rhythm, weave that power in influential ways. Several noteworthy and scholarly archmages had attempted over the years to relate the bard's musical powers to traditional magic, but it was different, somehow. Magical spells could not touch the music, and neither could the music affect magical spells.

Mecandes caught up to Gwendolyn beside a door with a sign reading "Fine Wines—10 years and older. For regular customers only." Listening at the door, she shook her head, and moved on.

The next door they came to was lying on the floor of the hallway, torn forcibly from its hinges. As he stepped over the sign, "Rare Wines—50 years and older. Keep Out!", he noticed the clear footprints of dogs. Motioning Gwendolyn to the side, he put Fin's flute to his lips, and began to play.

The song he played, *Wayland's Watch*, was of gnomish origin. The combination of the music's inherent magical properties, and the magic of Fin's flute, allowed the skilled bard to weave a tune that he knew would sooth the savage beasts within the room. Gwendolyn watched in wonder as he stepped around the corner, confident of the power of his music. The dogs within growled and leapt to their feet—but they held back, some of them cocking their heads to the side at the sound of Mecandes' melody. A few minutes later, they were all asleep.

He called softly for Gwendolyn to come into the room. The barmaid stepped carefully over the sleeping wild dogs as she examined the wine shelves. "So many bottles have been broken; the Captain is going to be furious," she said. "But this still doesn't tell us how they got in here."

"By all means, let us keep looking then, milady," said Mecandes, attempting his most charming smile, and gesturing with a flourish towards the door. "Lead on."

They continued down the hallway, and reached an intersection where four thick wooden poles held the roof up. "Step carefully around them," Gwendolyn cautioned, "the Captain has laid a bit of a trap in there to catch thieves." Now that she mentioned it, Mecandes thought he could see an almost invisible wire stretched between the poles. He didn't ask what would happen.

They searched carefully through four storage rooms filled with various bottles of liquor, but found nothing unusual, and no sign that the dogs had been in any of them. When they opened the fifth door, however, an odd smell wafted through. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Gwendolyn pushed aside a few casks of ale that had apparently been overturned by the dogs, revealing another door at the back of the room. "That breeze is definitely coming from here," she said, and pushing open the door, added, "There's a trap door here, and it's been forced open."

Before Mecandes could even open his mouth to comment, Gwendolyn was descending a ladder into unknown depths.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, the bard looked around in amazement, and the sound of his movement seemed to echo on and on into the distance. Having obtained a proper torch from the cellar storerooms, Gwendolyn waved it around, and its flickering glow illuminated carefully constructed passages that seemed to stretch for miles beneath the city. She had heard that the town of Skara Brae had been built upon the ruins of a more ancient city, and these hidden sewers seemed to confirm it. Tunnelled with the obvious skill of mountain dwarves, even the sewers of this ancient place seemed elegantly designed, if such a thing could be said about a sewer. The echoing sound of running water could be heard in the distance.

"Let's have a look around," she said to Mecandes. He opened his mouth as if to protest, but she started down the hall, confident he would follow. Men always did, didn't they?

The many years of neglect were definitely starting to show here. Cracks were forming in some places, and as they moved deeper, there began to be a great deal of slime on the walls. In some spots, they had to cross

through shallow pools of murky water. Here and there, dwarven runes were carved at intersections, but when Mecandes attempted to translate them in one place, all he could manage was “IRKM DESMET DAEM.” It made no sense to either of them.

Eventually, stranger noises than the water began to become apparent. Gwendolyn thought she could hear faint clicking noises—but they didn’t sound mechanical. No, they sounded almost... organic. The sounds began to grow louder, and just as she thought she was starting to hear a pattern to the noises, they stopped.

The silence was suddenly broken by Mecandes. “Move!” he shouted from behind her. She glanced back at him, a puzzled look on her face. “Run first, ask questions later!” panted the bard as he began to run down the passage.

The clicking sounds returned, mixed with the echoes of their footsteps on the stone floor. Gwendolyn followed as Mecandes led her quickly through several intersections. Where was he going?

Rounding a corner, the bard stopped suddenly. Gwendolyn plowed into his back, and was about to make an indignant comment, when she looked up and her breath caught in her throat. Before them, blocking the passage, were three black widow spiders. Three very *large* spiders. They stood almost to her waist!

Turning quickly around, she was dismayed to find their retreat blocked by two more spiders. “We’re trapped! This would be a good time for that magical song, bard...”

“No time for that,” muttered Mecandes, his bardsword already in his hands. “We’ll have to do this the old fashioned way.” Instinctively, they moved back to back, facing the monstrous black widows on either side.

Excited by the possibility of an easy dinner, the three spiders approaching Mecandes attempt to scramble over one another in their eagerness. Seeing their confusion, Mecandes steps into their advance, sweeping his bardsword in a simple broad arc, severing the middle leg of one of the beasts, and slicing deeply into the furry hide another, ending it’s life. With a screech, the two remaining spiders leap back a little, their many black eyes wary now of the sword-wielding bard.

Behind him, Gwendolyn squats low to the ground, waving the torch menacingly towards the black widows approaching her. One stops cautiously, but the other continues to move towards her. When it comes within range of the flames, Gwendolyn quickly thrusts towards it, roasting its eyes and mandibles. With an almost deafening high-pitched wail, the burned spider scrambles backwards over its companion to flee down the passageway.

The black widows approaching Mecandes click at him ferociously, and seem to coordinate their attack as one moves onto the left wall, and the other to the right. As they advance in unison, Mecandes steps back, feinting, just before he leaps forward, slicing the head from the spider on the left wall, and whirling his blade about to pierce the body of the black widow on the right. Leaning into his lunge and twisting the blade violently to silence the beast, Mecandes glances back to see Gwendolyn sprawled face-first on the ground.

Climbing onto her back, the spider bites into her side, tearing into her with its powerful mandibles. Summoning all the strength she can muster, Gwendolyn manages to roll over with a grunt and bury her mithril dagger deep into the spider’s neck, just as Mecandes thrusts his sword into its body from above.

Gwendolyn winces as Mecandes lifts her and cradles her in his arms. He can feel her strength waning as the blood flows from the wound in her side, but she tries to smile bravely for him. “I suppose it is time for you to play a dirge,” she says, weakly.

“I had something else in mind,” says Mecandes. Taking Fin’s flute from his pocket once again, he brings it to his lips and makes his fingers to dance along its length.

The music seems to flow slowly in Gwendolyn’s mind, caressing her. It makes her feel strangely whole, and she can feel her strength slowly returning as the bard plays. When he finishes, she instinctively feels for the wound in her side; and finds that it is healed. Ecstatic, she resists the temptation to throw her arms around the bard. “That is the most beautiful music I have ever heard,” she says instead.

Mecandes smiles warmly as he tucks the flute away again. “It’s called *Badh’r Kilnfest*—an ancient Elven melody. It has the power to heal wounds, provided they are not too deep.”

Gathering their things together, they retrace their steps down the passageway, and Mecandes notices that the image of a giant spider has been etched into a nearby wall. “*Now* they warn us,” he laughs.

Intending to return now to the Scarlet Bard tavern, it soon becomes evident that the flight from the spiders has disoriented their sense of direction, and they spend perhaps an hour wandering the maze-like sewers hoping to find a familiar landmark, or another way up to the surface.

“I think I see sunlight ahead,” said Gwendolyn suddenly, taking Mecandes hand and hurrying towards a passage where a faint glow can be seen. Rounding the corner, they are confronted with a strange sight, and their hope for an easy way out of the sewers fades.

A light beam from the surface is mirrored down here somehow, and focused to a burning ray, blocking the corridor. Once Mecandes’ eyes have adjusted to the light, he sees that there are also some rotted clothes and bones here. Whatever had caused this poor fellow’s death, it was clear that the spiders had finished him; the bones had been picked clean.

A glint of silver catches Mecandes’ eye, and he bends down to move some of the clothing aside. Fine clothes hide an even finer sword—one made of the precious and expensive metal called adamant—forged only by the most skilled of dwarven blacksmiths.

“Here, take this,” the bard says, handing the blade to Gwendolyn, “It will serve you better than that dagger if we encounter more of those spiders. Apparently this man is—or, rather, was—a noble of some wealth, to be carrying such a finely-wrought sword.”

“What would some royal Lord be doing down here in these spider-infested sewers?” asks the barmaid, testing the weight and balance of the sword in her hand, and nodding as if pleased. When Mecandes doesn’t answer, she looks down to see him reading a ripped piece of old parchment paper.

Looking up at her, the bard shrugs. “It has been torn and most the ink washed away by the water, but it says, ‘Know this, that the man called Tarjan, thought by many to be insane, had through wizardly powers... proclaimed himself a god in Skara Brae a hundred years ago. His image is locked in stone until made whole again...’ That is all I can make out.” On a whim, Mecandes tears the readable section out and stuffs it into a pocket.

Then, taking a piece of rotted clothing, he tosses it down the passage before them. As it passes before the beam of light, it bursts into flames hot enough to completely consume the material before it even touches the ground. “Well, we won’t be going that way,” he says, and starts to head the other direction.

“Wait,” Gwendolyn says, clutching his arm. “Look more closely at the wall where that beam of sunlight is coming from. It’s clear that this is a barrier that has been created intentionally, probably by the very dwarven masons who built these sewers. I’ll wager that this is simply sunlight, reflected down here in some mechanical way. And, unless my eyes deceive me, it has dimmed even in the time we’ve been standing here.”

“So, you think we should wait and see if we can pass the light at night?” asks Mecandes, beginning to see her logic.

The barmaid nods. “Why would someone put such an elaborate trap here in this passageway? There must be something important beyond—perhaps a way out.”

“Or they were just trying to keep the spiders at bay,” adds Mecandes cynically. “But seeing as we’re completely lost anyway, we might as well see if you’re right. My weary legs could use the rest at any rate.”

Setting the torch upright in a crack, and finding as comfortable a seat as possible, the bard is secretly delighted when Gwendolyn leans against him to wait out the hours. Spending their time in long conversation, they talk of their families and childhood, and their dreams and futures. Mecandes finds himself gently stroking her soft raven hair.

Waking with a start, the bard realizes suddenly that the flickering of the torch is the only light in the passageway. Gwendolyn, awoken by Mecandes’ sudden movement, quickly climbs to her feet and—gathering up the adamant sword and the torch—strides past the area of the trap and down the hall. “I’m sure there’s a way out down here,” she calls back to the bard struggling to catch up.

• *The piece of parchment*

Gazing out from the balcony of his tower as the last dying beams of the sun’s light fade on the horizon, the powerful archmage could feel a certain amount of tension leaving his body. He couldn’t say why, but he had

always felt more comfortable once night had fallen, and he supposed it was why some of his opponents had called him “Mangar the Dark.” Well, that and his preference for black robes, perhaps.

To those who knew him, there were other darknesses that clung to Mangar, but he would never see it that way. In Mangar’s mind, the destiny of the strong is to grow more powerful, and that of the weak to suffer and live their pitiful lives serving them. If some would call this way of thinking evil, then so be it—it was only the weak who thought in terms of “good” and “evil” anyway. In his mind, it was just a simple—if admittedly harsh—reality of life. He knew on which side of the balance his own destiny lay.

Looking down into the courtyard of his tower five stories below, Mangar knew that his destiny was close at hand. Several hundred armoured orcs and kobolds were camped within his walls. A veritable army—more than enough, at least, to accomplish his plans for this pitiful town. Their time would be soon, but for now, the archmage checked the magical wards he had placed on his gates to keep intruders and curious eyes out, and the unruly orcs in. The magical guardian statues placed on the streets outside his tower in the south-west corner of Skara Brae reported nothing unusual. Brushing a few stray snowflakes from the railing with an ironic smirk, the archmage glanced once more at the heavy blanket of snow surrounding Skara Brae, and then returned to his study.

With a casual wave of his hand, a blazing fire ignited in the hearth. Although the darkness suited him, the cold did not. The unusually bitter weather and heavy snowfall was an important part of his plans, but the sooner his schemes could be accomplished, the better.

A knock came at the door of his study. At this hour, it had better be important. “Enter,” he called.

The captain of the tower guard strode through the door. A skilled and highly paid mercenary who fulfilled his duties coldly and efficiently, Haddon gave a slight bow and got straight to the point. “We captured two intruders, master. Inside the tower walls.”

Mangar raised an eyebrow. How could someone have passed his magical security barriers without him being alerted? “Mages?” he asked.

“No, master. A human bard, and a young half-elven woman. They pretend that they do not know where they are, but I found this.” Stepping forward, he handed the archmage a small piece of parchment. “I believe they may be spies sent by Bashar Kavior.”

“Indeed,” replied Mangar. Placing a finger on his pursed lips, the archmage stood for a moment in thought, staring at the torn piece of parchment in the flickering firelight. What is that insane priest scheming at now? He’ll get his payment; there is no need for this. If these two really were from Kavior, Mangar needed to send him a clear message.

“Execute them, Captain Haddon,” he said, the parchment suddenly flickering into bright flame in his hand. “See to it yourself.”

The sword lying on the ground outside the tent caught Haddon’s eye as he approached. It had been taken from one of the prisoners, but it seemed entirely too stylish for a spy. And there was something... familiar... about it. Shrugging, Haddon took the adamant blade with him. There was, after all, only one real use for a sword.

A massive man, Haddon had to bend low to step into the tent. His eyes fell on the girl, still tied to the post, and then flicked towards where the bard was tied up...

Mecandes, leaping at the captain of the guard from the dark side of the tent, slammed into him as hard as he could, hoping to knock the man off his feet. It was like hitting a brick wall. Haddon barely broke his stride as he shrugged the bard off of his back. He landed on the ground with bone-wrenching thud.

“I’ve no time for games,” Haddon said, and stepped past him.

With absolutely no ceremony or hesitance, Haddon runs the girl through with the adamant blade. Her eyes went wide, but she made no sound as her body fell limp on the post.

The bard lets out a strangled yelp behind him, but as the captain turns to finish his work, he sees only the movement of the tent flap. Haddon pauses and kneels to wipe the blood from the blade on the grass floor of the tent. He is in no hurry. The bard has nowhere to run.

This is as far as I managed to get in the writing of this story. Real life started to intervene, and the birth of my second child left me with less free time for such pursuits. Perhaps one day I will return to Skara Brae to finish the tale, but for now it will have to remain a perpetual work-in-progress. However, I still have all of my notes for the plot and characters, and they are included below. I hope you'll take the time to read the notes below and see the clever ways in which I proposed to turn the sparse plot of Michael Cranford's *The Bard's Tale* computer game into a functional novel:

Some background

Skara Brae is a small, but thriving community of the realm. While not particularly ancient or important, it serves as a nexus for trade between the capital city of Candarr, the thriving city-state of Trangramayne, and the important costal port, Hamelin.

Mangar Zanta, and his older brother, Lagoth Zanta, are both powerful archmages, plotting the takeover of the realm. They have already put an end to Lord Garrick and control the port of Hamelin. Lagoth has entrusted Mangar with disrupting trade in Skara Brae while he takes care of business in Tangramayne.

Harkyn, Mangar, Kylearan, and Kavilar are all members of the Board of Review, a committee that sees to the official affairs of the city. Baron Harkyn, appointed by the King and the only "royalty" in town, is "first among equals" in the Review Board; they are his advisors, and he their ambassador, so to speak.

The Plot (after end of what was written above)

- Mecandes attempts to enlist the aid of warriors in his quest. Those at the Adventurer's Guild laugh at him, but Brian "the Fist" approaches him when he hears mention of the cult of Tarjan. Brian lost his son to Tarjan's undead minions (who roam the streets of Skara Brae at night), and he is seeking justice. He joins Mecandes.
- Brian enlists the aid of Phenglei Kai in the quest, an old friend. Or maybe it's the other way around.
- Their first task is the invasion of the Mad God's temple. After defeating the High Priest, they enter the Catacombs and narrowly escape an encounter with a "Soul Sucker." It is guarding two prisoners, Morganna and Markus. Markus joins the party, but Morganna flees. (We don't know why she was there, but she'll be back later. Markus is viewed a bit distrustfully by certain group members, due to his thieving and skulking ways – but he gets a chance to redeem himself at the end.) They battle King Aildrek, leader of the undead, and free him from his slavery. Just before his release into the afterlife, he gives them the Eye—a final gift, or a final curse?
- In a humorous incident in the Gran Plaz involving Markus, Omar is introduced and brought into the party.
- The stables are afire! The sound of battle ensues.
- Baron Harkyn is the aloof magistrate, or mayor, of Skara Brae, appointed by the king (who's castle resides in the capital city of Candarr.) Mangar's forces invade Harkyn's Castle, and our adventurers are swept into the battle. After a battle with the traitorous captain of the guards (a Silver Square is found on his person), with the aid of Sir Grady (once known as "the wild warrior"), our party dons their outfits (green is the colour of their tabards) and sneaks further into the castle during the fray.

- Kylearan, in the guise of a wise but dottering old man, joins the company. He's the fellow who asks about the Skull Tavern. The Crystal Sword is found near Kylearan; or by him somehow.
- There are hints that the battle between Harkyn and Mangar go deeper than the trade dispute—it is revealed that Harkyn was a follower of the cult of Tarjan, which wants Mangar to pay for their aid. Mangar decided a pre-emptive strike was best; to kill two birds with one stone. Encounter with berserkers.
- Harkyn is killed by Mangar's captain. It is later revealed that he was a secret and unwilling adherent to the cult of Tarjan, and Tarjan's statue is found in his quarters.
- The Eye brings the statue to life. A spectacular battle ensues, and Kylearan (though the party does not know it is him) retreats through a hastily-opened portal. The party follows, and winds up at the Amber Tower.
- Meanwhile, Mangar is entertaining an important guest and telling of his victory at Harkyn's castle... it is his brother, Lagoth. Lagoth is his older, more powerful brother, angry about Lord Garrick's escape, and Mangar is eager to please him with tales of Harkyn's demise. They have grandiose schemes, and Lagoth is off to work his end of the deal in the distant city of Tangramayne, since Mangar seems to have things under control here in Skara Brae...
- We rejoin the adventurers at Kylearan's tower—a large test of skill. At the end, the party encounters the Crystal Golem, which re-animates after being destroyed. Sir Grady finally dispatches it with the Crystal Sword found in Harkyn's Castle (with Kylearan).
- They encounter Kylearan, get the whole story, and receive an Onyx Key from him—which ensures entry to Mangar's Tower.
- Morganna rejoins the party in between Kylearan's and Mangar's Tower. She is brutal and highly questionable in her actions.
- Somewhere, Mecandes learns the tune, "Lucklaran"—it allows bard's music to influence traditional magic, something previously thought impossible.
- In the final battle with Mangar, Morganna turns out to be a planted spy, and her treachery puts the party's magic users out of the battle. She moves on to disable the magical bard, but is slain by Mecandes. The party looks to be in serious trouble; fighting an archmage without the aid of magic users, but Markus (who had disappeared earlier in the tower) reappears in the shadows behind Mangar, and, putting the Thief Dagger in his back, ends his reign of terror.
- The story ends with our heroes enjoying an ale at the Scarlet Bard inn as spring returns and the birdies chirp outside. The final lines of the story are Mecandes' song:

The song I sing
Will tell the tale
Of a cold and wintery day;

Of castle walls
and torchlit halls
And a price men had to pay.

When evil fled
and brave men bled
The Dark one came to stay,

Till men of old
For blood and gold
Had rescued Skara Brae.

Cast of Characters:

The Bad Guys:

- Mangar. A human archmage. He is evil, but it is because of his materialistic ambition to rule and be wealthy. He is aloof and arrogant, and couldn't be troubled by the lowly "street urchins" of Skara Brae. In his mind, the town is only his stepping stone to greater glory. It is to secure his power that he cuts off trade routes to Skara Brae with a spell that brings winter many months early, closing the roads to all traffic. An unholy alliance was made with Tarjan to secure the power for this spell. The price may be high. Mangar has also secured the alliance of orcs and kobolds, and they are his primary henchmen.
- Tarjan. Tarjan is an ancient evil. Basically, he is an evil human magic user who has sold his soul to become Satan's lieutenant on earth. He proclaims himself a very god, and is branded "the mad god" by those brave enough to make the claim. The legends about him are almost unbelievably horrific, and his name is spoken in whispers. Some think he is no more than a legend, though his return is foretold. The cult of Tarjan is associated with undead activity in Skara Brae.
- Bashar Kavilor. High Priest of the cult of Tarjan. When he tries to prevent the party from entering the catacombs, a battle ensues and he is slain.
- King Aildrek, the undead "witch king". In ancient days, he was Tarjan's principal opponent. Tarjan vanquished him, made him his slave, and now Aildrek is a powerful undead minion of the cult of Tarjan. He is keeper of the Eye.
- Brilhasti. A half-orc follower of Tarjan, who looks forward to his return. He is thoroughly insane, and his evil is petty and cruel in the typical orc way. He loves torture. (Incidentally, he survives the tale and returns to pester our heroes in Bard's Tale III.)

The Good Guys:

- Kylearan. The good human archmage of Skara Brae, he is Mangar's nemesis in every regard. Kylearan is very much like Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings – he has his hand in all the affairs of the realm, and his true power is hidden. (Perhaps he covertly joins the party for the Harkyn's Castle adventure, and his glory is revealed in the confrontation with the resurrected image of Tarjan. He is grievously wounded in the epic battle, however, and thus he must leave the party to face Tarjan alone.) Although a world-traveller, Kylearan was born in Skara Brae and maintains property there; his majestic Amber Tower.
- Garth. Once a hearty young dwarven adventurer of much reknown, a grievous and unhealing legwound (suffered at the hands of the Witch King of the Catacombs, it is later revealed) has put an

end to his adventuring days. He is quite content in his new trade however, that of weapon-shopkeeper and blacksmith of Skara Brae.

- Roscoe. A slightly off-kilter gnome who has created a magical machine which allows the sun's light to be focussed in a safe way. (Since the sun is the source of magical energy in this world, this allows visiting magic users to receive a "recharge".) He heavily hints that he expects to be paid for this service. Roscoe has a pet cat. He and Omar get along famously, and Omar has vague hopes that Roscoe's crazy machines could help his temporal mechanics.
- Bedder -- an old half-elf who reportedly sold his mother to a band of lonely orcs in order to finance his first bank branch.
- Mecandes al'Maradon, humble half-elven gleeman. He knows nothing of his elvish heritage. At the beginning of the tale, Mecandes has replaced Corfid op Orfin as The Scarlet Bard's principal entertainer.
- Gwendolyn, a too-adventurous (and too-attractive) half-elven barmaid.
- Brian Isli, "the Fist", human paladin. A proud Christian crusader, his honour bids him join the quest when he learns that the satanic cult of Tarjan is involved. Tragically, Brian is slain by Tarjan's reanimated statue, but he buys enough time for Kylearan to deal the "killing blow" so to speak.
- Markus, a hobbit thief. He uses his thieving skills only on those who are evil (or overly wealthy), and is quick to offer his plunder to those more needy than himself. Also known in some circles as "Slipfinger". (It is actually Markus who finally slays Mangar, stabbing him in the back from the shadows.)
- Morganna, dwarven hunter; skilled in tracking and assassination. She is too ruthless even for our experienced adventurers, and she and Brian clash seriously over her over-eagerness to kill. Eventually, Morganna betrays the adventurers, and it is revealed she has been employed by Mangar to spy on them.
- Sir Grady. Human warrior. Second-in-command to Baron Harkyn, he is a goodly warrior-lord who has scars from many a battle. He doesn't suspect all of the treachery until too late, and aids our heroes through the castle. He wields Hawkblade, and later, Kael's Axe. (He basically takes on Brian's role after Brian is slain by Tarjan's statue.)
- Omar Ghaklah, gnome magic user specializing in Conjurer and Sorcerer spells. (Usually referred to as a Sorcerer.) [It might be mentioned that he has a certain interest in time and spacial travel--In Bard's Tale III, he will become a Chronomancer. The Review Board frowns on his studies in this area.]
- Phenglei Kai, ancient elven magic user specializing in Magician and Wizard spells. (By the end of the tale, he becomes an Archmage, but is generally referred to as a Wizard.) An extremely quiet elf, he always seems to be studying a spell book of some kind.

Items

Items play such an important role in the game; I wanted to include some of the item names right out of the game (without going overboard, of course). Here's what I was thinking of using:

- Kael's Axe is probably best weapon, found late in the story.
- Bardsword. Mecandes' family heirloom.
- Lak's Lyre. Fin's Flute. Pipes of Pan. Truthdrum. Spiritdrum.
- Pureblade and Pureshield, Brian's trusty weapons.
- Soul Mace. Wielded by Morganna against Soul Sucker, and broken in that battle. Later, she has a Mournblade.
- Frost Horn used by Mecandes late in the tale; perhaps in battle with berserkers.
- Crystal Sword, used to slay Kylearan's Crystal Golem guardian.
- Spectre Snare. Found in Mangar's quarters before final confrontation; it is what he used to ensnare the head of Harkyn's guards, and the promised gift to Morgana as reward for her treachery.