

Prelude

Trystan needed *that lute*. He needed it like a fire needs air.

And it was in the hands of the most pompous twiddler he'd ever known.

Baron Camphus Pickell strummed. Trystan's mouth watered. The notes from the instrument sang, golden and living. They hung in the air nearly visible. They reached into his chest, waking truths buried fathoms deep. The ache sweetened as it stung. Each note conjured meanderings by still waters he had not seen in an age.

Trystan blinked as these few notes threatened to undo him. Even this lordling's feeble strumming evoked laughter, through tears.

But *not* through the player's talent.

It must be the lute. People think such honesty comes easily. Musicians know better.

Pickell is no musician.

It was not an authorized lute, Trystan realized. Bindery luthiers crafted those under the watchful eye of the Conclave. Anything the Bindery produced was pedestrian, simple.

Those instruments could never sing with such haunting, luminous voices.

The distinctive rosette inlay might have caused the distinctive timbre. Eight base sides, carved with flowers, colored with strange blues and a delicate shell echoed the pattern on the bowl and neck. The honeyed rosewood glowed, nothing like the dull sheen of a proper Guild instrument.

"... So I think the ballad should have that refrain," the baron said, his nasal voice harsh over the strumming. "And you must recount the glory of my house." He waved at their surroundings, encompassing gilt-framed portraits of his ancestors. The chamber held so many paintings and books, it rivaled a gallery. Still, he did have an impressive collection. Two full harps, a lyre, several flutes, tambors, drums, vielles, and lutes waited in silence and anticipation.

However, House Pickell, like most noble houses in Bestua, did not love music. They valued their standing. The collection was massive enough to exhibit the House's prowess without any need to bother with so crass a thing as performance. Marbled floors with thick Fennish rugs complimented the white-plastered walls and giltwork. The instruments shone as diamonds in an expensive setting. Admired, not touched.

Trystan pursed his lips. He plucked a piece of lint from his own embroidered-velvet sleeve. "It's a lovely beginning, milord. You hardly need me to write this ballad."

"Nonsense." The baron gestured, his arm dripping lace. "A trifle, nothing more. But I daresay

I'll enjoy being able to claim I penned this ballad with *you*." He paused, his eyes brightening as he pictured it. "Of course, I'll need the opus to be nothing short of perfect. It must be ready in time for my wedding."

"Certainly," Trystan said. "Your lute's tone sounds... I don't think I have ever heard its equal."

"You like it?" Pickell flushed and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "It's rather special." His eyes darted from side to side. He inhaled, opened his mouth to speak, and exhaled slowly. He turned away, fussing with the lute's tuning pegs.

"Was it made in Bestua?" Trystan asked. He already knew the answer.

Everyone knew such instruments from nursery stories. Instruments with the Song bound into their frames. One could play a man's soul from his body and it never needed tuning. The lute was enchanted, an ancient thing of legend and myth.

"It's a family heirloom." The baron's frown was at once condescending and exasperated. "We've had it for centuries, but it's so valuable we rarely display it. I felt that the import of this occasion merited performance."

He offered the lute to Trystan. "Would you like to play?"

The perfect weight, it curled into his arms like a lover, and Trystan caressed it with no small passion, daring to touch the strings. He bent his head. With a sharp intake of breath, he began to play.

A ripple of melody leapt forth, soft at first. The notes explored. He tested the tones. The sounds tasted his soul in answer, reflecting his heart's inner tune. They soared and hung back, hesitant, seeking permission to dance aloft.

Trystan swung into a traveling song. It made his own legs restless.

The melody skipped and bounced, echoing with a mad beauty. Trystan caught a scent of damp forest and felt soft wind on his face. Birdsong trilled in counter-melody and found its way to the strings. It was so pure, his hands wavered. He shook himself as he let the music fade.

"If I keep playing I may never stop," Trystan said. He looked closely at the lute, turning it over. Its bowl held a marking, indented in the wood. His fingers traced it. *Stars, the mark of the luthier. The lute is starbound. Starbound.* The term fit, reflecting the ethereal tones and the pale, glowing inlays.

He glanced at his host, questioning. Pickell's blue eyes held unshed tears, affected by the Song, but he answered the unspoken query.

"My ancestor, Hiram Pickell, was in the battle of the Sundered Cities. When the Water Leapers stormed the great palace"—he shuddered as if remembering—"he protected a Majestir from certain death, and the Majestir gave him the lute in thanks. It's been in my family ever since."

"A great story," Trystan said, returning the instrument. "I would give all I own for such a treasure."

"You shall perform on it at my wedding....Honestly, it caused such a stir when I recovered it from our family vault. A Cantor turned up the next day, full of imprecation and questions. The servants must have gone to him. Or one of the watchers," He sniffed, affronted, and gestured to the grotesque who perched, guarding the massive stone mantel. The gargoyle's eyes followed Pickell.

"The man was positively wretched; he even hinted that I'd gained it by *nefarious means*. Can

you imagine? He made quite a spectacle." Pickell placed the lute on its stand and continued his complaint with lace-punctuated gesticulation. "You can't order one of these lutes. Only the Bindery crafters build lutes now. Everyone knows that."

Trystan frowned, thinking. "But if the Conclave thought you'd acquired it, it must be possible."

Pickell waved the idea away. "He asked about my whereabouts for the past decade, and I answered. I'm a Baron. The Cantor couldn't prove any wrongdoing, regardless. But I suppose he *did* imply there were others."

Trystan felt hope rise, impossible, euphoric hope, tinged with trepidation. He must own such a lute, no matter the risk. The task might prove impossible. The very fact this instrument existed, and he was able to play the thing, unharmed, raised troubling questions. These instruments could drive a player mad. Their Song could be used as a weapon.

Yet, if the Conclave was searching, another could be found. *I will find one. I will own a starbound lute. I don't need its power, I just want the Song.*

The baron changed the subject, eager to get back to his favorite topic.

"Now about the verses..."

Trystan sighed and shoved his plans away.

There'd be time enough for plotting when he finished writing Pickell's ballad.



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