

A Pattern of Silver Strings

by Charles de Lint

For Mary Ann

Nagakaramu Kokoro mo shirazu
Kurokami no
Midarete kesa wa
Mono wo koso omoe
Lady Horikawa
[Will he always love me?
I cannot read his heart.
This morning my thoughts
Are as disordered
As my hair.]

Meran Gwynder was the daughter of an oak king and the wife of a harper, though neither her royal green blood nor her marriage seemed very real to her just now. Loss filled her heart and she could find no way to deal with it. The sadness of what seemed a broken trust shared an uneasy rule with her unending questions. If she could know why...

"He left without a word," she said.

Bethowen the hillwife clicked her teeth in reply, though whether the sound was meant to be sympathetic or was only a habit, re-mained debatable. They sat on a hilltop, under the guardianship of an old longstone, with the stars glimmering pale in the night skies above and the fire between them throwing strange shadows that seemed to echo the whisper of the wind as it braided the hill's grasses. Stirring the fire with a short stick, Bethowen looked through the glitter of sparks at her guest.

Meran had nut-brown skin and brown-green hair. She was slim, but strong-limbed. Her eyes were the liquid brown of an otter's. The hillwife could see none of this in the poor light. Those images she drew up from her memory. What she saw was a troubled woman, her features strained and wan in the firelight. At the oak-maid's knee the striped head of Old Badger looked up to meet the hillwife's eyes.

"Men will do that," Bethowen said at last. "It's not a new thing, my dear."

"Not him."

"What makes me wonder," the hillwife continued as though she'd never been interrupted, "is what brings one of the treefolk so far from her tree." Ogwen Wood was a good two hours south and west across the dark hills, a long distance for an oakmaid.

"My tree fell in a storm years ago—you never heard? I should— *would* have died but for him. As the green blood spilled, he drew me back. With his harpmagic. With his love."

"And you have no more need of your tree?"

"He made me charms. Three talismans."

Meran could see his quick sure hands working the oakwood as surely as though he were beside her now. First he made a pendant, shaped like an oak leaf, and that she wore under her tunic, close to her heart. Then a comb, fine-toothed and decorated with acorn shapes, and that she wore in her hair to keep

the unruly locks under control. Lastly a flute that she kept in a sheath hanging from her shoulder. Oak was not the best of woods for such an instrument, but his harpmagic had instilled in it a tone and timbre that the natural wood lacked.

"He built us a new home of sod and stone and thatch and there we lived as we had before. Until this morning..."

"When you awoke and found him gone," Bethowen finished for her. "But he journeys often, doesn't he, this husband of yours?"

Roadfaring and worldwalking from time to time. I have heard tales..."

"And well you might. But you don't understand. He left without a word. I woke and he was gone. Gone." She tugged at the edge of her cloak with unhappy fingers and looked up to meet the hill-wife's bright eyes. "He left Telynros behind."

"Telynros?"

"His harp. The roseharp."

Telynros was a Tuathan gift, an enchanted instrument that plainly bore the touch of the old gods' workmanship. Silver-stringed and strangely carved, it had, growing from the wood where forepillar met the curving neck, a living blossom. A grey rose.

"Please," Meran said, "tell me where he has gone."

Bethowen nodded. "I can try, my dear. I can only try."

From the unrolled cloth that lay at her knee, she chose a pinch of flaked alder bark and tossed it into the flames with a soft-spoken word. The fire's hue changed from red-gold to blue. Muttering under her breath, she added a second pinch and the blue dissolved into violet.

"Look into the flames," she said. "Look and tell me what you see."

"Only flames. No, I see..."

An oak tree strained at its roots, green-leafed boughs reaching for... something. There was a sense of loss about that tree, an incompleteness that reflected in the pattern of its boughs. Under the spread of its leafed canopy, half covered in autumn leaves, stood a harp.

"My tree," Meran whispered. "But it's..." She shook her head. "My tree standing in my father's wood as ever it did. And that is Telynros, his harp. Bethowen?"

"It is the present you see," the hillwife replied. "But a view of it that we already know, not what you seek."

Sighing, Bethowen closed her eyes. Deep inside, where the herenow curled around her thoughts, she drew on the heart of her strength. Her taw, the inner silence that is the basis for all magic, rose sure and firm like a well-remembered tune. When she spoke a word, the air crackled about her and a pale green rune hovered in the air above the fire. Sinking, it slowly became a part of the flames.

Meran leaned closer to the fire. The scent of wildflowers was strong in the air. The vision in the flames remained. Only its perspective changed. First the harp grew large and larger still, until all she could see was the silvery glisten of its strings, then between them, amidst eddying rivers of mist that hid more than

they showed, she saw him, saw his face. Her heart grew tight in her breast.

"Cerin," she breathed. There was both hope and loss in her voice.

He stood on the ramparts of an old ruined fortress, the grey stoneworks stark against a spill of dusky hills and the tendrils of mist. Beside him was a tall man clad all in black—tunic, trousers, boots and jacket. The man in black had a strangely shaped lute hanging from a shoulder strap. Its shining wood was of the darkest ebony. Even the strings were black. Meran shivered and looked away.

"Who is he with?" she asked.

Bethowen shrugged.

"Where are they, then?"

"In this world, but not."

Bethowen passed her hands above the fire and the flames stirred the image into a new shape. The two men still stood on the ramparts, but now the fortress was changed. Gone were the ruined walls and tottering high towers. Stone was fashioned cunningly to stone, wall to towers to inner keep until the whole of it seemed the fashioning of master stoneworkers. Brave pennants fluttered in a breeze that blew across the sudden green hills.

"This is what he sees," the hillwife said.

She spoke a last word and the vision was lost in mists once more. Harpstrings, silver and taut, took shape amidst the swirl of mist, then a harp, half covered with leaves, and above it a yearning oak keeping watch. Then there was only the fire and its red-gold flames.

"Where is that keep?" Meran asked.

"North of Abercorn and far from your father's wood. Across the Dolking Downs. Too far for an oakmaid. In the old days they named it Taencaer and it prospered. Now it is a nameless ruin where no one goes."

"I must go to him."

"Too far," Bethowen said.

"But still I must go." Meran bit at her lip, finding the next question, for all that it burned inside her, difficult to frame into words. It was not the question so much as what the answer to it might be.

"Is he... is he enspelled?" she asked.

Bethowen shrugged. "I have shown you all that the flames have to show, my dear. More I cannot do. For your sake, I hope..." The hillwife shut her mouth and entwined her knobby fingers together on her lap. She hoped what? That all was well? If all was well the oak king's daughter would not be here asking her questions.

"You must take care," she began, but stopped again. Hers was only the gift of farseeing and a few remedial cures. Advice had never been her province. To each their own wisdom. But this oak-maid, so determined, as stubborn as the badger that bided by her knee, as much a part of the Middle Kingdom as the ensorcered keep she meant to visit... what advice had the hills for her? None, save caution and, to one so headstrong, that would only be so much mouthing in the wind.

"He is enspelled," Meran said.

He had to be. He would never just leave her. But the fear, once having risen whisperingly inside her, couldn't be shunted aside. Like a serpent's insidious hiss it worried at all she'd ever held as certainty.

Is our love such a frail thing that I should question it like this? She demanded of herself.

He left, the whisperer replied slyly. Without a word.

He was enspelled! she insisted. He'd never be gone otherwise.

Men will do that, the inner voice replied, repeating Bethowen's earlier words, but mockingly, without the sense of comfort that one woman might offer to another.

Fiercely Meran shook her head. She thought of the roseharp's strings and the dead leaves entwined amidst them. She turned her gaze northward and followed the line of the hills with her eyes.

"Thank you," she murmured to the hillwife, her thoughts already far away, already planning her journey.

Fighting down the draw of her dead oak that still called to her for all the charms she carried with her, she left the hilltop. Old Badger trailed at her heels.

"Luck go with you," Bethowen said, but there was no one left to answer. Only the night remained, with its voiceless stars and the crackle of the flames.

Those same stars looked down on what was once named Taencaer, the old hillfort that straddled the border between Abercorn and Staynes. But where they saw the keep for the impoverished memory that it was, with leaning stone-cracked towers and debris rounding the once-straight planes of its walls, the two men who stood atop its ramparts saw it as it had been in long years past, a bustling keep filled with the retainers of the old king's court, the last bastion of man before the grim wastes of the wild northlands. Where the hawk in the deserted west tower and the rodents that made their nests in the courtyards below heard only the wind and the stirrings of dead grasses as they rasped against the weathered stones, the two men heard music drifting lazily from the inner keep, the voices of stableboys and maids gossiping in the courtyard, horses stamping in the stables, the creak of the wooden pulley as water was drawn from the well, and the hundred other sounds of an occupied keep.

One of the men was a black-haired tinker, brown-skinned and dark-eyed. His name was Jeth Tewdol. He leaned against the old stone of the ramparts and eyed his prisoner with amusement, his lean fingers straying from time to time to the strings of his lute. The occasional snatch of music that answered had a sardonic quality to it that matched the dark cunning of his eyes for mood.

The other was Cerin called the Songweaver, the husband of Meran Gwynder and a harper, though he was far from his wife and had no instrument at hand to show his calling. There was more grey than brown in his beard and his braided hair was greyer still. He was thin and his face seemed a map of lines, like the many roads he'd journeyed, but where the tinker's dark eyes reflected without depth, his were clear and tarn-deep, more the eyes of a young man for all his body's apparent age.

Staring across the darkened hills, Cerin worried at the why and where of his situation. It was a strange thing to go abed in your own house, with your wife at your side, and wake in a strange keep, who knew where, a prisoner. The sun had arisen and set once since then and still he was here. Try as he might, there was no way free of it. His captor's lutemagic bound him as surely as though he were chained, sapping his will, refusing him the chance to raise his own magics.

For he had magics, only they were denied him, here in this strangely familiar place. His law, the inner

quiet where his power had its birth, was silent, but silent with a silence of absence, not the silence that was like music, that was his strength. What he needed was his harp, but Telynros too was denied him.

Ordinarily there was a bond that joined them so that, no matter what the distance between them, he could call the roseharp to him, or him to it. But when he reached out to it, the lutemagic thickened about him and he heard no scatter of welcoming notes, no greeting. Nothing. With the roseharp in hand he could have surmounted his captor's spells, the clear notes cutting through his unseen fetters like an otter cutting through water. But as it was...

And Meran. What was she to think, waking and finding him gone?

As though reading Cerin's thoughts, Jeth Tewdol grinned. He pulled a flask from the pocket of his jacket and took a long swig before offering it to his prisoner.

Cerin shook his head. "I think not."

"Afraid it's a faery drink?" the tinker asked. "That if you take a sip you'll be bound here forever?"

"Something binds me already, tinker."

"Why, so it does."

Jeth Tewdol drew chords from his lute and Cerin's head swam with sharp pains that came like dagger blows on the heels of the dark music. He staggered and leaned against the stonework for balance, his lips drawn back as he fought the pain.

"A reminder," the tinker said with a smile. His hands fell away from his instrument.

As the last note faded, Cerin's breath returned to him in ragged gasps. The pains faded into a dull ache and were gone. All save the memory of them.

"You've only the one more night of my company, Songweaver," Jeth Tewdol added. "And then?" He grinned. "Why, then you're free to go as you will, where you will. Home to your woman of wood, if you want. If she'll still have you."

For all that he controlled the situation, the tinker took a step back at the sudden fire in his prisoner's eyes.

"No," he said, holding up his hands in a disarming manner. "You mistake me. I haven't harmed her, nor will I." His moment of unease dissolved as though it had never been and he made himself comfortable on the stoneworks, enjoying himself again. "This is the why of it," he explained. "Have you heard in your travels of Taen-caer, the old king's keep?"

Cerin looked around with a new insight. The sharp edges of the keep wavered for a moment, as though the deepseeing of his magic had returned to him. The sounds that rose up from the courtyard and inner keep were now like the wind playing through ruined stonework. Then that moment was gone and all was as it had been, except that Cerin knew now where he was: in ruined Taencaer, where ghosts were said to play with the wind and the spirits of the dead slept lightly if they slept at all. The hillfort had been brought back to a semblance of life through the tinker's lutemagic, the same lutemagic that kept him from gathering his law and putting an end to his captivity. Recognizing the fort and the hills beyond, he wondered how many he would know amongst the ghosts that the tinker had woken.

"What of it?" he asked. The where he was he understood now, but not the why.

"They had a contest here, in days long gone. Barden and musicians came from many lands to compete in

it."

"I know," Cerin said. "Tasanin was the last to win it—a young fiddler from Yern."

The tinker regarded him strangely. Something in his prisoner's voice brought him up sharply, but Cerin, for all the furor of his thoughts, kept a bland expression on his face.

"How could you know that?" Jeth Tewdol asked.

"I was here that day."

"But that was... long ago."

Cerin smiled, enjoying the tinker's disconcertment. "I know. But still I was here and remember it."

"Songweaver," Jeth Tewdol said. "That's your name? Not a title?" At Cerin's nod a queasy feeling went through the tinker. It had been one man through the centuries bearing that name, not wearing it as a title? For a long moment he said nothing, then a new gleam entered his eyes.

"That makes it even better," he said. "That contest will be held again tomorrow night—for the first time in many a year—and I mean to win it. It was for that reason that I raised the dead of Taencaer. I mean to win the contest and take the title of Songweaver from you. But now... now I take more than a title. I take your name and all the magic in it."

"Contests mean nothing," Cerin said. "They are for youths who have yet to prove something to themselves, not for men such as you and I. And my name, like the roseharp, was a gift of the Tuathan. You cannot take it from me."

Jeth Tewdol touched his lute and an eerie note sang forth. "You needn't sound so smug, Songweaver. I too have a god-gifted instrument, though mine was given to me by the Daketh."

Cerin looked from the lute that the tinker claimed came from the Tuathan's dark cousins, to the man's brown face.

"How so?" he asked. "Why were you gifted?"

"Through no special effort on my part," Jeth Tewdol said. "Would you know the tale? I can see by your eyes you would—for all that you shake your head. Then listen and marvel, you who have lived down through the longyears. We are more alike than I thought, for I see now that as you are, so must I be, for are we not both god-gifted?"

"My instrument came to me in such a fashion: I was traveling through the Kierlands—do you know them? They're unfriendly dales in the best of times, but for a tinker there's none worse. It was winter and I sought lodgings, but was turned away from every inn until I took refuge in the one place no man could, or would, deny me—a ruined fane in the north marches. There was little enough there, but the walls that remained were enough to shelter me from the wind's cold bite, and what with this and that—a stolen haunch of a wild fowl from the last inn I'd tried, a small fire that spluttered and spat more than it gave off heat, and a threadbare cloak—I made do. A piteous picture, don't you think?"

"I gave no thought to ghosts or the like—knew nothing of them save from my own people's roadtales. I fell asleep knowing nothing of the history of those ruins. That I found out later. Once it was a Tuathan fane, desecrated in years long gone, and now a place of dark shadows where the Daketh's power was strong. I slept and dreamt that they came to me, those dark gods, came to me who was nothing. I remember cowering from them, yet accepting their presence as we will do in a dream. They saw

something in me—my bitterness, perhaps?—and fanned it to life with promises.

"What would you have?" they asked me.

"I remember thinking of the instrument my father had left me— a poor old flute that I sold for a week's lodgings and meals a year or so before. I'd never've done it, but I was desperate. The innkeeper had the city guard waiting at this door if I couldn't pay him something.

"Well, I thought of it, and remembered its warmth and comfort. You must know what I mean, Songweaver. When all's wrong in your world, a snatch of music can still lift your spirits. So I opened my mouth to ask for another like it, but when I spoke, all that came out was one word: 'Power.'

"The Daketh laughed—such a sound!

"Then power you shall have,' they said and were gone.

"When I woke, my fire was gone out and the wind was howling. I recalled my dream and found, lying next to me, this." The tinker tapped his lute. "They left me this instrument and its magics, yes, and the skill to use both. Why? Who can say? On a whim, perhaps? It makes little difference to me, for I'll tell you this, Songweaver. Innkeepers no longer look at my darkened skin and bid me begone. With the lutemagic I could tumble their walls down about their ears and they know it. They see it in my eyes, sense the lute's power. Ah, isn't she a beauty?"

Cerin nodded obligingly.

"And it's with it that I'll take your name."

"I do not engage in contests," Cerin replied.

"Are you afraid to lose?"

"Win or lose, it means nothing. I take my music as I find it. Whether you are the better musician or not, does not invalidate my own skill. And my name is still my name."

"And yet there will be a contest and you will play in it. And when the king's harden name me the winner, I will be the Songweaver and you will be nothing."

Cerin shrugged. If the tinker wished a contest, so be it. If he named himself Songweaver, there was little he could do about that either. A name was only a name. It had power, as all names must, but only if it was a true name. The tinker deluded himself if he thought otherwise.

"I have no instrument," he said.

Jeth Tewdol smiled. "I have one for you. A harp—the like of which you've never seen before."

And indeed he hadn't.

When the tinker brought the harp to him, Cerin could only stare. The soundbox was cracked. The supports, forepillar and curving neck both, were warped. The tuning pins had no hold in them so that a string wouldn't stay in tune, while the strings themselves were discolored with rust and buzzed when he tried one.

"Well?" the tinker asked.

Cerin looked from harp to man and answered softly. "A fine instrument, Jeth Tewdol, and I thank you for

its use. If you will allow me to... accustom myself to it?"

"By all means." The tinker laughed. "I will leave you to your task. Only, Songweaver. Do us both a favour. Don't try to escape."

He tapped his lute meaningfully, with all the subtlety of a bit actor in a mummer's play.

"I am yours to command," Cerin said.

"So you are. Why, so you are!"

Chuckling to himself, the tinker wandered off, plucking a tune from his lute. When he was gone, Cerin leaned against the stoneworks and eyed his borrowed harp for long moments. Then, sighing, he began to take out the tuning pins, one by one.

Rubbing dust and stone powder onto them, he fitted each back in place, testing them for give and how they'd hold for tuning. Some still fitted so loosely that he had to add slivers of wood to achieve the desired tightness. When he was done with them, he polished the strings themselves, working every fleck of rust out of them until they gleamed as bright as his roseharp's. He ignored the warpage and the soundbox's cracks. There was nothing he could do for them except rub the wood until it regained some of its lost luster.

He thought of Meran as he worked and wished there was some way he could get word to her so that she'd not think he was hurt or dead, or worse, that he'd left her. What *would* she think? The shock of waking alone and finding him gone... Frowning, he rubbed the wood all the harder, trying not to think of it.

At last he was done and he could test the instrument. The tuning pins held, for what it was worth, but the tone was abysmal, without projection. The bass strings still buzzed, though they could perhaps be fixed. Holding the harp on his lap, he closed his eyes and concentrated on Telynros, hoping that the tinker's guard might have dropped or the lutemagic fallen away enough for him to reach the roseharp with his need, but it was no use. He called up the grey rose and the silver strings, but only mists answered.

Weary, he went to find a place to sleep for the day. Finding it, he lay long awake, thinking of his wife and their home, and what the tinker would do with him when the contest was done. Surely he would not simply set him free? He would fear Cerin's reprisal, as well he might. But worry though he did, if there was a solution to his problem, Cerin couldn't see it.

Dawn found Meran many leagues north of Ogwen Wood and the longstone where Bethowen the hillwife kept her seeing-flames. Her legs ached, from ankle to calf especially, and she longed to rest.

But there was still so far to go. And when she got there... What if he wasn't there? What if he was, but he'd gone of his own volition?

"I'm tired," she said, kneeling in the coarse grass. "Ah, but I'm tired."

Old Badger rubbed up against her and she ruffled his thick neck fur. She watched the sun rise, saw the hills unfolding for bleak miles north. Her dead oak called to her, stronger than before, for she'd never been this far from her father's wood. Rubbing her pendant, feeling the oak grain between her fingers, she tried to ignore the insistent summons to return, but it stayed with her, a constant need that sapped her determination, weakening her when she needed all her strength.

"I don't know if I can run that far, Old Badger. I don't know if it's in me."

But it had to be. As surely as though she felt Cerin's arm around her shoulders, she knew he needed her. Or was it her own need that drove her? She frowned, not liking this turn her thoughts kept taking. He was enspelled, she told herself yet again, and wished the voice inside her, whispering otherwise, would go away. She would continue. She'd run until her legs collapsed under her and then she'd run some more. Unless...

She smiled suddenly, wondering why she hadn't thought of it earlier. Drawing her flute from its sheath, she looked along its length, seeing Cerin's handiwork in its every curved inch. Then she slipped the instrument and, gazing skyward, began to play.

For a moment she thought she heard a harp answer, accompanying her as it had so many times before, then she knew that it was only her need that heard it. She shook off the feeling and concentrated on her playing. Her fingers moved in a slow dance across the wood and clear notes rang in the air. For a long time it was the only sound the hills heard. Then, far off in the distance, there was an answer—a deep-throated whistling call. A black speck grew larger in the sky and larger still, until a greatowl dropped ground-ward on silent wings.

Like calls to like, the old tales say. So an oakmaid's playing drew one of her skykin to her. The greatowl's wingspread spanned sixteen feet and his torso was as long as a man's. Landing, he ruffled his feathers and became a man, tall and round-eyed, with feathers streaming down to his shoulders in place of hair. Meran drew her flute back from her lips and laid it across her knees.

"Thairn," she said in greeting, her voice warm. They were old friends, these two.

"Your song was sad enough to make the wind weep, Meran. Why did you call me?"

Listening to her reply, he cocked his head like the great bird in whose shape he was more comfortable.

"I can bear one of you," Thairn said, looking from her to Old Badger when she was done.

Meran sheathed her flute and bent down to kiss Old Badger's brow.

"That will be enough," she said.

Thairn nodded and took his skyshape again. He lowered his neck to help her get a better purchase and she mounted awkwardly, afraid to pull the feathers too hard lest they loosen and come away in her hand. Once she was settled, Thairn rose effortlessly into the morning air and hovered.

"Goodbye, Old Badger!" Meran called down. "Wish me luck!"

Thairn's long wings plied the air and they were off, swifter than ever Meran's legs could have taken her. Behind, Old Badger whined, looking this way and that. Then he set off, doggedly following the bird and its rider. When they were only a speck in the distance and finally gone from sight, still he followed, his short legs churning, his body moving in a strange flowing motion that looked for all the world like a furry carpet come to life and floating a few inches off the ground as it followed the contours of the terrain.

The distance sped by under Thairn's tireless flight. Burrowing her face in his soft neck feathers, Meran stared ahead, northward, until just before the coming of twilight, she saw the fortress in the distance. By the time they reached its ruined walls, the night had fallen. Thairn coasted in and landed near the gates. Disembarking, Meran stretched, trying to work the stiffness out of her muscles.

"Thank you, Thairn," she said.

The greatowl took manshape again.

"I'll come with you," he said.

Meran shook her head. "Please. I have to go by myself." She didn't want to have to explain about the whisper that had kept up its constant nagging the whole of the journey north. All she knew was that she wanted to see Cerin on her own in case... in case... She bit at her lip and savagely pushed the thought away.

"You're certain?" Thairn asked.

"I'm certain."

She waited until he'd changed back to a greatowl and his wings had lifted him into the dark skies again before she turned to make for the gate. As she reached it, the whole fortress seemed to waver in her sight. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes. In place of the ruin were solid walls, rearing high, lit by torchlight. Where the gateway had been empty, two guards now stood.

"Your business?" one of them demanded.

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The guard looked at the flute sheath hanging from her shoulder. "Are you here for the musician's contest?"

"The...? Yes. Yes, I am!"

Musician's contest? Was it for this that her husband had left her? To take part in some mad contest? The whispering grew stronger in her mind and, feeling sick, she didn't have the strength to force it away.

"They're just finishing up," the guard said. "In the main hall. You'd better hurry."

Nodding her thanks, feeling more numb than real, Meran stepped through the gates and made her way across the inner courtyard. A musician's contest? Why had he come to it? Without his harp, even! As if he cared for such things in the first place. Contests were for people who needed titles, he'd told her often enough, not for anyone who cared about their music. Then she heard someone playing a harp, a strange harried sound as though the player were exhausted or drunk, and she recognized her husband's playing in the phrasing of the notes.

He *was* here! Part of this contest, and playing badly. Unsure if she was angry or sad, or perhaps some painful combination of the two emotions, she made for the door.

Disconcerting as the gathered dead were, what interested Cerin most was that there were more contestants than simply the tinker and himself. He wondered why. Long tables ran the length of the hall, except for the cleared space before the dais where the king and his retinue sat. And though he knew the people gathered here were only shades of the dead, he saw no mouldering corpses or gaunt bony shapes wrapped in their death palls. Instead they appeared as real as the tinker that walked at Cerin's side. They joined the other contestants, three men and a woman, at a table set aside for them to the left of the cleared space.

"The rules are simple," Jeth Tewdol told him. "Musicianship is judged by those three," he indicated the dais where the king's bar-den sat with fiddle, harp and flute respectively on their knees. Cerin didn't recognize any of them, though he knew the king. He looked away at the dead king's mocking smile. There had been no love between them when the king was alive.

"But the judging," the tinker was explaining, "is also measured on how well you appeal to the less

tutored—those gathered here to listen. Thunderous applause is what you're seeking, Songweaver. If you wish to keep your name." He glanced down at Cerin's instrument and grinned. "I wish you the best of luck."

One by one the contestants played and, living or dead though they might be (Cerin was no longer sure), they were all skilled musicians. He found himself enjoying their strange tunes and tried to remember this flourish or that decoration for future reference. *If* Jeth Tewdol was going to allow him a future. Then it was the tinker's turn.

He bowed, first to the king's dais, then to the crowd that filled the hall to overflowing. Giving Cerin a wink, the tinker began to play.

There was no doubting his skill. Why on top of that he needed to be named the best, Cerin couldn't understand. He played with a dark grace. Moody tunes grew out of his fey instrument that sent shivers up the spines of his listeners and their feet to tapping the weird rhythms. When his last note died away, a long silence filled the hall. Then it was shattered as the people roared, clapping their hands and stamping their feet. They banged their mugs on the tables, whistled shrilly and generally raised a hullabaloo. Beaming, the tinker returned to the contestants' table.

"Now it is your turn," he said.

Cerin nodded, rising as his name was called.

"Lastly, Cerin called the Songweaver, Harper from Ogwen Wood."

As Cerin took his place, settling the tinker's harp on his lap, a murmur went through the crowd. There were faces he knew amongst them—the faces of folk long dead—and they recognized him and his name, though there wasn't one that had a friendly smile for him. Looking down at his instrument, he sighed. It's not the harp, it's the player, he told himself. And it matters not whether you win or lose, just let it be done.

He was tempted to play badly, just to let the tinker win, but knew he couldn't. Whatever he might think of contests or his present situation, he had the pride of his art to consider as well. When he played, he always played his best, whether it be for a king in his court or a shepherd in his cot. Tonight could be no different else he'd lost his name in truth, though not in the way that the tinker meant he should lose it. Turning so that he could watch Jeth Tew-dol, he began to play.

He started with a familiar air, fingers curled like a hawk's talons as they plucked sweet notes from the shabby instrument on his lap. It was a simple piece but, in his hands, for all the drawbacks of the instrument, he breathed new life into it; gave it a deepness so that for all that his listeners had heard it played a thousand times before, in his hands it sounded like a newly-composed piece. He grinned at Jeth Tewdol as he began a second time, enjoying despite himself the look on the tinker's face. But his amusement didn't last long.

Seven bars into the tune, he saw Jeth Tewdol caress a string of his lute and the harp Cerin played rang discordantly. He tried to remedy the turn his music had taken, but the more he tried, the worse it sounded. The damage was done. Titters started up at the back of the hall and his neck reddened, but try though he did, he could no longer control the instrument. For every true note he fingered, the lutemagic awoke a dozen discords. At last he let his hands fall from the strings and he bent his head under the laughter of the gathered dead. And laughing loudest of all was Jeth Tewdol.

"Ha!" he cried. "I've won! See him now, he who was once called the Songweaver!"

Cerin's face burned. He knew he could play better, knew the flaws heard by these people were none of his doing, but knew as well that as far as they were concerned, he was worse than a novice player. They had wanted to see him fail and cared not how that failure was brought about. He could hold the truth of his own skill in his heart, but it did little to diminish the weight of the ridicule he bore. This was like his worst nightmares as a fledgling harper come to life. How often hadn't he woken bolt upright in his bed, sticky with sweaty fear, the dregs of a dream thudding in his heart? He'd be before a crowd, playing his best, and then it would all go wrong, and instead of applause, he received jeering and laughter. Like now.

Slowly he rose to his feet and, clutching his harp tight against his chest, made his way back to his seat. There was no use protesting, no use in doing anything except seeing this thing through to its end. And perhaps, in some measure, he deserved to be treated in this way, taken down a notch. He didn't believe in contests, no. But perhaps all his noble wordage as to why merely covered up the fact that he thought himself above them. Just as when he'd been playing and he'd mocked the tinker—something he'd never done to another musician no matter how good or bad his playing. Who was better? Was it because perhaps Jeth Tewdol *was* better? Why should it matter? It never had before. But just now, with the jeering and catcalls still loud in his ears and the tinker's grinning face so near his own, it seemed to matter more than anything else ever had before.

"We have little love for the living," the dead king said as the noise finally fell away. His voice boomed hollowly through the hall. "But, in truth, Jeth Tewdol, you have provided an entertainment this evening that we'll not soon forget. To see the Bright Gods' champion brought so low! Ha! Arise and accept from me now the winner's cup!"

"See?" the tinker said to Cerin. "It's done."

As he rose to collect his reward, Cerin caught at his arm.

"Am I free to go now?" he asked.

Jeth Tewdol shrugged. "Perhaps." He ran a finger along one of his lute's dark strings and Cerin shivered as the lutemagic bit at him. "There's still the matter of a name to settle between us. We can scarce have two Songweavers wandering the world, now can we?"

He laughed at the impotent rage in Cerin's eyes and turned away. Laying his instrument on the dais before the king, he went to where the king's harper held the winning cup. But before his hand touched it, the clear sound of flute-playing spoke across the hall.

As one, all heads turned to the door to see the woman with her green-brown hair and her cloak like leaves who lipped her flute. Her fingers fluttered across the holes of the instrument as though she were caressing a lover and there came forth such a sound! The low notes thrummed like a bear's honeyed breath, the high ones skirled and pierced the sky with sudden stars.

"Who?" the tinker cried, but none save Cerin and the king's harper heard him. The rest were too entranced by her playing to heed him.

"At last contestant it seems," the king's harper said.

"Meran!" the Songweaver cried.

Her playing was like the woods in summer, full and merry, deep with old tree secrets, yet held an underpinning sweet sorrow, for, like music, the seasons change, summer to autumn to winter and round again to spring. Her music told the tale of that cycle, now joyful, now sad. And, by the faces of those who listened, such a music had never been heard in that hall before.

Jeth Tewdol's features contorted with rage. He leapt for his lute to stop her music, but Cerin was there first. The harper's boot crushed the hellish instrument before ever the tinker could lay a hand on it. With the sound of a great wind, the glamour of Taen-caer fled, ghosts and all. The three of them stood in a ruined hall, the stars showing through the roofless heights above them. And still Meran played. Jeth Tewdol spun away from Cerin's grasp and made for her.

But as the tinker scabbled across the rubble, he forgot who his prisoner was, the power Cerin wielded that had been denied him. Still seething from the ridicule he'd undergone, concerned for his wife, no longer restrained, Cerin reached out to Telynros, his thoughts leaping the distance between the ruins of Taencaer and the cottage where his roseharp awoke with music as it stood by the hearth, though no hand touched its strings. A moment it played on its own, then the harp was in Cerin's hands and its music rushed forward to accompany the sound of Meran's flute.

Across the ruined hall, harper and flautist met each other's gaze. Meran brought her flute from her lips and held it at her side, her fingers whitening as she squeezed it. She tried to focus on her husband's face, but her vision swam.

She didn't know what had possessed her to play in the doorway as she had, unless it be that those people had mocked her love and she meant to show them that it was wrong to do so. She'd not played to be a part of the contest. Rather she'd only tried, through her music, to reach out and touch the audience, show them that ridicule was cruel, hoped to awaken some compassion in their dead hearts. Blinking now, she saw only the vision from Bethowen's see-ing-flames—the pattern of silver strings and the dead leaves that half covered the instrument, the mists aswirl, and then, at last, her husband's face.

The sly whisperer inside her was laid to rest at last as she looked into his eyes. But a new fear rose to take its place. He played Telynros savagely and the dark-clothed man that was between them jerked to the music, helpless as a marionette. Cerin's eyes were dark with a wild anger, as though he didn't know what he was doing, or worse, that he knew all too well.

"Germ!" she cried. "Cerin!"

His anger seemed to blind him, for there was no flicker of recognition in his eyes when she called his name, no lessening of that terrible harping. She opened her mouth to call again, then lifted her flute to her lips and sent her own music skirling through the maelstrom of the roseharp's notes, weaving and binding them. As their musics joined, she came to understand what drove him. It was not so much his ordeal that burned in him, as what he'd found in himself.

A new tone entered her playing and it pierced his anger with its reason.

No one can be perfect, love, it seemed to say. Yet remember that he drove you to it and learn the lesson of it. Don't become what he is. Where is the gentle man I love? Where is the Songweaver amid such anger?

Slowly his rage faded. Telynros's grim notes dissolved into echoes and Cerin slumped to his knees, hugging his roseharp to him. He stared at the tinker's still form, sick at what he'd done. But as he watched, Jeth Tewdol raised himself painfully and sat up against a block of weather-roughened stonework, lifted, it seemed, by the flute music that still rang sweetly through the hall, healing all hurts. Then it too died and Meran picked her way across. She paused by the tinker and looked down at him.

"Why?" she asked. "By my father's Oak, why?"

Jeth Tewdol lifted his gaze. "I am a tinker," he said bitterly.

"That is not reason enough."

"The Dark Gods gave me an instrument that made me a prince of players—I who was nothing before they gifted me, a two-copper pretender of a musician, a tinker welcomed more often with a cuff in the face and a curse. The Daketh gave me power. They delight in torment, so should I not offer it to them in payment? Is that reason enough? They..." He shook his head. "How could you understand?"

Meran regarded him silently for long moments, then handed him her flute.

"Then I gift you with this," she said. "Will you now take delight in bringing joy to people?"

"I..." The tinker looked at the flute, remembering its sweet tone when she'd played it. His fingers trembled as he took it in his hands, running his fingers along the smooth length of its wood. For long moments, now he was silent. When he spoke again, his voice had a different tone to it. Gone was the mockery and self-assurance.

"I... I know it's the player, not the instrument that makes a musician. Your husband... even on that box with strings I gave him to use... he was still the better player. I can't accept this. I..." His eyes glistened with unshed tears. "I don't deserve it."

"Still you don't understand," Meran said softly. "It's the music that matters, not who's better or worse."

"But... I... What will you use?"

Meran looked to Cerin and smiled. "Perhaps my husband will make me another. There's still some of the old tree left."

Jeth Tewdol could find no more words. He simply leaned against the stone, holding the flute as though it were the greatest treasure the world had to offer. Watching them, hearing his wife speak, Cerin felt the tightness in his chest ease and he could breathe again. He thought to himself that he should still be angry, but searching inside, all he could find was pity. Shaking his head, he stood and then Meran came to him, lifting her face to be kissed.

"Such a spell you wove!" he said with a smile. "Who's the Song-weaver now?"

She grinned. "You are, silly! Who else?"

"Perhaps," he said as he kissed her.

Meran looked at his harp and, remembering the pattern the strings had made in the seeing-flames, reached out to touch one. A tiny bell-like note rang forth.

"Maybe I'll take up the harp then," she said, "and maybe not. But right now there's an Old Badger stuck somewhere between here and home, and a night's sleep that we never saw completed."

"So there is." He looked over her shoulder to the tinker. Jeth Tewdol raised his gaze from the flute to meet Cerin's eyes.

"If I said I was sorry..." the tinker began, but Cerin shook his head.

"We both learned something tonight, Jeth. I as much as you. If you're ever 'round Ogwen Wood, visit us, will you? Only come when we're awake."

Cerin's smile awoke a tentative answer on the tinker's lips.

"If you'll have me," he said slowly, "I'd be honored to come."

"Good. Till then..."

Cerin set the roseharp to ringing with deep chords and an amber hue surrounded Meran and him.

"Thank you!" the tinker called.

From the amber glow he heard a chorus of farewells. When the harping died away and the amber hue was gone, Jeth Tewdol sat alone amidst the ruined stoneworks of Taencaer. Rising he went to the ramparts to watch the dawn pink the sky above the eastern hills. He thought for a moment of the Daketh instrument that lay broken below him, then shook his head and lifted Meran's flute to his lips. He was out of practice, so the sound that came forth was awkward and breathy, but the tinker smiled.