

## The Last Song Caster

In the world of Aldere, there are grand castles and mighty strongholds. There are empires built overlooking the Bashend Sea and grand halls carved into the very rock of the Valder Mountains. There are smoldering deserts, humid jungles, and verdant forests. There is also—if Uncle Penter was to be believed—the last Song Caster.

All his life, Derig had heard about song casters. He would stay up late at night, singing little songs to himself in the hope that he too could bring forests to life with a harmony or find the right notes to still the ocean set to raging in the storm. Yet the forests his window watched over were still apart from the steady breeze and even his prettiest words could not calm the roiling seas. And, on his seventeenth birthday, Derig decided that the world needed a Song Caster more than ever.

"It's an old myth," Derig's father said. "Uncle Penter told you those stories because he's a failed bard desperate for an audience."

"No!" Derig said, firm. "He told me he saw one! He saw the Song Caster pull a bridge out of the Greymore River!"

"And then it sank back into the waters. Convenient, don't you think? The only piece of evidence from his story isn't there."

"That doesn't mean it didn't happen."

Derig sulked through three weeks as a carpenter's apprentice, learning the tools and skills from an old toymaker who was so bent with age that it felt like he was always looming over Derig's work. The work he did was tedious, measuring out wooden rods and gluing them into holes while the toymaker left the art of whittling animals to himself. People praised the toymaker, but Derig was ignored when customers would come to the shop. Each night, he would stop at his Uncle Penter's cart for the one relief he felt during the day.

"Good, Derig," Uncle Penter smiled, watching the boy's fingers pluck the strings of the lute. "Finer musicianship than any to play in the concert hall of King Terin! You should hear the sounds of the Valder Concert Hall, Derig. The stone is so smooth that the music just rolls across the ceiling to the furthest seats. The quietest poet can be heard all the way in the back!"

"If I can ever get out of that toy shop, I would love to go there."

"Come now," Uncle Penter said, reaching for his mug in the too-cramped cart. "As someone who has seen their fair share of the road, there's nothing wrong with a steady place to make a living!"

"But what's the point of life if you can't live it!"

"You're young! Don't get discouraged, lad. Every great hero starts from humble beginnings! Do you know the story of Welig, the Dragon Slayer? He wouldn't have had the heart to play the Slaying Song if it hadn't been for his time as a knight's squire. With his great song, he went from cleaning his lord's boots to standing taller than any man!"

"But how can I find heart when I can't even make more than wooden dowels?"

"Heart doesn't all come from the same place! Keep at your music, son. An artist's suffering is their first great trial of the nine to heroism."

Derig stayed another week at the toymaker's shop before he packed a bag and left in the middle of the night with only his lute. The road was hard, as Uncle Penter often assured him, but Derig enjoyed walking under the sun. The birds chirped overhead, there were calming streams for him to play by for spare coins from travelers, and he would sometimes see deer as a good luck sign for places to bed down. He played for his board in small inns in towns without names or offered a few hours of washing dishes in exchange for sleeping in the stables. It was another week before he made his way to the Greymore River. The bridge wasn't where Uncle Penter had said it would be, but there was a shallow enough place where Derig could cross and barely get his knees wet. Crossing the river was the furthest Derig had ever gone and he could feel his story beginning as he dried his boots and socks by the fire that night.

Here, the roads were a bit less forgiving. Inns and taverns would only accept cash, so Derig had to find other ways to make his lodgings. Often, he slept in abandoned farms or soaking wet alleys, but Derig told himself this was suffering that made songs. He heard music and songs that even Uncle Penter didn't know, but his trained ear helped him pick up these songs faster than most.

He'd been chased by angry people when he stole food, hungry animals when he drifted off the road, and the weather forced him to seek refuge anywhere that had enough for him to huddle under for warmth. He'd lost his map a while ago, but he told himself his wanderings

would make for good stories. His feet blistered, he'd torn his coat, and his hands were scarred from when his betraying strings had cut into his skin as they snapped under his fingers. Each broken string was a few more coins from Derig's purse and meant he had to get creative when he was wanting.

He could see the storm coming as he entered a clearing. The skies shifted and churned with dark clouds making spirals that foretold of earth-shaking thunder and lightning that would illuminate the land in flashes of white-hot brightness. Shelter jumped up Derig's lists of needs and he started looking for somewhere to stay the night.

The old cottage was on the side of the road, warm orange light indicating a fire burning inside as the first droplets of rain made the outdoors unwelcome. He rushed into the tree cover and approached the cottage, following the path so the owner wouldn't instantly presume he meant ill will. He tried to straighten his appearance a little, dusting off his jacket and running his fingers through his fuzzy beard. He knocked on the door and an older woman with long, grey hair opened the door.

"Good evening," Derig said, as charming as he could manage. "I hope it's no trouble to you, but there is a storm coming. Can a humble musician grace your halls in exchange for a few hours of safety from the rain? I care not for myself, but my poor lute will not sound as pretty if it gets waterlogged."

"Well, best to avoid that tragedy," the old woman said. "Though I warn you, the dog won't take kindly to poor manners."

"A musician is always a servant first and a guest second..." T

he woman laughed and shook her head. "I've met too many musicians to believe that's always true. Come in. My name is Scana."

"Derig."

The inside of the cottage was warm and bright. It wasn't much more than a single room with a bed and a table with two chairs. A big, comfortable-looking chair sat by the fireplace and the walls were lined with small piles of books rather than on shelves. A stew simmered over the fire and tempted Derig's stomach, but a great hound lay in front of the hearth protecting the dinner with an imposing growl. Derig took off his boots at the door and removed his tattered

coat, hoping his clothes were somewhat more presentable to the kind woman. As he picked up his lute again, he noticed a lyre in the chair by the fireplace.

"Do you play?" Derig asked. "Or was that from a former guest?"

"It is mine," Scana said, stepping around the dog to get to her stew, "though I haven't played in quite some time. I lost my taste for music some time ago, I'm afraid."

"Lost your taste for—how does one lose their taste for music?"

"Too many years in silence, perhaps. Or it takes too much effort to play anymore. Enjoy your hands while they're young...I should have."

"Perhaps I could regale you with a tale of—"

"No," Scana said, firm, but kind. "I prefer the quiet these days."

"Very well," Derig said, sitting at the table, but keeping his lute close at hand.

"What brings you so far off the road? I don't see many people these days."

"I'm looking for...it may sound silly, but I'm looking for the last Song Caster."

"Ah," the woman said, stirring her stew and grinning. "Another searcher?"

"You've seen them before?"

"As I said, I've met many musicians. Doesn't feel so long ago that King Terin sent his men off in search of the last Song Caster. And, a few who fancy themselves students worthy of a master. Then again, old men come seeking to challenge the Song Caster for the title and carry on their greatness."

"Has anyone ever come back?"

"No," Scana said, doling out three portions of stew. "Not that I know of."

She set one bowl in front of the dog and the beast ate ravenously, smacking at the bowl and licking any stray gravy. Scana came back with a bowl for Derig and one for herself, though Derig noticed she didn't offer any prayers or offerings before eating. He dug in and, though the stew had very little meat, it tasted better than anything he'd had since he left home.

"The Song Caster," Derig began, "did you ever meet them?"

Scana laughed a little and poked at a piece of potato with her spoon to cut it open. "A one-track mind is easily deceived."

"The Song of Balta," Derig said.

"Very good," Scana nodded. "You should trust me, son. There's nothing for you out here...only hurt."

"Well, an artist's suffering is their first great trial of the nine to heroism!"

Scana shook her head and set her spoon down. "And do you know what happens after heroism? Disappointment. Failure. Heartbreak. We love the stories of great Song Casters because of how they end, but we never talk about the After Ending. So rarely are stories completed when the hero wins the heart of a prince or princess and stays in the kingdom. There's fighting...and more strife. Pain and hurt like a thousand swords, but with words that cut deeper. Do you know why no one's seen the last Song Caster in a long time?"

"I assumed...well, I guessed that they hadn't found a worthy—"

"If Song Casters were valued as much as we're supposed to be," Scana started, leaning closer, "we wouldn't be discarded like yesterday's stew. Hell, Wingo has been a closer ally to me than any royal. I give him food and he gives me protection and company. I give the royal families the best years of my life and they cast me out when I can no longer play for them."

"The royal—wait, you're the last Song Caster?" "

And I intend to stay the last," Scana said. "Go home, Derig. There's nothing for you on this path but suffering."

"But suffering makes for great—"

"Pain," Scana said. "Anyone who says that you're making art is lying. Song Caster Balta died penniless and alone. Welig ended up a drunk who sold his flute to pay for beer in the end. All these 'great Song Casters' are left after their story is over. Once we are no longer of use to them, they cast us out. You've only heard the stories...I see where they truly ended."

"Song Caster, there must—"

"I'm not a Song Caster," Scana said and Wingo perked up at the sound of her angry voice. "And I won't teach you anything, so get out if that's all you want."

Derig glanced outside and a roll of thunder crashed nearby. Derig went back to his stew as Scana went to tend the fire for a moment. They finished their stews in silence, only punctuated by the crackling of the fireplace, the rain on the trees outside, and Wingo licking his bowl clean

after eating. With her food finished, Scana went over to the seat and moved the lyre before sitting in her chair. "If you don't play," Derig said, staying in his chair, "why keep it?"

"Memories, I suppose?" Scana said. "That's what music needs. Not a starving artist, but an artist who can remember things. Or maybe I'm a sentimental old bat who can't let things go. I've never been sure myself. Thought about using it as kindling or giving it to Wingo to chew, but...I can't give it up."

"Or maybe you still believe in music."

Scana smirked and exhaled out a soft laugh. "Maybe so. But I don't care for the music of instruments."

"Then what music do you care for?"

"Listen..." Scana raised a hand to her ear and closed her eyes. Derig did the same, closing his eyes and listening. It wasn't quite even, but there was a rhythm to the rain. The tempo shifted, but the beat was still there as the droplets pattered against the leaves. Thunder rolled in the distance and Derig could almost hear the notes of bass drums in the distance. Light cracked through the sky like a whip and left a ringing in Derig's ears that could have been bells if he imagined hard enough. He opened his eyes and Scana had a slight smile on her face as her hand swayed in time with some inaudible tempo.

"We speak of the great heroes," Scana said. "Songs that shape oceans and shake armies, but that power has always been around. The whisper of a tide has words as the waves crash against the shore, the staccato crackling of wood in the fire sings to the trained ear...even rustling of the wind sounds like a lyre if you listen for it."

"And you said you had no taste for music," Derig smirked. "Sounds like you still love it."

Scana opened her eyes and sighed. Her hand lingered by the strings, but the fingertips didn't grace the length of the wires as they danced in an old, familiar pattern.

"I love music," Scana said. "But it's the rest of the world that doesn't. Few people—very few—truly love music. They love what music is, and what it becomes after it is heard. Song Casters were revered for their power, but after a song is sung it loses power. And royals commission great songs and epics without realizing that it won't make them more powerful. And the narrative of a suffering artist is sold so that the few who do love music and song have to be

grateful for what they are given. Because unless you are willing to give up everything for your art, they feel you shouldn't do it. A farmer tends his crops and sells the product, so he is paid fairly. A musician suffers the same but is forgotten if they don't surrender their heart and soul for music. I am bitter, true, but part of you must know I'm not completely wrong."

"So, why do it? If music is what we love, shouldn't that be what we do?"

"It isn't something you do," Scana said, leaning forward. "Music is who you are, in your soul. Do you need to grace the ears of a thousand rich patrons or just your own for it to fill your heart with joy?"

"But the music of Song Casters—"

"Is just a song with our heart and soul in it. There's no secret. There's no magic there that isn't already in a thunderstorm or a summer breeze. A Song Caster could be anyone. But I caution against trying to make songs for power. I would rather have been a happy musician than a powerful one. That is something that those who don't truly appreciate music—any art—will never understand."

Derig leaned forward and thought. He thought through the rest of the night, listening to the storm outside, the last Song Caster's steady breathing as she slept, and the tempo of his heartbeat. There was a symphony in nature and maybe that was greater than any song of dragon-slaying or mountain shaking. And when he and Scana parted ways the next morning, Derig hummed with the song of the world after a storm.