

THE LIVING LUTE





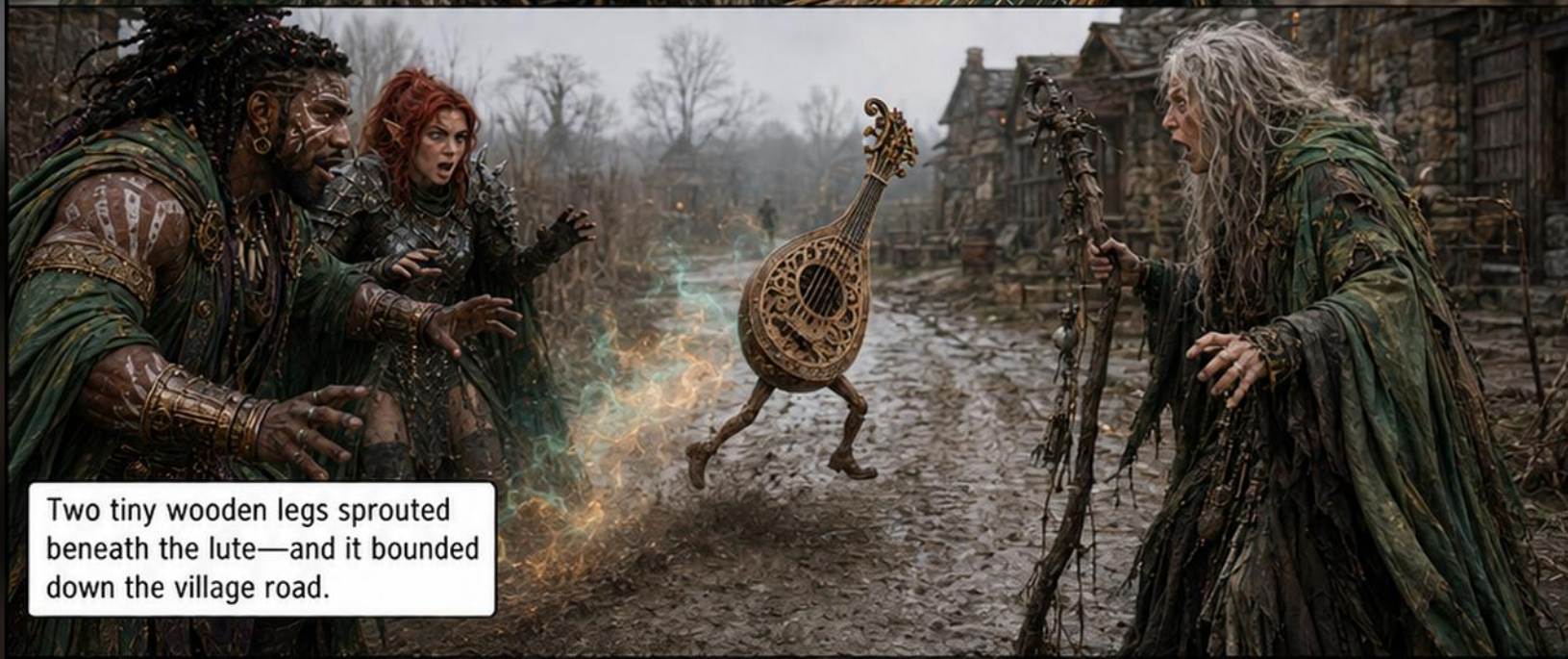
Clifford and Angora were almost back at the tavern when an old witch stepped into their path.



Still eager to improve his unreliable music, Clifford asked the experienced spellcaster to tune his magical lute.



The witch adjusted one peg and poured ancient power into the instrument.



Two tiny wooden legs sprouted beneath the lute—and it bounded down the village road.

Clifford and Angora chased the runaway instrument through the crowded street.



Clifford nearly caught it, but the nimble lute twisted beyond his enormous hands.



Angora seized it at last. The struggling wood cracked loudly in her grip.



The lute whimpered. The spell had not merely animated an object—it had created a frightened living companion.



Clifford cradled the wounded lute and played the Tune of the Astral Blade as gently as he could.



Angora's violet sword answered the melody, sending psychic energy through the golden strings and into the broken wood.



The fracture vanished. Fully healed, the living lute trusted Clifford enough to leap joyfully into his arms.



Over hot stew, the witch admitted that she came from the distant swamps—but guarded every other secret.



Angora ordered more food and mead before realizing that she could not afford the bill.



Clifford and his animated lute performed together, astonishing the patrons and filling the floor with coins.



The duet still fell short. Clifford and Angora remained in debt.



Angora challenged the tavern's strongest fighter: victory would earn one hundred flagons, but defeat would cost the same.



The massive champion accepted before Clifford could question the bargain.



One brutal strike knocked Angora to the floor and shattered her wooden shield in half.



Their debt had become enormous, and their strongest fighter had just been defeated.



Clifford did not challenge the champion.
He offered to become the fighter's agent instead.



He promised greater opponents, arena fame,
and a percentage of every victory they could arrange.



The delighted champion paid an advance
large enough to erase every tavern debt.



Then the witch tried to repair Angora's shield—
and broke it into even smaller pieces.





Clifford again played the astral tune, rebuilding Angora's shield with a protective psychic sheen.



At the potion shop, their growing reputation earned them a mysterious vial from the keeper's secret collection.



The keeper would only say that they would understand its purpose when they needed it.



The witch attempted to identify the potion. The vial exploded.