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PROLOGUE

"I CAN FEEL your fear, girl."

"What?" Sekalla's head snapped up; her hand clenched the steering oar, brown fingers turning white from the pressure.

"I said," the Gatekeeper raised her voice, "I can feel your fear. It's been growing ever since we left the dock."

Hierarch Efbenna, sitting in the front of the small boat, turned his head, long white locks and beard slipping over scarlet robes. "What do you mean, Tesha?"

"Your secretary is afraid of me, your holiness."

Efbenna frowned. "How do you know this?"

"I can sense a little of the Song Without Words. Just enough."

"Really? You know, as your mentor, Bishop Inarrion, reminded me this morning, this is forbidden."

"It's true, your holiness. But then, what are you doing out on the river? You've said you contemplate the One here by listening to the Song rising from the water; if it's forbidden for me to hear the Song, why do you, the leader of our church, do it? You've admitted this many times, including this morning, when the bishop spoke with you."

"I do listen to it," replied the hierarch quietly. "As we all should, as we will after the council of bishops convenes this week." He looked at the Gatekeeper; only Tesha's eyes were visible, and a band of bronze skin, everything else save her hands concealed in the scarlet wrappings of her order. He looked over the woman's broad shoulders to where his secretary sat, frozen, in the back of the boat. "Sekalla, my dear, why are you afraid? Tesha is a Gatekeeper, a warrior

priestess of the Efteni church, my faithful servant. She won't hurt you."

The Gatekeeper laughed. "She knows better than you, your holiness, whose faithful servant I am. When Bishop Inarrion suggested this morning that you let me, rather than your pet, Alaria, be your guard today, Sekalla thought perhaps there might be a reason besides, 'letting Tesha have a turn bathing in the hierarch's glory.'"

Sekalla lifted her head. "Whatever she meant, Hierarch Efbenna's presence is something you need." Her voice was low, trembling. "The hierarch believes in kindness, that the church should do something besides frighten and hurt people, something you and the bishop don't understand."

Tesha laughed softly. "I'm just fine as I am, little secretary. I'll be even better shortly." She looked at Efbenna. "Efthelzra Inarrion follows church doctrine, and you don't. She's going to become hierarch, and remedy that problem."

"How's she going to become hierarch, while I'm alive?"

"Well, that would be obvious, your holiness, to anyone who didn't foolishly trust all those around them." She stood, hands dropping to the hilts of sword and dagger. The small craft swayed with the shift in weight. "Still calm and full of peace, your holiness? Will you keep that calm when I break your secretary's neck, and I'm holding your head under the water?"

Sekalla launched her slight form at the Gatekeeper's back. Sekalla was no fighter, had never held a blade, and Tesha dwarfed her. But, terrified or no, she wouldn't let Efthelzra's creature murder the hierarch she adored.

She wrapped her arms around Tesha's waist, pinning the Gatekeeper's hands to her sides. Tesha roared in anger, threw herself left, then right. She tried to kick backwards, lashed out with her head, but Sekalla clung on, her face pressed into the woman's back. Tesha's boot heel struck her shin; Sekalla cried out but didn't let go.

Hierarch Efbenna stood, turned. "Tesha! Cease!"

“To the Flame with you, old man!” She spun around, pulling Sekalla off her feet, throwing the secretary against the gunwales. The boat slewed over sideways. All of them fell, Efbenna tumbling backwards into the bow, Sekalla and Tesha amidships, the secretary still clinging tightly, the Gatekeeper growling in fury.

Tesha’s temple crashed into the brass oarlock, and the cursing stopped. Sekalla could feel the woman’s hard muscles go slack.

The impact drove the gunwale below the water, and the brown river rushed in. Sekalla continued to cling to Tesha as the boat flipped completely, sending both women under; the water soaked into their heavy robes, and that burden, combined with the weight of the Gatekeeper’s sword and dagger, dragged them down into the muddy, icy darkness of the River Ef.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IKTARA RIVER sang. At least, Piper always thought of it as singing. Sometimes a sweet murmur. Sometimes a strident song. But the sound of water flowed around and through him whenever he was near, whether it moved and coursed, dripped, whether it rained and ran, or blew through the air as soft mist, fog or clouds. Waves lapping on a beach made melodic nibbling noises, chewing on the shoreline. In places such as this, where the broad width of the river rang on stony banks, it sang back and forth in swirls of current, dancing up to the sky in frothing waves as it broke around rocks and snags and the pilings men had created for mooring barges and logs.

No matter how often he denied it, it was music he heard, though it had no real melody or words. But it wasn't random sloshing, tinkling, dripping. The long, sonorous tones of deep water were currents of sound, each thread weaving with the others, swelling, falling. The waves slapping the shore and sparkling out in the channel were counterpoint, grace notes, high harmony lines.

That he could hear it was aggravating. Not that it sounded terrible, quite the opposite. It was that he could hear it at all. It didn't move through the air like normal music; an inner ear received the sounds. Bound with emotions and feelings, it touched, lifted, angered, and disturbed him, as music should.

Just not this way, not this constant, unwanted barrage.

He'd met no one else who'd admit to hearing it, though he suspected a few. Piper was pretty sure his old master at the Academy of Music, Asmodeus, heard similar things. But the master wouldn't admit it, wouldn't discuss it when Piper brought it up.

Because of the One and the priests thereof, who allowed no deviation from the 'approved norms'. Not simply for hearing the voices, but because the church controlled music, allowing only the simplest of chords. If Piper played what he felt and heard, it wouldn't have gone well; the river's music hinted at complexity, toyed with dissonance.

Such a chord floated through his thoughts. Like a fishhook pulling, he felt where that could go, the melody embedded below; he reached for his gittern.

Which wasn't there; he'd left it in his room in the inn, knowing what would happen. He balled his long fingers into fists, suppressing the urge to play, clamped his lips shut to keep the notes from spilling out.

He leaned back against a sun-warmed boulder, his green wool cloak bunched behind, long legs and booted feet hanging over a stone ledge. He ran his hands through his black hair, retying the leather strap that held it in a tail. His arms fell loose to his sides, as he relaxed tense shoulders, breathing slowly; he was playing at the nearby inn tonight, had to banish this agitation, not take it to the stage.

The Iktara flowed wide here, moving smoothly, glinting and rippling with the late afternoon light, deep brown with spring runoff from the Southern Barrier Mountains. It coursed over a rocky bed, past the thick forest on the far bank, evergreen and leafed trees with heavy, gnarled trunks growing down the mountainside to the water's edge.

"What do you hear from the river?"

He spun, hands going to the ground beside him. A cloaked and cowled figure stood close by, above and behind. Tall, a woman from the voice, though it was difficult to tell for certain, the face partly shadowed under the hood.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I used to come here too," she replied. "I listened."

“To what?”

“The voices. All the voices.” She sighed. “The music.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe. Smart. You don’t want the priests to catch you, lad.”

Piper sat frozen. He should walk away, no, run. He tensed, pushed his palms into the rock to rise and leave, his heart racing.

She saw, held up a hand. “Sorry, I’ll go.” She turned to walk away.

He clamped down on the fear. “Wait!”

She paused, looked back, frowning.

He needed to know. He pushed past his anxiety, and reached out with his inner ear towards her, listening, as he did with the river, for the moving currents of her emotions.

He hit a wall, a bare trickle of feeling coming out of it. The emotion he could normally sense, especially in a place like this where water and wind moved, was hardly more than what he felt from the rocks beneath her feet.

“You were a witch!”

“So they said.” She shrugged.

“Why did they think so?”

“I heard the voices. I talked about it, what I heard and felt. That’s what being a witch means to them.”

“To the church?”

“The church. People. Doesn’t matter.” She bowed her head. “All gone now,” she whispered, “the bishop took it away, with most everything else. Take care, lad. I shouldn’t have spoken. But I wanted to see if there was someone who understood, someone the church hadn’t crushed.” Tears trickled on her cheeks, glittering in the afternoon sun. “I’d best go. You don’t want them to see you talking to me.” She walked away up the bank.

He came to his feet, took a step after her, hand raised. Then stopped himself, clamped his mouth shut against the questions that wanted to burst forth. Questions that bubbled up from a bed of old suspicions and fears.

Caution warred with the need to know. She was right, he shouldn’t talk with her, not when everyone here knew who and what she was; they’d cross to the other side of the street when she walked by,

pretend she wasn't there. If anyone saw him with her in this small village, he'd become an object of suspicion himself.

She wasn't the first victim of the church's punishments he'd run into, left broken around the countryside and cities; he'd feel for their emotions and see emptiness. But while he'd suspected, he'd never been certain the priests equated the silent music with witchcraft; he'd never met one of those so crushed who could still talk, who showed any feeling at all. They were witless, emotional blanks, stark reminders of what it meant to displease the church. But he'd never heard what they'd done to cause that anger.

She disappeared over the top of the bank. He sat back down, slumped against the boulders, eyes closed, head in hands. He'd always known he was 'outside the norms'. But now he knew for sure this thing inside him, that he'd wished gone for so long, was a deadly sin if anyone found out.

The old priest at home, sitting on her stool by the fire, leaning on her stick, would say, "Meditate. Focus, chant the precepts. 'Simplicity, Order, Obedience'. Do it quickly, use the proper melody, keep your mind moving." She'd wave her staff dismissively. "It's just imagination, these things you say you hear. Meditate to force them out." She'd shake her head. "Simplicity, my son. You make life too complex. And…" She'd lean in closer, eyes narrowing, "…what's acceptable in a child can't occur in the man. Do you understand, Piper?"

He abruptly stood, a tall man facing the setting sun. His head was down, his eyes closed. "I understood well," he growled. "Don't mention it, don't let anyone know."

He'd tried hard with the precepts. He'd chant with the other children, see their contented looks. But for him it only created an unpleasant, odd mental squirming, the voices getting gleefully louder, fighting the precept's soothing blanket.

He opened his eyes and scanned the water, looking, as he had so many times, for some clue. But nothing presented itself. Anger surged through him; he picked up a stone, hurled it into the river. A spray of water leaped up where it hit, giving a sound almost like a laugh, a gentle spray of rising and falling notes.

The clouds whispered along with the wind above him, the moving air seeming to add its own lilt to the song, the entire world filled with sound and emotion he wished would go away. Yet…he couldn't leave it, couldn't ignore it, and so found himself once again on the banks of the river, absorbing and cursing the entire display.

He sat, closed his eyes, and listened.

The edge of the sun went behind the mountains, the shadows of the tall peaks sliding across the water towards his feet. A flow of cooler air came out of the dark, from the deep forest; mist rose off the surface of the water, slowly sifting up the banks. The music changed, quieted, burbled along at a lower volume. Piper lifted his head. He breathed in the scents of the evening, stretched his arms. He was calmer, though the encounter with the woman had unsettled him badly. But it was time to play some music.

He rose, climbed the riverbank. He stepped onto the grassy verge of the road that ran between Sisto and Misha, at this point a day's journey from the latter. The road stretched off in either direction, paved with broad flat stones. In the distance he could see a few riders, some carts, and the occasional traveler on foot.

On the other side of the wide way sat the inn, the Twisted Pine. Two stories tall, built of sturdy beams and stone with a shake roof and small glazed windows, it had stood here for centuries. Beyond the inn, with its outbuildings and the few tall trees that shaded it, lay a small village, a collection of shops and artisans that serviced the local farms.

Past the village the great central plain stretched off, the wealth of the kingdom; thick, rich soil tilled into fields, freshly planted. Slightly rolling, a few tree-covered hillocks visible in the distance, along with some smallholdings, clusters of buildings, pens and fences, smoke drifting from chimneys. The exact opposite of the wildness that lay behind, across the river.

The inn was a favorite place to escape to from the city, to dine well, to drink the inn's excellent beer and the fine wines of the central

plain. Perhaps also to listen to some music while not under the watchful eye of parents, rulers, priests, or whomever else one would like to avoid for a day or two. It was also a stopping place for travelers in need of a room and food after a long day on the road.

Piper wasn't here for a rest from overseers. He was definitely resting from travel, earning a night's stay by providing the music this evening. He was going from a winter of playing in the smaller villages and holdings on the east side of the central plain, headed to Misha, possibly to the capital, Kershak, to see if he could gain some better paying work in a larger city for the next year. He was tired of traveling rough, of roaming from place to place, playing for a bed and food to eat or a bit of silver, performing the same old lays and folk tunes.

He'd started to write his own songs once more after a time away from the craft, but they required a more sophisticated audience than he'd been playing for these past few years. He laughed ruefully at the thought. Tonight might not be a night for them either; playing at an inn in the country, he never knew what his reception would be. Sometimes the audience was there for the music. But as often as not, they only wanted to eat and then either drink themselves under the table or go straight to bed.

Few had been disrespectful or rude towards his new songs; they'd clap politely, but rarely ask for a repeat. At one small manor the master of the house, Lady Ellen, had put her plump hands together and asked, "Please Minstrel Piper, I appreciate this might be a fashionable type of song in more modern parts of Auld, but here in the plains we keep to the traditions." She'd glanced over to where the local priest and his wife sat in the hall's corner, gnawing the last shreds of beef off the bones from their dinner, full mugs of beer in front of them. The priest was watching Piper over his bone, eyes partly closed, a faint hint of disapproval in his demeanor. Lady Ellen had looked back at Piper, "You know what I mean." He'd nodded; no deviations from the church norms. Not that his new songs did deviate, but no one out here could tell. Complexities in harmonic and rhythmic structure were beyond them. But anything new was suspect.

He pulled his green cloak close against the chill of the night and strode across the road to the inn's broad wood and iron door. He

stood straight, made sure the cloak covered his slightly shabby shirt and trousers and the tops of his worn boots. Entrances were important, and he'd get more silver if he didn't look like a beggar. He wasn't reduced to that level of dishevelment yet, but the newer cloak concealed the fact that his clothes had a year of travel and wear on them. He retied the strap in his hair again, ran fingers through his somewhat ragged beard to at least make sure it hung straight, not like some wild man's bush sticking in all directions.

He walked beneath the inn's tall sign, the image of a bent pine tree burned and painted into it. As he pushed through the door, the babbling voices of the river subsided, almost buried by the noise of the main room of the inn.

It was busy tonight, and everything was already in full swing. Girls, boys, young men and women in knee-length breeches, all probably children or nieces and nephews of the innkeeper, bustled about with flagons of beer, carafes of wine and platters of roasted beef, chicken and pork, fruit and vegetables and loaves of fresh bread. Thick smells washed over him, the delicious scent of meat and bread, the sour smell of old sweat on too many people, the strong touch of damp wool and leather. There was talking, laughter, shouting, the thump of platters and mugs on wood, the squeaking of chairs drawn back and forth. Fires burned and crackled on brick hearths, lit to fight off the night's chill, though there didn't seem any chance of the room getting cold; the mass of people would take care of that.

Lamps hung burning along the walls and were slung overhead from hooks in the beams. Piper looked around to see what kind of crowd he had tonight, and the potential for extra cash.

A lord and his lady sat at a table near a fireplace. He didn't recognize the lord, a big man both in height and girth. Long black hair with grey streaks, rich attire made of good wool. It was too early in spring to pull out the silks yet, but from the looks of him, the chain he wore around his neck and the rings on his thick fingers, this was a man of station and means. The lady was much smaller, cloaked in a fine robe of scarlet wool trimmed with silver fur covering her hair and partially hiding her face. Around them sat a few soldiers and servants, there to protect and serve them on their journey.

While he watched, the lady leaned over to the lord and said something. The lord paused to listen, holding his flagon of beer halfway to his mouth. He roared in laughter at her words, and laid an affectionate hand on her arm.

Near to them sat a priest of the One, not a lowly country priest, but one of some standing by the fineness and cleanliness of his purple robe. He sipped wine from an earthenware goblet and looked back at the minstrel from sharp, dark eyes under long blond hair pulled back behind his ears; some Kiffran blood there, not unusual in Auld, though less usual in the priesthood. Piper bowed his head slightly to the man, who nodded back, unsmiling; the priest knew who he was looking at, and minstrels were always suspect to the clergy.

Another gentleman, well-dressed in clothing more flamboyant in cut and colors, accented by a carefully trimmed, fiery red beard, mustache and ponytail, came and sat with the noble and his wife. Piper recognized the man: Hubertus Halfmun, actor, playwright and impresario. In Piper's old life in the capital he'd worked with Hubertus, providing music for theatrical productions. Perhaps it was time to get reacquainted and see if any work was available.

It was a good room, a full room, a lively room. One a minstrel wanted; there was potential in the audience, potential for additional silver.

Also, potential for trouble. He could feel the murmuring of the river still, the music, the power, whatever it was, swirling under the hubbub. It was always there for him, sometimes stronger, sometimes more distant. Tonight it was pulsing and singing away.

It was a dangerous place for him to play, with the sound of water tickling his mind. That, and the size of the crowd, the sheer emotional pressure of so many people, currents of discourse and movement piled on and around each other. It was an excellent opportunity having that lord and Hubertus here to listen, possibly augment his pay, possibly have other work for him. But he knew, could feel that when he played it might go somewhere it shouldn't, and the priest was sitting there; he definitely looked like someone who could recognize what was "deviant from the norms."

Piper knew if he was smart, he'd leave. He'd also be hungry, sleep outside, and miss excellent opportunities to set himself up for future success. And he'd never get a job at this inn again.

"Time to play." He stepped forward, wound his way through the tables.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SMALL RAISED stage stood in a corner, and already held a chair, his gittern leaning against it. A server had plunked an empty flagon on the front of the platform, as was tradition; you could “buy the minstrel an ale” by dropping your coppers, silver, or gold, (not a lot of that over the years), inside. He settled himself and took the gittern in his lap.

Some minstrels tuned before they reached the stage; Piper always liked to do it there. If the hubbub of the room was going to subside at all, the sound of tuning would let the crowd know music was about to start and they could quiet down. It also gave him a chance to look around and judge who was listening, who might be a target for a song to incite the extraction of a little cash: a love song to a glowing newlywed couple, a song of the One for the clergy, a martial tune of battles past for a soldier.

The room quieted a bit; he noticed more than a few heads turning his way. He looked over at the table with the noble, his wife, and Hubertus. Hubertus was smiling and pointing at him. He nodded and smiled back: excellent, a good start.

The priest leaned into the conversation, listening. He sat back straighter in his chair, looking at Piper closely. Piper pretended not to notice, but his gut did a flip. Why the sudden interest? There’d been an unfortunate incident or two when he played in the capital, one reason he’d left so suddenly, but he’d received no official censure.

But questions were asked; who knew what was said, written down, passed around?

He almost missed the reaction of the lady to the same conversation. She looked up and paused; he could just see a delicate chin and lips peeking out from the shadow of her hood. Something about her teased his memory.

The door opened. A sudden swirl of moist, foggy air slipped through, curled around the stage, a small chorus all by itself, demanding attention. He breathed, pushing the touch back, and laid his hands to the strings on his gittern.

The opening chord rang across the room. Heads turned, the noise quieted some more. He played the introduction to “The Siege of Mek”, the traditional paean to the victory that turned the tide against the invasion of the Efteni centuries ago. The first of the current line of Auld’s kings had led the battle and followed up the victory with a triumphant march to Kershak, deposing the old ruler of the western half of Auld, (not without an argument that didn’t end well,) and the new King Auldrak Segundus had taken charge, founding the Segundus family dynasty, uniting the two halves of Auld into a single country.

Piper’s baritone voice swept out in the first verse. He always played the song with a martial air to it. Sure enough, he saw heads start to nod and hands beat time on the tabletops. He smiled a little; he had their attention. He knew how to engage an audience. His playing and voice had won him first in class at the Academy of Music, and he’d been showered with opportunity and commissions before it had all come apart.

The song concluded, and he got solid applause. An old soldier, scarred in service, came up to the stage, leaning on a stick to support himself, and dropped a copper in the flagon. Not much of anything, but it was what he had, and Piper was never one to ignore or mock such an offering. “Thank you, sir, for that, and everything else you’ve done.” The man nodded, eyes bright with tears over old memories the song had stirred. He received applause of his own as he made his way back to his beer.

Piper launched into the next song, an Efteni dance he'd learned this past winter. It wasn't traditional to Auld, but followed all the norms. The priest, who'd been watching and listening intently, smiled, leaned back and sipped his wine. The young servers kicked up their heels in time a little as they moved through the tables, and the evening was well underway.

A slow but steady clinking of coin dropping into the flagon punctuated Piper's playing. The wine and ale were flowing, along with cash to the servers and innkeeper. That worthy, Ketta, tall and wide in his long, striped apron stained with food and drink, presided over the room from a table by the door to the kitchen, happily counting the money. He nodded to Piper when the minstrel stopped for a brief break and sent over a girl with a silver coin and a mug of cool beer. Piper lifted the drink to Ketta, who hoisted his own back. It was a good night for the inn and while it was the inn's location and reputation that brought folk through the door, the minstrel was getting their blood up; they wanted a party, and he was stoking the feeling.

Piper took a long pull of beer, wiped sweat from his forehead. Yes, it was his playing, his voice driving them. But something else was there, oh yes. That blasted burble from the river was very much present and all his attempts to drive it back, keep it out of his music, were at this point only barely holding a line of defense, and the infiltration was constant. It influenced his playing, his voice, a sheen on his tone here, a fuller chord there, a ripple running through a held note. He was right on the edge of doing something he shouldn't.

But, oh, it sounded good. This was one of those nights when it seemed he couldn't miss; his phrasing for everything was just right, his timing perfection. All riding the secret river that wound through them all, abrading them, shaping them, pushing their emotions. And those emotions flowed back into the current, filling them all up.

He still had hours to go. He couldn't stop, that would be as big a mistake as running at the start. And truth be told, he didn't want to stop. This was what he lived for, nights like this, not the sad evenings

of playing old lays to sleepy lords and ladies in their smallholdings, or standing in the sun in loud markets and fairs with his gittern case open on the ground, competing with the vendors crying their wares and the noise and stench of livestock being moved and sold behind him. No, this was nearly as good as it got, a room of people being moved by what came out of him, filling his flagon with their regard.

The air was warm and close. As he sat to resume playing, a boy took a long pole and went around pushing open the high windows. As Piper checked his tuning and considered what was next, that cool, damp breeze laced with tendrils of mist blew into the room again, stronger this time, caressing the stage, Piper, his gittern.

He gritted his teeth. “By the One!” This wasn’t good. If the joy of performing was what he lived for, this feeling of being overwhelmed by exterior force was the opposite. He knew what was coming; there was too much of that power, too many people, too much emotion loose in the room and in him, the exact things that had caused such problems in Kershak.

Fight it. Control it. Use it. If he could.

The front door crashed open. The person who’d pushed it came through, propelled by another gust of damp wind, the handle torn from his hand. He reached out and pushed it shut, the air streaming and shoving back, flowing past him, so thick with meaning it seemed to Piper it was visible. It hit the stage, cold or hot, he didn’t know, but it was powerful, mixed with what came through the windows. He had to stop, breathe, and sit still as it coursed through his body.

The newcomer viewed the room. He wore a black cloak, held a long walking stick in his hand. He shoved back the hood from his head and looked around, frowning. A few people looked back, wondering at the dark skin of his face and hands, the light brown hair. It wasn’t common to see Azzali anywhere in Auld, much less so in an inn out in the country.

His gaze stopped on Piper, dwelt a moment; he saw the concern and concentration in the minstrel’s deep-set blue eyes. His own

amber eyes narrowed. He found a small table near the wall, and sat. A girl brought him a flagon, and he smiled at her, his face changing from cut stone to softness as he gave her a coin.

Piper noticed none of this. He could feel the compulsions coming, his fingers wanting to do things, things they shouldn't. A new song was erupting, just like that, welling up inside him, undeniable. Hands went to instrument. He stroked the first notes. Words flowed.

The wind has come again, old love,
Blowing softly down the lane.
It makes me think of times gone past,
And old forgotten pain.

It makes me think of springtime,
When you were mine alone.
Seems that I, fell behind,
And like the wind, you'd gone.

Spring's a time of leaving,
Spring's not when hearts grow.
Others think the world renews itself,
But I know that isn't so.

The lady sat back, hand to her breast, hearing the words he sang. He didn't know where those words came from, but they reminded him of his lost love, another reason he'd left the capital. It had been in the spring of the year. Obviously, this lady felt the words; with the flow that moved through the room, he was sure everyone did.

Then she stood, hands clasped, put her head back, and sang in a clear, strong voice.

The wind has come again, old love,
From a hot and clear blue sky.
It makes me think of two so close,
Lying side by side.

It makes me think of summer,
When we were as one.
The heat that burned between us,
Shamed the summer sun.

Summer's a time of burning,
When everything comes to ash.
Others think the world is building up,
But I know that nothing lasts.

She swayed, arms slipping up. The noble reached quickly, took her arm, guided her into her chair. She sat still, gaze fixed on Piper. He stared back; he knew that voice, knew it well. Lessa, Lessa, what was she doing here, on a night when he was already losing control? He looked down, teeth clenched, shoulders hunched, but still playing, fingers still drawing sound from the strings.

Hubertus stood, raised his arms, and sang.

The wind has come again, old love,
Through the rain and fallen leaves.
It makes me think of soft, bare limbs,
Love given and received.

It makes me think of autumn,
We slipped along the breeze.
In softest light, drifts of gold,
Arranged for our ease.

Autumn's a time of endings,
When the old is cut away.
Others think it means renewal,
But I know you will not stay.

The last note rang across the room. Hubertus stood still for a moment, then smiled and slowly sat.

To Piper's horror, he felt a change coming, a key change, most definitely not part of the norms. The music transposed up, and then up again into a minor key. A forbidden, dissonant chord was coming, it was happening; he felt its shape and tone, it would fit, oh so perfectly, but it couldn't, no, no, no….

He was powerless to prevent any of it. He looked up. The priest leaned forward, hands holding the table, listening. Piper watched him; the man acted as though he was drunk, trying to understand, unable to do so. Truth to tell, Piper felt that way himself. The room seemed to be expanding, filling. Everyone swayed, listening, captured in the music.

A figure in a black cloak stood up from a table along the wall and stepped forward. He sang, a deep, rich bass, his voice swelling out through the room, slowing in tempo, gathering the song, holding it back.

The wind has come again, old love,
From a frozen, snowy sky.
It makes me think of what was lost,
Of laughter gone to sighs.

It makes me think of winter,
Of cold, of ice, of snow.
The light sharp in the mornings,
Your face lit with its glow.

Winter's a time of passing,
What can't thrive will soon be gone.
Others say you left me broken,
All I remember is how you shone.

The last line held hope, slipping through the sorrow the song had brought: simple human hope, simple human sorrow. It cut the overpowering emotion that had filled the rest of the space, drained the river underneath. As the singer hit the final note, Piper resolved to the major. As if that was a sign, all that was odd about the entire

experience folded up and exited off through the high windows, leaving only that hope, that sorrow, lingering on as a good song should.

The singer picked up his flagon and emptied it. He looked at Piper, chuckled, and strode to the door and out. Piper sat in a daze for a moment. Then he laid his gittern down and stood. He needed to follow the man, ask him what had just happened and what he'd done to end it.

Coins were plunking steadily into Piper's flagon. A gentle murmur of appreciation rolled over him as the onlookers came up, depositing whatever they had. Calls for more beer and wine filled the room, and the servers scurried to supply it. "More songs, minstrel, more." Cups and flagons banged on wood.

He turned to the room, bowed. "A moment, good people. I need a touch of air."

He stepped off the stage, hurried to the door. He pulled it open, stepped into the foggy night.

Nothing. The man was gone.

"Hello! Are you still near?"

No answer came back, no figure stepped out of the mist.

"By the One!" His head spun left, right, eyes trying to pierce the mist and darkness.

The door opened behind him. Rory, Ketta's eldest son, a slight, red-headed young man, stepped through, saw him there. "Minstrel Piper, sir? Ketta wonders where you're goin'." He hesitated, seeing Piper's clenched fists, the look on his face. "You alright, sir? Ketta...." He stopped, stood straight. "Ketta said to remind you yer not finished, if you want yer room and silver."

Piper dropped his fists, opened them up. He forced a smile. "I'm fine. As I said, I just needed to cool off. Come, let's go back."

He looked around one last time but saw only darkness and fog. They opened the door, stepped back into the close air of the common room. Scattered applause rolled over Piper as he walked to the stage and picked up his gittern.

He glanced across the floor, to the noble, the lady, Hubertus. They sat and talked, laughed, waved towards the stage. Lessa's head rose,

and she caught Piper's eye; the smile slipped off her face. Piper sat silent, the slice of pain that hit when he'd first realized who she was burning through him again. It was the first time he'd seen her, had a chance to speak to her since he left the capital. Not that he knew what words he'd say. She was no longer with him; she was with this lord, whomever he was.

He pulled his eyes away from hers, turned them to the priest, who sipped his wine, frowning, deep in thought. Piper wondered what about. He shook his head; he really didn't want to know, because it was likely to be bad. Time to recover his poise and ease any damage. Time to put Lessa, the priest and the mysterious singer into a pocket, as they'd taught him in the academy: wall off the pain and fear, and yes, a little anger, both at her and what was running through the room, and concentrate.

He played an old ballad to the One. The room sang along with him, the patrons repeating the chorus and applauding at the end. A couple of breaths for calm and he was off again.

And so the evening went, song after song. He was in a pool of goodness with his playing, but now without the presence of the river's song. Whatever had curtailed the voices, it was lasting, and he was thankful. He stopped only to eat an excellent dinner, a great steaming bowl of venison stew, mopped up with crusty fresh bread, much better than the normal fare he received for these kinds of evenings. Then he went straight back to the stage.

It was well into the middle of the night by the time the last few locals stumbled out the door and the visiting patrons headed for the stairs, laughing and calling. Ketta nodded to him, and closed his cloth bag of money, bulging nearly to the top. Piper picked up his gittern and the flagon of coins and dragged himself to his room, drained emotionally and physically.

He wondered what the morning would bring. "Nothing to do about any of it now," he yawned. He counted the cash he'd taken in. It was an astounding amount, the most he'd ever made on a night like this, a good sign of what he hoped could come in the capital.

For now, he needed to sleep. He needed to face whatever the priest said and what Lessa's presence would mean tomorrow. But

most important, he needed to find out who that last singer was. The man had to be local, he'd had no bag, was obviously not sleeping at the inn.

And he knew something. Knew a lot, apparently, about things Piper needed to understand. Oddly enough, despite the other issues that might erupt with the light of day, that gave him hope, eased his disquiet.

He crawled into bed and slept a long, deep sleep.