Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three

CHAPTER ONE

KAFKAN ROSE FROM where he crouched in the farmyard dirt. He put down the hoe handle he'd been shaping with his knife and turned to Rasmus.

"Father's coming. He's drunk, and angry."

His younger brother looked up. "How do you know?"

Kafkan shrugged skinny shoulders. "Can feel it." His eyes narrowed. "Can't you?"

Rasmus hesitated. He could indeed feel something, right on the edge of his senses. He wasn't sure *what* sense, but there it was, a roiling bit of unhappiness that was growing stronger. "Yeah, I feel something. But…how?"

"Don't know. But that's father." Kafkan shook his head. "You haven't felt it before?"

"Well…yes. And you do, too?"

"Yup."

Rasmus sighed. "Was wondering if it was just me."

"No, me too. For a few years now. Been growing."

"Not so long for me."

"Maybe 'cause I'm older?"

"Maybe." Rasmus put down the length of rope he'd been making from dry grass. He took a long breath. "By the One. Thought I was crazy, hearing and feeling things."

“Yeah. From people, and” — Kafkan raised an open palm to the sky — “sort of from everywhere, even when no one’s around.”

“Yup.” Rasmus frowned, looking at his brother’s raised hand. “You cut yourself again.” He pointed to where a thin line of blood trickled over skin as black as his own. “You didn’t notice?”

Kafkan looked at the slight wound. “When father’s around and drunk, I don’t think about much else.”

“No, me neither.”

They both stood and looked at the end of the path, where it came out of the woods by the farmhouse. Sure enough, Ulmar Kesmun staggered off the end. He stopped, leaned against the rough weathered trunk of the old, dead tree that stood there. He coughed roughly, hacked up a ball of something from his lungs or stomach, spat it on the ground.

Straightening, he spotted the two boys looking at him. He grimaced, lips pressed into a thin line in his leathery, sunburned face. He was a burly man, strong from years of farm work, though he’d started to grow soft from drink, and from taking advantage of the boys being old enough to deal with most of the daily toil. He ran a wide hand through tangled black curls, then spat on the ground again. “Checked the snares yet, you useless sacks of dung?”

Kafkan shook his head. “No, father, we’ve been working on the chores you gave us this morning. I’m making a new handle for the hoe, the one that broke yesterday. Rasmus is making rope.”

Ulmar took an unsteady step forward. He waved a hand at the boys. “For the whole morning? Lazy, like always.” He staggered a little. “Useless, the pair of you. Just spoke to Priest Amali. Said the same thing about Rasmus as he said about you two years ago; going to be a witch. I might as well get something out of the two of you while I can.”

Kafkan sighed. “Should we finish this first?”

Ulmar clenched his fists, and roared, “Just do as you’re told, if you want to eat!”

“Yes, father.”

Ulmar glared a moment longer. “Can’t believe you’re my sons, anyway. Black skin, brown hair, brown eyes. Don’t look Auldean.”

Rasmus felt the familiar stab go through him. “Azzali blood runs in mother’s family!”

Ulmar sighed, looked away. “I know. Priest reminds me how different our family is whenever I see him.”

“Because we’re Azzali?”

“No.” The voice came from the farmhouse door.

They turned, saw their mother, Vessa, standing there. Only a little taller than her two boys, but just as thin, she was as Auldean as their father and their young sister, Maryam, who stood behind her, one hand clenching her mother’s dress; all three had headfuls of black curls, with blue eyes, fair skin, round faces with square jaws.

“Then why, mother?” asked Kafkan.

“Because witches run in my family. And everyone knows us, because sometimes we have witches, and sometimes we have Azzali children.”

“That’s bad?” asked Rasmus.

“Being witches is. Being Azzali is just something that marks us out; not many Azzali around here. So everyone sees you two, they remember our ‘problems’.” She turned to her husband. “What did the priest say?”

“Says he’s sure about Kafkan, just waiting for final proof. ’Spects Rasmus is, too. Says he can feel it.” He coughed. “Doesn’t say what that means.”

“So, he won’t do anything yet?”

“No.” He turned, looked up at the dead tree beside him, nothing but a wide trunk and a single thick branch that reached out over the farmyard. He shook his head, stepped away from it. “Should have cut that down long ago.”

He walked unsteadily over the dirt and stones of the clearing. As he reached the doorway into the farmhouse, Maryam stepped out from behind her mother. She looked up at Ulmar, blue eyes searching his face. “Rasmus and Kafkan are witches?”

He stopped, one hand holding himself up on the door frame. “Nothing you need to know, girl.” He reached down, patted her head, then stepped by her and her mother into the darkness of the farmhouse.

Rasmus watched him go. “Why’s he say those things?” He turned to his mother. “Why’s he always angry?”

“He’s afraid of losing you.”

“‘Cause of what the priest said?”

“It’s happened to our family before.”

“Your uncle Melann,” said Kafkan quietly.

She turned to him. “You know about that?”

“Yes, the priest told me.” He looked at the old tree. “Hung himself there after they were done with him.”

She sighed. “Yes, he did.”

“Was he Azzali?”

“No. But he was a witch.”

“How’d the priest know?”

She shrugged. “No idea.” She straightened, took a long breath. “The holy church knows these things; they can feel them. They do what they must.”

“Right. And no one in the family helped him.”

“We cared for him until he was gone.”

“But you didn’t stand up to the church!”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed. “No, we didn’t, and we don’t. If the priest says it must be, it must be; that’s the way of Auld, that’s the way of our family.” She crossed her arms over her chest, looked up, eyes closed. “We just pray it doesn’t happen.”

“That doesn’t seem likely, does it? Seems the priest’s made up his mind.”

Her head dropped. “I suppose so,” she said quietly. She turned, walked past Maryam into the house.

Rasmus watched her go. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s just the way things are,” replied Kafkan. He stood, staring at the ground for a moment, fists clenched. “Come on, we need to check the snares.” He looked at the partially completed hoe handle, the wood chips and shavings on the ground. “We can clean this up later.”

“We can finish after we check the snares,” replied Rasmus, “or we’ll get a clout on the head.”

“I guess.”

“Be nice if we could spend a few of the family coppers on more tools, so we didn’t have to keep making them with nothing but a knife.”

Kafkan snorted. “Be nice if we had a winter house in the capital as well.” He sighed. “Come on, let’s go do the snares.” They retrieved their staves and net bags from a shed and headed towards the path. Maryam saw them leaving, ran over. “I’m coming with you!”

“Why?” asked Rasmus; a ghost of a smile chased away his frown. “You’re going to carry all the rabbits?”

“No!” She walked past him, took Kafkan’s hand. “It’s more fun than the chores mother gives me.”

“And somehow,” said Kafkan, “you never get in trouble for not doing them.”

“I’m not a witch, so I’m better.”

“I guess that’s true,” said Rasmus.

The path came out of the woods and ran beside their small field. The crops were sprouting, reaching for the summer sun: some grain, some beans, some root crops, a couple of apple trees standing in one corner. All produce that could be preserved by being pickled or dried. It was a small field, not really enough to support the family, so they spent a lot of time in the woods, gathering plants, nuts and mushrooms, or setting and checking traps.

“Crops look good,” said Rasmus. “Might not get too hungry this winter.”

“We’ll still be scrounging in the snow,” said Kafkan. “Like always.”

Rasmus nodded. “Yes. Together, like always.”

“I help, too,” said Maryam.

“Sort of,” said Rasmus very seriously. “And if we’re still hungry, can we eat you, instead of skinny rabbits and roots?”

She gave him the kind of disdainful look only the young can manage.

“Well,” said Kafkan, “mother’s always saying how sweet you are, so you must be tasty.”

She giggled, stepped past him, and marched down the path.

They sang as they walked, old tunes they’d heard since they were little, newer ones they’d picked up from the travelling minstrels that

occasionally came through. Rasmus felt the movement around him, through that same strange extra sense with which he'd noticed father coming. The odd ability had indeed only started to happen this past year, especially when he sang or played his flute; an extra energy, a flow, seeming to come from the world: the air, the earth, the rain and streams, the sun.

At first, he hadn't been sure it was there, but he no longer doubted, though he certainly didn't know what it was. He also suspected that not everyone heard or felt it the same way, though he'd wondered about his brother. Whatever it was, it enhanced the music, and his joy in it. It also made him uneasy, the strange voices not heard with the ears; he'd certainly feared he was losing his mind at first, hearing things no one else did.

They sang for pleasure, and also to warn off any bears or mountain cats lurking nearby. Kafkan poked Rasmus in the back with his staff. "You should have brought your flute."

"Why? So I could fall on my face while I'm walking and playing, and knock my teeth out?"

"No, because your playing scares the bears off."

"No need," replied Rasmus. "Your face does that."

Their laughter rang through the trees, causing the squirrels and birds to race off through the leaves.

They found a few summer-fat rabbits dead in the snares and tucked these into the net bags. Half the afternoon was gone when they reached their favourite place, a rock knoll that stood out from the forest, giving a fine view of Smethen, the village closest to their farm. There wasn't much to the little town, a few wood structures, including the local trader, the blacksmith, and, of course, the temple, the largest building, rising directly below their perch.

The summer sun warmed the dark rock. A light breeze blew, carrying the scent of the forest behind them: the damp, loamy earth, the wildflowers, bark and leaf. They sat in silence for a while, the three of them resting and taking in the view.

Rasmus thought back on the day, and what their father had said. Why was he so cruel? More and more, he treated them like vermin,

rather than as his children. He turned to Kafkan. “Why does father hate us?”

“I don’t think he hates us. It’s what mother said; he’s afraid he’ll have no sons.”

“He has us.”

“For now,” replied Kafkan.

Rasmus shook his head. “When did you hear about this?”

“Father told me. The priest talked to him a couple of years ago about me; that’s when he started being angry, drinking too much. It’s our family, we’re odd.”

“I suppose. Like mother said, not a lot of Azzali around here.”

Maryam tapped Kafkan with her finger. “Are all Azzali witches?”

“Don’t think so. Mother said not every Kesmun who looks Azzali ends up as a witch.”

“But,” replied Rasmus, “what does ‘end up as a witch’ mean?”

“I think you know. You felt father coming this morning. You knew, like I did, that he was angry and drunk before you even saw him.”

Rasmus nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“When we sing, and when you play flute, you feel more than just the music, right? Something extra, in your mind and around you.”

Rasmus considered that. “So, it’s what I thought; not everyone can do or feel it?”

“Nope.”

“Why doesn’t the church like it?”

“Dunno,” said Kafkan. “Something to do with the cults of the old Gods, is what I heard. But we need to be careful. We shouldn’t say anything in front of anyone else, especially near a priest.”

“What’ll the priest do?” asked Rasmus.

“Not sure,” said Kafkan, “but I don’t think it’s good.”

Maryam frowned. “Am I going to turn into a witch?”

“I hope not.”

“What if I want to be a witch?”

Kafkan laughed. “Didn’t you just say you were better ‘cause you weren’t? And why’d you want to?”

“Do you get magic powers?”

“Not really,” replied Rasmus, “at least, nothing useful, if that’s what we are.” He sat quietly for a moment. “It’s not fair.”

“What?” said Kafkan with a smile. “That Maryam doesn’t get to be a witch?”

Rasmus looked away. “That we get called witches, and treated like trash by our family, and the priest.”

“Well, it’s mostly just father who treats us bad.”

“For now. You heard mother. No one stood up to the priest when he punished her uncle.”

“Right.”

Maryam crossed her arms. “I want to be like you.”

“You sure?” said Kafkan. “If Rasmus and me are gone, you’ll get the farm. You can find a nice husband who’ll do what he’s told, just like mother.”

Rasmus laughed a little. “Not so bad, really.” He turned to Kafkan. “So, what do we do?”

“Be ourselves, but we need to be careful, especially when we’re singing or playing flute.”

“Be ourselves?”

Kafkan shrugged. “Act normal and don’t talk about what you hear or feel.”

“Shouldn’t be hard.” Rasmus looked out into the forest. “At least now I know I’m not the only one; I’m not going crazy.” He paused, felt the old worries bubbling inside. “Do you think the sounds are dangerous?”

“To us, or anyone else?”

“Both.”

Kafkan lifted a hand. “I don’t know any more than you. But so far, the only thing that’s dangerous seems to be people finding out.”

Rasmus nodded. “Well, that’s good, though we don’t really know for sure. But, yeah, we need to be careful.” He climbed to his feet, dusted off dirt and pebbles. “We’d best get back.”

“Yes.”

They went down the back of the rock, into the forest. They followed a different path to the farm, where more snares were set.

Rasmus heard a sniff. He looked over at Maryam and saw tears on her cheeks.

"What's the matter?"

"All the stuff you were talking about. It's scary."

"It is."

They walked up to a snare. A rabbit was caught, but it wasn't dead. It began thrashing as they came close, trying to escape. Rasmus could feel its fear, as he'd felt his father's anger, Maryam's upset, his brother's worry. He crouched, grabbed the creature by the scruff of the neck. As he looked at the terrified brown eyes, the weight of what Kafkan had said sank in, what it meant for their future. "I know what you're feeling, little fellow." With a quick twist, he snapped the rabbit's neck. He straightened, pulling the small body from the snare. He dropped it into his net bag, and they continued on to the farm, saying little the rest of the way.

CHAPTER TWO

AS THE SUMMER wore on, Rasmus thought a good deal about what his brother had said, and their father's words lay like a heavy hand on everything they did. Not that there was much to do about it, except to keep quiet about the things they felt and heard.

One sunny afternoon in late fall, Rasmus sat near the edge of the field, putting the finishing touches on a new flute. It was longer than his old one, with a deeper pitch. He polished the outside with a handful of rough grasses, held against the wood with a leather pad. He looked out over the bare field, the stubble, the drying stalks, all that remained of the harvest they'd gathered over the previous weeks. Fall was filled with long days of hard work, cutting, pulling, winnowing, pickling and drying, storing it all away, mostly to eat during the winter, some to sell in the market.

He'd started making the flute in the spring, stealing an hour here and there to work on it. Today he had time, a few extra hours when neither mother nor father had found something for him to do. His father had taken the opportunity, now that the major work of harvesting was done, to get drunk and pass out. Mother had gone to the temple to offer thanks to the One for the good harvest.

Maybe she'd even offer thanks for her sons, the strong young backs that had done most of the hard work outside. Of course, the work was simply expected. Rasmus sometimes wondered what she

would have done if she'd had only daughters; Maryam was still very young, but mostly did chores within the house.

He chuckled ruefully; he supposed if mother was looking for a well-to-do husband for her daughter, Maryam shouldn't be all dirty and calloused. Not that what she did wasn't hard work as well; she did some of the labour outside, fetching water with the boys, working the harvest, helping skin and clean whatever they caught or picked. She also worked with mother, learning how to turn what they gathered into food or household items and clothing.

He put down the leather pad and examined his flute. It was longer than his forearm, made of maple. He'd drilled it out carefully over time with a handmade bone tipped drill, spun by a bow. The rich wood grain was stained with a blend of grass juice and berries to a dark brown with green highlights.

He put it to his lips and blew. A fine, sweet note flew out over the field. He'd already tested the intonation before; no point in finishing an instrument that didn't play true. But the holes were perfectly spaced.

He sat straight, perched on a log, legs crossed in front of him. He played a piece about the harvest he'd learned the year before from a travelling minstrel. Not that the minstrel knew that the young Azzali lad had picked up the song; Rasmus had grown skilled at memorizing a tune the first time he heard it. He happily purloined music from every minstrel who came through, or anyone else who sang or played an instrument where the boy could hear. Kafkan possessed much the same talents. As a result, the Kesmun boys were popular guests at any gathering both in Smethen and any farmhouse or other nearby village.

But only when someone needed music. Everyone knew the story of their family. The priest had been talking, apparently, and the village and other farm families knew the history of the Kesmuns. Rasmus and Kafkan had heard more than a few whispers.

"Those boys, church'll deal with 'em."

"They will, won't be walking around so bright and cheerful then. Be lucky to still talk, they will, lying around in their own filth, probably."

"It's a shame, isn't it, that two sturdy lads should go bad?"

“It’s a shame they was born in our village, is what it is.”

Sometimes the stories weren’t whispered; sometimes they were spoken out loud, with a glare at the boys, to let them know what the village really thought of them and their heresy.

But as disturbing as all that was, it was old news now, and Rasmus wasn’t thinking about it today. He was thinking about the music, as it skirled out through the warm fall air. He was thinking about how it felt, how it intertwined with the other sounds around him, in a way only he and Kafkan could hear. Ripples of melody danced in the air, the sunlight, rose from the earth, creeks and ponds.

He wondered, as he always did, what exactly the voices were. The church thought the elements — earth, fire, water, air — were part of the Song Without Words. Not that the scriptures were clear about any of it. He’d read them many times, the simple declarations of faith, inscribed on old vellum; the church taught basic letters to its worshippers, so they kept the thoughts of the hierarchs near to hand. Worshippers read along with the priest at sennight services, about the Song, and how it was the current that lifted the One, the source of all life, all inspiration and beauty in the world.

Perhaps that was where the voices came from. They certainly didn’t seem evil or terrible. Still, their touch always made him anxious; but whether that was actual fear of the voices, or simply concern that the priest would find out he could hear them, he didn’t know.

He needed to be careful with them when playing music around others. He’d done something he shouldn’t have at the midsummer festival. An older farming couple, Hellema and Karlon Methon, had been sitting quietly watching the dancing. Their neighbors, younger and with more energy, had been calling to them to come out and join them in the square. Karlon had waved dismissively, calling, “Too old for that nonsense!” Hellema nodded sagely beside him.

Rasmus had considered this. He knew how the voices and music made him feel: good, happy, joyful. Even when he was in a bad mood, it seemed he could amplify the emotion if he wanted to. And though it seemed no one else could sense what he did, still he could direct the sounds to wrap themselves around the music. Without really thinking, he gathered a couple of threads of the voices, pushed

them into his playing; he felt a small ball of something, happiness mixed with music, appear in front of him. With a final skirl on the flute, he tried to send it in the Methon's direction.

They sat a little straighter, looked at each other. With a smile on their faces, they rose, and hand-in-hand walked out into the square, to the cheers of those watching. They danced together for several songs before sinking, exhausted, into their seats, where their children brought them chilled cider, and wiped the sweat from their foreheads, chiding them for being so foolish, beaming with pride that they could still do it.

And Rasmus could sense it all, the happiness in the dancers, the joy of their children; his ability to detect what others felt had continued to grow stronger. He looked over at Kafkan, a grin on his face. But Kafkan only frowned. A quick nod of his head towards the far side of the square had led Rasmus' eyes in that direction. Priest Amali was looking at him, eyes narrowed. Rasmus quickly turned away, the smile fleeing from his lips.

His brother had said nothing afterwards, but Rasmus, sitting on the log by the field that fall, playing his flute, remembered his mistake very well. He hadn't taken his brother's words from the day on the rock knoll seriously enough. He had no idea what the priest felt or knew, but what had happened wasn't good. Though, he thought with a chuckle, the old farming couple had had a wonderful day.

He lifted his flute again to play another song, when Maryam's voice came to him from the forest, calling his name.

"Over here, Maryam."

She appeared on the path, saw him, and trotted down the edge of the field towards him. "Rasmus, there's a minstrel in the village. He's going to play tonight!"

"That's great. Haven't had a minstrel here since spring."

"Will you play with him?"

"I don't know. Not every minstrel wants people to play with them."

"Bring your flute," she said, "just in case."

"I guess so."

"Why wouldn't you?"

“Well….” He thought back to that summer dance, and the old farming couple. He remembered the look on the priest’s face. What if he made that mistake again, by accident?

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid to play?” She stood with her arms crossed, glaring at him.

He had to laugh at her fierce face. “Alright, alright! I’ll bring my flute.”

Her lips curled into a smile. “Well, come on then. We need to get going.”

“Because you can’t go by yourself, and I have to take you?”

“Yes,” she replied archly. “You know what mother’ll say if you let me go on the path myself.”

He chuckled. “Yes, princess. Come on, let’s go.”

He rose, took her hand, and they headed back to the farm to fetch Kafkan.

They didn’t rouse their father; no one wanted to risk a blow. So the three of them set out for the village.

They met their mother in the village square. “Ah, there you all are.” She turned her gaze to the boys. “At least you two lumps remembered to bring Maryam.”

Maryam smiled smugly. “I told them to.”

“Good.”

A small raised mound on one side of the square was used as a stage. A three-legged stool sat there, a gittern resting against it. People were walking up, finding logs to sit on, or bringing their own stools. The Kesmuns found a spot where they could sit together and watch.

“Rasmus brought his flute,” said Maryam. “I made him so he can play too.”

Kafkan looked at Rasmus. “Is that smart?”

Rasmus shrugged. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Kafkan replied. He gazed over to where the priest was entering the square.

Rasmus watched the purple clad cleric move through the crowd, greeting someone here, laying a hand on an arm there. The priest was the local leader of the village; Smethen was too small to bother with a mayor. Rasmus didn't think the baron would show up, as it was a bit of a ride from his manor, and he probably had better entertainment in his hall, anyway.

The local tavern keeper had his servers carrying cider and beer to the square, selling them for a copper a mug. Business was good; the farmers had sold their crops, so had a little money to spend. The minstrel waited until the square was full and everyone had some drink before he stepped up to his stool.

"Good evening to the village of Smethen. My name is Vandeth Lammar." He sat on his stool. A little stout, his face was round and somewhat red, his head crowned with black and gray curls. He wore green linen, slightly faded from sun and rain, with brown leather boots on his feet, worn from the road. He picked up his gittern, checked the tuning, then launched into a song of praise for the church.

Rasmus smiled. Visiting minstrels always began so. He wondered, if the local baron had been present, whether the minstrel would have chosen a song lauding the nobility.

A tall flagon sat at the foot of the mound, meant to entice the audience to drop a coin inside, to "buy the minstrel a drink." When the song ended, the priest stood, walked up, and dropped a few coppers in it. The minstrel waited a moment to see if anyone else would move, but they didn't. Smethen wasn't a prosperous village, and what coins there were this day the villagers mostly spent on themselves. If the minstrel was lucky he'd get a few more during the night, depending on how well he played and how drunk the audience grew.

There were other ways to extract cash, such as inviting locals up to the stage to encourage their families to feel more generous.

"So," said the minstrel, "do we have any musicians here who'd like to come up and accompany me?"

Before anyone else could say anything, Maryam jumped up, raising her arms. "Rasmus brought his flute! And he sings."

Rasmus remained still for a moment; he probably shouldn't do this. He glanced at his brother, who frowned at him, then looked over

at the minstrel, calmly waiting for someone to approach.

What was he going to do? Spend his life denying this, the love of music that sat inside him? To be fearful?

No. He stood, took his flute out of his robe, and walked over to the mound.

"Hello," said Vandeth, "you must be Rasmus."

"I am, sir."

"Well, young man, what can you play?"

"I can play along to anything, sir. I know lots of songs, and I'll pick up what I don't."

"And you play in tune and keep a beat?"

"Yes, sir. I hate it when the music doesn't go together, when someone sings out of tune. Feels weird, not just bad music, but not right."

"Really," said the minstrel. "Hm. Well, I'll try to stay in tune." He laughed. "Let's see what you can do." He picked up his gittern, hit a chord, began a dance tune, a fast number designed to get the listeners' heels moving.

Rasmus came in immediately, improvising effortlessly around the chords. He recognized the tune, introducing parts of the melody into his playing. The minstrel's eyebrows rose, then he nodded and sang.

Rasmus lowered his flute, sang along on the chorus, providing a low harmony. Soon the square was full of dancing bodies, laughing, singing. This was what they'd come for, some fun, a release, some celebration of the harvest and the hard work they'd put in to ensure they'd make it through the winter.

Rasmus could feel them. He wasn't sure he'd ever felt this much from a crowd before. Emotion swirled through the cool night air, mixing with the threads of sound that were always present. He wondered how much he and the minstrel influenced that flow; he could certainly sense what was happening, and could tell that some of what came from his flute and voice was mixing in with what was there naturally.

The minstrel was looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Did he feel it too? Rasmus saw that both his brother and the priest were watching him. He could sense nothing from them through the storm of

emotion that filled the square, but he could tell that his brother was worried. He didn't know what the priest was thinking, but he was sure it wasn't good.

More people came up and dropped a coin in the minstrel's flagon. Rasmus stayed on the mound, playing all the rest of the night. He was filled with the joy of the music, and what was coming off the listeners. They played more dance tunes, some lays, a few more religious pieces. It was near midnight when people began to leave, and the minstrel finally put his instrument down and stood to indicate he was done.

There was applause for the both of them, and they bowed to those remaining in the square. Rasmus turned to the minstrel. "Thank you, sir. That was fun."

The minstrel wiped sweat from his round, red face. "And I thank you. I think I got more coin tonight than I have in the last three villages together. But" — his gaze went across the square to the priest, who was standing, looking at the stage, a deep frown creasing his brow — "you need to get your issues under control."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I think you know very well what I mean, son. What the priest noticed as well, about the influence on everyone."

"I, um…." Rasmus hesitated. "You can…feel that, too?"

"Yes." He held up his hand to stop further questions. "Best not to talk about it openly."

"I guess not."

"Also, you're self taught?"

"Yes, sir. I learn by listening."

"That's good. You've learned the basics of songs, how they're supposed to sound. Do you know about the church 'norms'?"

"No, sir. What's that?"

"It means you're only allowed to play a certain way, certain things. You keep it simple, major and minor chords, no complex rhythms, no key changes."

"Um, I don't know what those are, sir."

Vandeth sighed. "Yes, well, you're self taught. You did well; if you get curious, ask your priest."

“Really?”

Vandeth chuckled slightly. “I understand; he’s not someone you really want to talk to. Like I said, keep your music simple when you’re playing for people. You’ll be alright.”

Rasmus' mother walked up, trailed by Maryam and Kafkan. “Is my son getting anything out of that flagon after playing all night?”

“No, he’s not.”

“Seems cheap that he gets nothing for filling your pot.”

The minstrel waved a hand. “It’s more customary for his family to put money in after I let him play with me.” He smiled at Vessa’s glare. “No, all he gets today is free advice.” He turned to Rasmus. “You should go to the Academy of Music in Kershak. You have talent. A talent that needs to be brought under control.”

Vessa snorted in derision. “Kershak? We don’t get more than a mile from our village.” She frowned. “What do you mean by ‘under control’?”

“Just things he should learn about music.” The minstrel stroked his chin, regarding Rasmus. “I wish you well, young man. Think about what I said.”

Rasmus bowed formally, arms crossed on his chest. “Go with the One, sir.”

“I will. I always do. As do you, my friend.”

Rasmus straightened, frowned. “Of course.”

His mother walked away. “Come on, Rasmus. You’ll be up early for chores, and this won’t be an excuse.”

He regarded the minstrel one last time, questions on his lips. The man just looked at him, expressionless.

“Rasmus!”

“Coming mother!” He trotted after her towards the moonlit forest.

CHAPTER THREE

THE JOY OF that night sat with Rasmus for a long time. For those few hours, he'd forgotten his hard life, doing something that made people look at him and smile. Not that his parents encouraged him in it, of course; his mother happily sang along with the boys and Maryam when he played in evening singalongs in the house, but Kesmuns didn't leave the farm, or the area around the village. To her the possibility of becoming a minstrel or going to the Academy was about as likely as Maryam marrying the baron. His father had been too drunk to show up the night the minstrel came, and was usually too drunk to listen at home.

Still, the music gave Rasmus something that was his, and he applied himself to his flute, improving his playing. Whenever another minstrel came through the village, he'd volunteer to play along. Occasional thoughts of Vandeth's words drifted through his mind, but only rarely; his life on the farm, the chores, just trying to survive kept him busy, and there was little time for such daydreams. But sometimes, usually after a night of music, he remembered what the man had said. Occasionally, he'd ask one of the other minstrels about going to the Academy. It did indeed seem like a dream to even consider the possibility; he had no training, and no way to get any.

"You have talent, boy," said an older minstrel, Academy trained in harp and gittern. She pushed a strand of silver hair behind one ear. "But that's not enough to get through the auditions and tests." She

waved her hand. “And you don’t have to be trained at the Academy to be a minstrel.”

“No?”

She laughed. “There’s no law that says you can’t put down your cap, stand over it, and play some music. Some minstrels would disagree, of course. You don’t have to listen to them. Though” — she sighed — “there are those who get angry about it.”

That provided more food for thought, but truthfully it all just felt like a story that could happen to someone else, not him. He’d never been farther than a half a day’s walk from the farm, and anything beyond that was a frightening unknown.

On a morning in late spring, Rasmus and Kafkan worked in the farmyard, yet again fixing old, broken tools. The planting was done, fresh shoots coming out of the earth in the field. This year, they’d done almost all the work themselves; their father did less and less, spending his days drinking the bad wine and beer he made in a shed behind the farmhouse. He brewed it from whatever came to hand, often getting the boys to gather fruit and other plants from the forest to use as a base for fermentation. Mother said nothing about this, as her sons could keep up the farm work. Neither was going to be a big man, but they were tough and wiry from their hard life, strong enough to hold the plow behind their single ox, to do the planting, and bring in the harvest.

Maryam still primarily helped her mother with household chores. This morning she sat beside the boys as they worked.

“Are you just going to watch,” said Rasmus with a laugh, “or help?” It was an old joke, an old conversation they’d had many times.

“Mother,” said Maryam, pulling herself up straight, arms crossed on her chest, “says that I’ll run the farm when I’m married, just like she does. So, I don’t have to do any of this.”

“Well, princess, she says you’ll have a fine consort?”

“Just like she does?” said Kafkan, shaking his head as he watched his father walk back to his wine shed, stumbling slightly as he went.

“Mother says you should show more respect,” said Maryam.

“Why? What’s he done for it?”

“He’s our father.”

“All we get from him is the back of his hand,” said Rasmus.

“Mother says it’s just like the church. You have to act right, or get punished.”

“Of course she’d say that,” muttered Rasmus.

Kafkan straightened, waved a hand at his sister. “Maryam, were you supposed to tell us something?”

“You’re to empty the snares.”

“Sounds better than this,” said Rasmus, putting down his tools. “You coming with us, to make sure we do it right?”

“Of course not.”

“Didn’t think so,” said Kafkan. “Too old and important now to wander in the woods with your brothers.”

She turned on her heel to go back into the farmhouse. “No. Just not wanting to hear things I shouldn’t.”

Kafkan and Rasmus raised their eyebrows at each other, and went to collect their game bags.

Later that afternoon, they sat on the rock above the church, singing together. They were laughing, joking through the lyrics, making fun of each other as they often did, enjoying the break from their endless days of work.

As they sang, they felt the movement all around them, the drifting threads of feeling, filled with the touch of the rock, the warm sun, the breeze. It moved with their music, pulsing in time.

“Kafkan, this thing with being a witch….”

“Yes, what about it?”

“You’re like me; you sense what other people are feeling.”

“Yes.”

“You feel the voices get wrapped up in the music, right?”

“Yes, I do,” replied Kafkan. “Whenever we play, or I hear music, yes I sense it. What of it?”

“Have you ever tried to bring it into your music on purpose?”

Kafkan sat still for a moment, looking out over the village. “Yes, I have.”

“Have you ever brought it into your music and sent it at someone?”

Kafkan turned to him. “No. Why’d I do that?”

Rasmus shrugged. “Because you can change someone’s mood that way.”

Kafkan sighed. “I’ve only done it by accident. But I figured I could do more. You haven’t done it, have you?”

“Yes,” said Rasmus quietly, “I have.”

“You’re a fool.” Kafkan’s fingers balled up. “That’s witchcraft. You’re doing something to people. Do you think maybe that’s what the church gets angry about?”

“Could be, I guess.”

“Could be? Must be. So, no, I don’t do that on purpose. But how much have you tried mixing it with the music?”

“Well, I do some, every time I play.”

Kafkan nodded. “I’m sure.” He looked away, then shook his head. “By the One, this is a stupid thing to do.” He turned back, a touch of a smile on his lips. “Do you do as much as this?” He sat quietly for a moment, gathering himself. Then he sang, one of the simple hymns to the One they heard in the temple every sennight. But as he did, and the threads moved around them in time, Rasmus could feel something more. His brother was gathering in the sounds, the individual voices, and winding them deeply into the tune, far deeper than Rasmus had ever done, making the music wider, richer. Rasmus wasn’t entirely sure that he heard this, or simply felt it. But however it was working, it was beautiful, and it filled him with emotion. He felt joy, then peace, a cloud enveloping him as he sat and listened to what his brother wrought.

He sensed how Kafkan was doing it. He sang as well, a higher harmony, and as he sang he reached out with his mind and added to the composition. At first, it was jumbled as he fumbled through how to manipulate the threads. But he caught the knack, and soon they were singing away together, shaping a creation that floated above their heads in the bright sunshine of that spring morning.

Something cut through the splendor: anger, fierce anger, as someone came near. Rasmus faltered in his song. Kafkan also ceased, looking around, trying to discern who it was; he froze as though listening.

He turned to Rasmus, and whispered, “The priest!” Without warning, he put his hands on Rasmus’ shoulder and pushed. Rasmus tumbled down the slope of the rock. He bashed into the bushes at the bottom, lay there dazed.

His brother’s voice came from above. “Priest Amali! Blessings of the One. What brings you up here?”

“I think you know quite well. Your infernal manipulations.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about. Your mother told me you and your brother came here often. You think you’re smart, doing witchcraft right above the temple?”

Rasmus, lying in the bushes below, froze in place.

Kafkan sounded as shocked as Rasmus was. “What? How’d she know where we go? She never comes here.”

“Your sister told her.”

Rasmus closed his eyes. Of course Maryam would do that. They should have been more careful.

“Where’s your brother?” asked the priest.

“Not here.”

“Your mother said the two of you are never apart. And I heard two voices, I’m certain.” He paused. “I *felt* two voices up here.”

“You felt voices?”

“I’m trained to detect this kind of sin.”

“Well, I don’t know what you’re talking about, and my brother isn’t here. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Oh, you can deny that all you want. It doesn’t matter. I’m a priest of the Church of Auld. My word is final on these matters, and you’re guilty. I’ve waited long enough for proof, and I have it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re coming with me. We need to have a talk about your sinful ways. I won’t have witches in my village.”

Rasmus crawled deeper into the bush, making as little sound as he could. But the priest was focussed on his brother, and didn’t come looking. Rasmus heard the two of them moving off. He made his way back up the rock, watched the temple carefully. In a little while, he

saw the priest and Kafkan exiting the forest. They walked to the temple and went in through the door.

Rasmus didn't know what to do. He certainly couldn't go down and say anything, as that would admit guilt. If he was anywhere but home when the priest came, that would be suspicious as well. He didn't know what was going to happen to his brother, but he was sure it wouldn't be pleasant. Best to go home and wait and see.

He picked up the game bags and ran down the path, headed for the farm.