

**Kelsey Sanford**  
*Ash & Echoes*  
**Short Story**

The stranger didn't move, not even when Tavi met his gaze head-on. Aurelith, standing in the shifting warmth of the hearth, looked as though she felt a cold wind no one else noticed. Her fingers brushed the bark pendant at her throat. The man's cloak was forest-green, but worn to gray in places. His boots were muddy, laced high with old leather, and at his hip hung a blade *too fine for a farmer; too plain for a noble*.

He did not drink. He simply watched. And then, *finally*, he rose. The room grew quieter with every step he took toward the fire. When he reached them, he inclined his head slightly, first to Aurelith, then to Tavi. Close now, they could see his eyes were a shade between stone and ice. Sharp. Tired.

"I've come a long way," he said, voice low and rough, like dry bark. "Not for her-" he looked to Aurelith, "but for what follows."

Aurelith's shoulders tensed. Tavi stepped in, a hand resting on the strap of his lute, thumb near the hilt of his dagger. "You might want to be clearer, friend. I don't usually welcome riddles before cider."

The man didn't blink. "Something walks behind you. It masks itself in charm. In song. In kindness. It waits."

Aurelith's breath caught. Tavi stiffened, jaw tightening, but said nothing.

"I've tracked it for five years," the man said, eyes locked on Tavi now. "It took a girl in a silver dress. It took my brother's voice. It took everything from your troupe but you."

Tavi stepped back, like the words had hit him in the chest. His lips parted, but no sound came out.

"I don't know why you still sing," the hunter said. "But I know it's listening when you do."

Silence. The fire cracked. And then Aurelith moved between them, not in fear, but calm and deliberate, like a tree bending between wind and root.

"He's not *it*," she said.

"No," the hunter said quietly. "But he might be the door."

---

His name, once, had been Callen Holt of Ashvale. The town doesn't exist anymore. Not on maps. Not in stories. Not in songs. Only in memory, and barely even there.

He'd been the younger brother. The one who laughed too loudly, who carved animals from pinewood and left half-finished arrows scattered on the hearth. His brother, Elian, had been the singer. Elian could make birds pause mid-flight with his voice. Could draw a tear from the hardest face in a crowded square. When the traveling troupe passed through Ashvale that summer, they heard Elian sing in the fields and offered him a place. He went, of course. Everyone knew he was meant for more than sheep and soil.

Callen stayed behind. Until the fires. Until the thing came. It didn't arrive with claws or fangs. It came on music.

A lullaby hummed in an impossible key. A shadow behind candlelight. A mirror that didn't reflect you. The troupe's return was expected, but not the silence that followed. No music. No drums. Just the low hum of something wrong that clung to them. Elian wasn't in the crowd. When Callen found them, camped in a circle around a fire that didn't give off heat, most of them didn't speak. One wept and plucked the same chord again and again. One had gouged out her own eyes. And one, a boy with golden hair and a voice full of laughter, was standing, confused, untouched. That boy had a lute on his back and no idea what had happened. Tavi. Callen didn't blame him. Not then. Not even now.

But something had chosen Tavi. And that meant something had passed through him. Ashvale fell soon after. Slowly. No screams. No blood. Just... silence. Its people forgot the name of their own town. Then they forgot the town altogether. It was like watching a candle burn out from the wick up. Callen left with the ashes still cooling behind him.

He's followed the songs ever since. Where Tavi walks, something follows. Not always close. Not always loud. But always there. He's heard it in the wrong notes of lullabies. Seen it in the way the firelight bends around Tavi's silhouette. Felt it in the sudden silence before a child's laugh. Callen doesn't know what the thing is. A spirit? A curse? A Muse turned dark? But he knows it isn't done. And he knows Aurelith, this girl born of the earth itself, might be the only thing strong enough to close the door.

Tavi hadn't spoken since Callen finished. He sat with his back to the fire now, staring at his own hands like they were someone else's. Fingers that played music, told jokes, healed tension with laughter. Fingers that, according to Callen, had once opened something that never closed. Aurelith sat beside him, close but not touching. She could feel the storm inside him without needing to see it. The quiet was different from his usual pauses; not thoughtful, not playful. *Hollow.*

The tavern had mostly emptied. The innkeeper shot them glances, but left them alone. Callen stood at the hearth, silent too, as if waiting, for them, for judgment, or perhaps for *time* itself to catch up. Finally, Aurelith broke the silence.

"What does it want?" Her voice was soft, but it cut through the room like a bell in fog. Callen looked at her, truly looked, like he was seeing her for the first time.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But it listens. It learns. It adapts."

"And you think it's... using me?" Tavi's voice cracked like a step on a frozen pond.

"No," Callen said. "Not using. Not yet. But you've seen things you don't remember. Felt things you can't explain, haven't you?"

Tavi gave a dry, humorless laugh. "That's the bard's curse, isn't it?"

"No," Aurelith said quietly. "That's fear."

Tavi looked at her then, really looked, and she could see how lost he was behind his usual brightness. She didn't reach out. She didn't know how to comfort like he did. But she gave him *truth.*

“You’ve fought for joy every step of the way,” she said. “Even when something chased you. That’s not weakness.”

His smile, when it came, was small but real. “You’re too kind, forest girl.”

“I’m honest.”

Callen turned to the door. “There’s a place east of here. The Hollow Fen. It’s quiet there, but wrong. Something seeped into the roots. I think it might be where it feeds.”

“You want to go *toward* it?” Tavi asked.

“I want to see if it can still be shut.”

“And you think we’re your best bet.”

Callen met his gaze. “No. But I think you’re already involved. Whether you like it or not.”

Aurelith stood slowly. “If we go... we go together.”

Tavi rose too. “Then I guess we’re all doomed.”

But he said it with a smirk. And for the first time that evening, Aurelith smiled.