The cabin was just as it had been when he’d last seen it. Every month or so, his constitutional happened to take him up the winding path that ran parallel to the house he had called home, even if it was only for a short while. Hoar didn’t know, of course. On clear days, he could see the whole valley stretched out beneath him, what was now Hoar’s cabin included. No smoke rose from the chimney. That wasn’t a good sign. He remembered wriggling up the chimney as a dare. Roa had nearly skinned him for that, there had been little soot prints everywhere. Hoar had helped him scrub them off. If Parseek had done anything to him neither his rank, nor station, not even God, would save him. Crater shifted the rifle for easier draw and descended to his old friend’s home dreading finding an empty house, or a full one.

“Hoar! Are you there? It’s me.” Crater stopped, one foot on the stoop. The stomach churning stench of chemical disinfectant covering charnel like a body bag hiding the pieces they could find. The edge was taken off, but it was still, horrifyingly recognizable. If that wasn’t enough to send him back down the road to Hrullt, the sound that had stopped him again, a sickening organic intake of air. Images of little Anker’s final, gurgling breaths, his chest riddled with hot metal that could have hit any one of them came down like a hammer blow. Crater’s sweaty hand slowly released his rifle, letting it slide back into its resting position. He didn’t remember reaching for it. The horrible sound came again, bubbling. Should he run for Lina? No. What if she didn’t come. What if she did and it was too late and he had left his comrade to die alone. Crater straightened his clothing and, trying to block out the wet breath, opened the door.

Inside there was no Hoar, crumpled and broken on the floor, but there was a figure, too thin to be the woodsman and half mummified in bandages and bound down with crude leather straps. Veever’s work, Crater didn’t doubt. But then, the straps, the surgery the woman, nothing made sense. He stood stupidly, knob in hand, until she, and it was definitely a she, made the sucking, gurgle again. He shivered, feeling the sound crawl over him like worms delighting in a new feast, but stepped in regardless. The problem was obvious. Without her hands, she couldn’t wipe the spittle and pus soaked bandage that had slipped half over her mouth and nose away.

Crater took another step toward the prone woman, and his brain finally processed the narrow patch of face that was visible beneath the bandages. She was Vaicour, she was staring at him, and she was very, very beautiful. He laid a hand against her brow, she was burning up in blatant defiance of the chilly room.

“Let me help,” Crater said to her softly, in a language she would understand. Carefully, he pulled the drenched gauze away and she breathed in gratefully.

“Help. Me.” She begged with her uncovered eye. “They’re coming, they’re coming to take me away.”

Medical knowledge that people should be free to breath exhausted, Crater didn’t know what to do. He looked about for orders, but was faced with the empty room of a man who lived life cut to the bone. Crater didn’t know what to say so he blurted out the first thing he could think of. “You’ll be fine. Everything will be fine.” Should he run and get Lina? She would know what to do. But she must have been here already. Why had she left?

“Arden ath venduri shiana.”

“Slowly, my Vaicouric is not good,” Crater said, trying to parse the sudden barrage of words.

“You don’t look Vaicouric,”

“You’re in the Golemel. The,” he paused, trying to remember the word for mountain. He settled on emphatically pointed hand gestures. “Not the delta?” Crater immediately regretted his words. Why did they always look like they were about to cry when he talked to them.

“Not the delta?” the woman croaked.

Crater heard the click and snap of the cabin door shutting. He hadn’t heard anyone approach. He’d only ever met two men from Hrullt who could move that quietly and one was decades dead, his only ghost his teachings stalking prey through the static winter woods. A hundred choices ran before Crater’s eyes, branching off into infinite, inscrutable futures. “I couldn’t reach her- I didn’t mean to hurt- It was Lina’s plan, I swear,” All jumbled in his tongue.

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Tall, gangling, impeccably dressed; Crater was just as he had been when Hoar had last spied him, casually walking the old logging trail to the east. He came by every month or so, always keeping to what he thought were concealing shadows and brush, but even as children, Crater had been miserable at subtlety. Hoar had never had the heart to tell his perfumes would be scented by game a kilometer away, let alone the racket he raised by simply walking.

Contrary to what the villagers might believe, Azil could still get tired. Hoar’s bones ached, his hands were raw from the handle of shovel and axe, and it felt as though he had eaten a heavy stone. Seeing Crater, uninvited and unwelcome should have been a knife slashing his heart’s strings, but now that he was here looking so nervous that he might drop his rifle, Hoar just couldn’t muster the energy. He carried his load of firewood to the hearth and began. Through the fog of exhaustion, he dumbly took in the cold coals.

“I’m sorry.” Crater was standing there his face red and fists balled as though he were ready to hit something. Hoar didn’t get up from where he was kneeling, coaxing the tinder to life.

“It’s the past,” he said, frowning at the tinder.

“But I- we…”

“Can’t do anything to change the past,”

Behind him, Crater was silent. Hoar considered throwing the man from his house, slamming the door and retreating into his isolation.

“Get the kettle down, I’ll put on some tea.”

As Crater was rummaging through the lone cabinet for the kettle, the Azil on the bed let out a sound like wet canvas caught in a gust of wind. By the time the kettle hit the ground, Hoar was already on his feet and moving towards the Azil.

As he was pinning the offending bandage out of the way, he heard Crater step up behind him. “Hoar. I know it’s not my business but, who is she?”

“I don’t know,”

“You don’t know?”

“Going deaf?”

“Hoar, I’m serious. It looks like she was dragged out of hell.”

“Frostbite. Found her four days ago.”

“You found her? What, lying on the side of the road?”

“She was a day’s travel from any road, and only a fool would be out that close to the first snowfall.”

“What were you doing out there then?” Hoar grunted but didn’t reply. After a moment, Crater asked, “Why?”

“They keep her from scratching. She was on powerful drugs, no telling what they’d make her do.”

“Right, good idea. I meant why did you bring her back, here?”

“She can’t stay in the village.”

“Why?”

“She is Azil,”

Crater let out a long, slow whistle.

“Better?” he said, after pinning the offending bandage back.

“Tah,” she said in the closest thing Hoar had heard to a normal voice. The drug Gili had given her had worn off several hours ago.

“She said yes,” Crater interjected, helpfully. Hoar frowned at him,

“I know how to say yes and no in Vaicouric,”