The forum of jostling, shouting, jockeying emotions that usually dominated Crater’s expressions with only a token measure of restraint had, on this aberrant day, packed up their tents and stalls and taken refuge inside. Two nights of little to no sleep and a three long, long days of pursuit had lain waste to his immaculately trimmed and combed beard and gifted him with two sombrous half-moons hanging heavy beneath his crinkled eyes. If he could get the frown right, he would be Hoar’s twin. That, however, would never come to pass. Crater did not have enough decades to train his face into such a death’s mask.

Day was fading, but the bloodlust and righteous vengeance that drove the pursuers burned unabated. With Lina and the richest repository of medical knowledge for a hundred kilometer, not to mention the only level head tough enough to stand up to Parseek, six month’s gone and buried, Parseek was howling murder. Two nights ago, his boy had taken an arrow in the meat of his thigh and he’d gone down squealing like a pig going to slaughter. Dead man walking, they said. Spineless boy limping, Crater said, but only in the privacy of his own head. He had seen dead men who hadn’t realized it was time to keel over and stop breathing during the Unification and the boy was a long shot from dead. It’d been a clear through and through, and Crater’d poured brandy through the ragged edged hole and plugged him up best as he could. The boy would certainly have a limp the rest of his life, or until Parseek sent him down to the delta cities to find a real healer, but that meant nothing to the twenty odd men and women, armed with a motely of axes, rifles and bows. They were out for blood, and so was Crater. So why did he feel so hollow?

Crater spat into a pile of leaves and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His nose wrinkled involuntarily. He’d forgotten. Two days without washing seemed to have tainted his clothing indelibly with the bitter stink of smoke. Crater’s tried scowling but really just wanted to be sick.

He adjusted the rifle, an old Cabratta model beautifully maintained and so notched that the stock looked like the teeth of a saw. There were nineteen in total, and each and everyone of them weighed more heavily than the water skin, rations and pouch of slugs that hung heavy on his hip. He wondered for the hundredth time who or what those little balls of lead would tear through. It was a thought that he’d had many times before. Crater was not, on the whole, a man cut out for introspection. He thought in straight lines. Fair price for lantern oil, charge. Straight line to the hilltop, charge. See the enemy soldiers entrenched and fortified, charge. But in the times when he was still, or when he was blind and whatever path there might had been was entombed by snow, his restless mind charged off in its own direction and one path it knew well was whose names were written on his bullets, his knife, his bare hands.

The recruiter, a tall Vaicour sergeant with broad shoulders and a noble face, had arched a single, elegant, Vaicour eyebrow at Crater’s heartfelt oath of loyalty made in Vaicouric. He’d been impressed, Crater had hoped. He’d practiced the oath every night for two weeks, Hoar frowning each time he caught him at it. The recruiter nodded to the rifle, a Cabratta only three years old, on Crater’s back and asked in Vaicouric, “You can shoot?”

“Yes!” Crater barked. He would have liked to say more, added a bit of flair, but he didn’t trust his Vaicouric enough to risk it. He’d impressed the man, and there was no point in ruining his good impressing by shooting his mouth off. Unslinging the rifle and nesting the stock into his arm, he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed out, and fired. There was a sharp retort, the acrid tang of gunpower and bark flew. Crater smiled. Hoar wouldn’t have. He had always shaken his head in disapproval, favoring the outdated bow over the sleek grace of a rifle. Decades later, in an unsleeping chase, Crater might have conceded a point to him. Bows don’t jam and cease to fire in winter.

The recruiter had made Crater a corporal then and there, as much for his ability with the rifle as his fluency in Vaicouric. There were enough Golemel recruits to make up two squads, and Crater had one, Parseek had the other. Crater made sure Saskia was under his command. Though she wasn’t Azil herself, she was still born of that inferior stock. No man in the village would desire her, though perhaps once the insurrection was quelled, she would remain down on the delta where she could make a better future for herself, away from those who knew what she came from. Crater had suggested this very thing to Hoar, but he wouldn’t hear of it. They had not parted on good terms. It would blow over, Crater was sure. Hoar wasn’t the type to hold a grudge. Crater navigated that memory hole like a Vaicour river captain passing within arm’s reach of snags but never quite touching them on his way downriver to fair weather, fair profits and a far off training camp.

It had been like a story torn straight out of the books his mother used to read him when he was little. They’d been bought from the trader, a different trader older and fatter and long dead, but Crater still remembered the books and the sweets the trader had given him fondly. The pages were soon sticky, but the fantastic images of heroes who always began their tales in small villages, like his, on the flats or the in the poorest, harshest streets of a delta city where no matter the vice and villainy that surrounded them, they remained true and good. There was always the wise wanderer, or the talking bird that guided them along the path, elevating them to their rightful place in high society. There was one picture, of the hero’s strong, noble features accepting her guns and blades from an angel, faceless in the heavenly light that emanated from their shadow less skin were fixed in his mind like a beacon. Then, they would lead the armies of men against the wicked

battles against demonic hosts and

granted their blades and guns by angels