The store was clean and orderly, almost militarily so. Every box of nails and bolt of cloth was stacked with precision, the brands on the side clearly visible and crisp as fried rice cake. Cans of salted pork, hashed beef and pickled rabbit from the slaughter houses of Kirch made impressive towers beside corked bottles containing every brandy, imported oil, tincture or tonic conceivable. Even the Thumbdraught bought medicines at the store from time to time. The chemists in the delta cities would soon put her and her kind out of business for good. Two aging men, both fatter than they had been twenty years ago, sat, drinking sparingly and attempting to conceal satisfied smiles at the dreams of profit, and neither of succeeding. Before them was a stack of furs that looked big enough to be a hibernating snow bear. Almost as high a neat if not quite perfect stack of boxes. A few were open revealing rice straw, steel hoe heads and dark glass bottles. But now, the two men were haggling over a pair of squat barrels sealed airtight with tar. One man was pressing the lid back down on a tin of rich, white grease and running his tongue over rendered fat coated lips appreciatively.

“You will ruin me, my friend, you will ruin me. How will I trade with the tapper now? I will have hardly any coin left after your highway robbery,” the Trader lamented, pulling a few more coins from an exceedingly fat purse and setting them on barrel top.

“Robbery? You’ll be able to sell those at triple the price, quadruple that if you go to the quartermaster. Premium bear grease, perfect for cooking, or lubricating steel. I should be asking for double that!” said Crater, pocketing the coins and passing the jars over unbegrudgingly. He’d been able to push the price higher than he had last summer by almost a tenth, the demand must have risen. He would make a note to stockpile even more of hunter’s renderings than he usually did, in case the prices reflected a new trend. It was hardly a risk; it burned smokeless as lamp oil in the deep of winter, lacquered knife handles, bows, gun locks, stocks and barrels and a dozen other small necessities.

“You have already cost me dearly on this trip and I cannot afford to lose on another deal,” The Trader’s Vaicouric, dripped like smooth and unctuous summer honey. Crater wished his own was as fluid. He was tall for a Golemel, wearing the same style of conservatively cut coat and pants as the Vaicour trader, with just a splash of color drawing the eye to the neckerchief amid the quiet whites and tans of the ensemble. The trader wore it better, of course. Crater couldn’t hope to match the elegance of a Vaicour merchant or gentleman, but he would at least make the effort. Running contrary to the untamed manes his neighbors wore, his own beard was short and trim and the hands that peeked out of his coat sleeves were thin, delicate and black. They were so beautiful he was almost glad he’d lost them. It had been a glorious war, one the minstrels would play songs of for three thousand year and somewhere, amid the ballads of summer wars in rice patties and tragic arias of martyrs giving their lives for their nation, there would be his song, the battle of Kulrathen where Crater of the Golemel led the charge. It would be a song of victory, and loss, of bravery and sacrifice. There had been sacrifice, but there was always sacrifice. Unthinkingly, the hands, rich and textured, black hands that were now his, clutched at air, as though trying to take the invisible hand of someone long gone. There was a scar along one thumb, a puckered memory made flesh that Crater would never know.

“Can I tempt you? Drown your sorrows?” asked Crater the mouth of the skin wavered over the glass which he’d bought from the Trader five years ago.

“Certainly, my friend,” the Trader said brightly, leaning back in his chair and smiling. “Now perhaps a fellow business man might be interested in something special.” The trader accepted the glass graceful and pulled an elegant case out from the depths of one of his trunks. “A clever business man like you can recognize an opportunity when he sees one, I know. Look.” He opened the case with a flourish. Row upon row of finger vials sparkled like ice in a frozen waterfall. The trader selected one and proffered it to Crater who took it gingerly. “Go ahead my friend, open it.” Crater did, and a scent of sweet amber blessed his nostrils. “Agarwood,” whispered the trader reverentially. “From across the Beryl sea.” Crater breathed again, deeply and the scent rose in his mind to the smell of money. There were plenty of young ladies in the village that one of the trader’s finger draughts would make swoon and with spring in the air and the right words, the young suitors would pay handsomely for the prize.

“I’d have an easier time selling snow,” Crater said dismissively, passing the vial back. “I might be able to push these onto a few old crones pining for their youth, if I’m lucky.” The trader shrugged in calculated carelessness.

“You’re cutting your foot off to escape the root. If I wasn’t leaving tomorrow morning, I’d sell them myself and walk away a rich man. But perhaps you’ll see reason. Thirty a finger, and that’s thievery.”

They haggled, firing offers and insults back and forth like lead shot. When at last they’d agreed on a price, both cursing their misfortune to have met the other quite cheerfully, Crater poured them both another drink. From there, the talk made an about face to gunpowder, of which the Trader had brought several small, iron banded barrels, packed carefully amongst his other wares. He poured out equal charges from each, rolling the gritty powder into paper and following Crater into the warm summer sunshine, expounding on the new techniques out of Arenholm and the eprouvette which he had purchased there last winter. It looked like a hybrid between a one shot pistol and a compass, one arm of which would measure the power of the shot. Gunpowder was a finnicky thing, and Crater was very particular that the powder the Trader sold was of the highest caliber. He’d never been disappointed, but the retort and acrid smell brought him blissfully back to another summer’s day, so many years ago.

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 would be. He’d practiced the oath every night for two weeks, his friend 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 against his shoulder he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed out, and fired. There was a sharp crack, a blissful, acrid tang of gunpower and bark flew. Crater smiled. The man who had been his hunting partner wouldn’t have. He had always shaken his head in disapproval at the sleek grace of a rifle, preferring his own hunting tool lacquered in bear grease.

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 the other. He’d seen the gleam in Crater’s eye when Saskia had arrived under the elder tree where the recruiters were collecting every brave man and woman Hrult could spare. He’d led the man aside, then, and sworn the first of two promises he’d made that night. Saskia had a chance, in the royal army, away from the taint of Azil and what every Golemel knew her name. Once the insurrection was quelled, she could remain down on the delta where she could make a better future for herself, away from those who knew what she came from, and away from Hoar. The second promise he had made, but 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.

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Parseek doesn’t care about Crater’s little feud any more. The war changed him. He hates Azil, and those who protect Azil. Crater included.

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“Ah, Trader, I’d heard you’d arrived.” It was Parseek, summoned no doubt by the shots from the eprouvette. He was smiling, but the greeting was in Golemel, an overt sleight to match his wounded pride over the Trader coming to visit Crater first. He approached them, a case under his arm and limping on Gorgem’s left leg which had replaced his own. Gorgem had been slightly shorter, though that was hardly the concerns of the surgeons at the time. Her left arm had been salvaged too, but the graft had putrified and the limb had rotted, poisoning Elena. She was dying in any case. There were sacrifices to be made in war. But Gorgem’s leg on Parseek had always disquieted Crater. She had never liked their mayor, though he had just been the mayor’s son back then. There were few enough villagers, born before or after the Unification, that liked him, but he was a necessary grievance, like one of Lina’s purgatives that removed the bad blood even if it meant half a week sitting in the outhouse. He made sure the village ran without blockages or shortages, and he did it well.

“Won’t you invite me inside?” Parseek directed at Crater, smile still in place but Crater saw through the deliberately visible cracks in Parseek’s polite manner. In some small way, the mayor would get even for Crater overstepping his bounds.

“Certainly, won’t you join us, Parseek?” he forgot to say “Mayor Parseek,” as was his title, even as he smiled in the way he imagined a Vaicour gentleman might. Whatever the man might try to take out of him, Crater could take it back and more. Their wills had skirmished at the too near boarder separating Hrult’s mayoral house and Crater’s since long before they went off to war, and it would likely continue until one of them released their dying breath in a thinly veiled insult.

Inside, Parseek set his case down on a table, firmly pushing the display of honey and candles from Kirch apiaries to the back. “What, in your professional opinion, could you give me for this?” he asked, flipping the latches with a flourish. The Trader joined him by the mouth of the case, and Parseek moved casually aside, blocking Crater from joining them without toppling the stack of furs. Crater smiled a polite, brittle little smile. The Trader glanced to Crater somewhat apologetically, Crater thought, but bent to examine its contents.

“Hmm, I’m afraid it isn’t in the best condition, my friend. There’s wire holding it together.”

“It is used, but it’s been marvelously maintained, see the repair work on the bowl? No, you can’t. It’s near invisible. I’d put it’s worth around 220.”

Crater was craning his neck as unobtrusively as possible to see the object of contention. “Now that is steep,” the Trader said bluntly, not bothering with complaints or curses of bankruptcy and beggaring. “I’d say a flat 160, maybe 165.”

Parseek’s smile flickered, “I see. Well, the value of owning it for me is certainly worth more than 165, thank you. But I have other items which we may be able to come to an agreement over back at my home. As he closed the case, Crater finally caught a glimpse, but a glimpse was enough. He felt his calm veneer begin to burn away.

“Where did you get that?”

Parseek turned to smile at Crater whose own expression had gone wooden. “I got it, at a very reasonable price.” If Crater had still been the younger man he had been, the man who had gone off to war and killed rebels, he would have broken the mayor’s jaw. But he was older, and wiser, too wise to rise to Parseek’s bait. “Have you heard of any Vaicour women leaving your fertile plain to come north?” The question caught the Trader by surprise, and allowed Crater to take the breath he needed not to strike the man. He forced his fists to uncurl. It did not become Vaicour hands to bloody themselves.

The Trader, clearly uncomfortable, took refuge in his confusion. “I haven’t heard of any Vaicour visiting the Golelem, beside myself.”

“Perhaps traveling at the end of Fall, someone who wouldn’t want to be seen?”

“No,” he said, become more confused but suddenly paying his full attention. Despite himself, Crater’s ears perked up too. This had all the hallmarks of a story that would be being discussed around every hearth by nightfall, and if Parseek was going to let it slip to Crater, then he would make sure every household would get the story from him.

Leaning in conspiratorially, Parseek whispered, “There’s a rumor that an Azil has stolen himself a Vaicour wife. Some people say, he keeps her locked in his cabin and never lets her see the sun. Some people say, he cut off all her fingers and toes so she can’t escape him. Some people say, he burned her face so no other man would desire her.” Crater’s blood had ran cold, like a frozen hart. Some people; That poisonous viper. If Crater were to bet money, the ‘some people,’ was Parseek snooping up by the old meadow. But that would mean there was some kernel of truth to the story, and that a Vaicour woman had appeared mysteriously in Hrullt and was living with the Azil, the only Azil left. Hoar.

Crater would have to tell the story now, before Parseek spread more of this tale. But first, he would have to find out exactly what was happening up by the cabin in the cleft. That meant seeing Hoar, but it also meant he might meet a Vaicour woman. The second that the door had closed behind the Trader and Parseek, no doubt off to discuss business on the delta over more brandy, Crater grabbed the vials of perfume and went to change his clothes.