Two aging men, both fatter than they had been twenty years ago, sat in the middle of the store, drinking and attempted to conceal satisfied smiles at the dreams of profit. Neither succeeded, but they were gracious enough not to let on to the other that they both knew. One was the store keep, who longed to be a warrior in an era that was no longer, if it had ever existed, and the other was a traveling Trader, who, at the age of forty four, longed to be a sessile Trader. But the Trader still walked his arthritic bones up and down the Golemel and the store keep was content to dream. Not that his dreams didn’t wend their way into the waking world.

His store was clean, orderly, eager to dash the malicious hopes of a drill sergeant on the prowl for dirt or dust. 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 the shop owner’s license could purchase and a few that, strictly, it couldn’t. Those weren’t on display. The shop keeper would have had to possess a Veever’s license, or at least an alchemist’s, to purchase those compounds. He knew that Lina did buy those very same items from the Trader, once they were done haggling, but her drugs were for medicinal purposes and those that he pedaled to those townsfolk who liked their comforts, weren’t. It wasn’t as if anyone got hurt, the boys and girls down in the chemical plants knew what they were doing, and a few coins passing from purse to purse in an immaculately kept storefront was surely clean and wholesome.

But that was for closing negotiations. Now was far more mundane and profitable exchanges. On the store keep’s side, “The finest products the Golemel have to offer, surpassed by none,” and unloaded from the Trader’s carts, “Only the highest quality items from the mills and plants of the delta, hand crafted just for you.” Both were lying, but only a little. That was commerce. A drift of furs, big enough to be a hibernating snow bear would be making the ride down the mountain with the Trader while the crates stamped with the seal of Kirch, Arenholm and \_\_\_\_\_\_ would be remaining in the shop. A few were open, revealing rice straw, steel hoe heads and dark glass bottles.

The shop keep rolled the second, squat barrel sealed airtight with tar into prominent view. The Trader pressed the lid back down on a tin of rich, white grease, still running his tongue over rendered fat coated lips appreciatively.

“You will ruin me, Crater my friend, you will ruin me. How will I buy Hrullt gold now? I’ll 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 barrels 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 made a note to let the hunters know that bear would fetch a good price this year, 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 unctuous summer syrup. 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. 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,” he whispered reverentially and the Trader nodded with the self satisfied expression of one who had already made the sale.

“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 snap. 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 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 back to another summer’s day, so many years ago.

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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, 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 against his shoulder he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed, 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. Hoar had always pointedly ignored his rifle. Perhaps it was jealously, or perhaps he preferred his bow 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 little Irina had arrived under the elder tree where the recruiters were collecting every brave man and woman Hrullt could spare and many they couldn’t. Before the man could intervene, Crater had taken the mayor’s son by the arm and led him far from the tree planted by his ancestor. He made the first of that night’s promises then, “You do not interfere with Irina. Do you hear me? If you so much whisper to the sergeants, I’ll make you regret it the rest of your life.”

“I’d never dream of getting between you and your little vendigores. Cross my heart.”

Not knowing what else to do, Crater had stomped off. By all account, he’d won that encounter, but throughout, Parseek’s infuriating smirk never flickered. But he’d gotten what he wanted, what was best for everyone, hadn’t he? Irina had a chance, in the royal army, away from the taint of Azil and where 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 her father. The first promise had been easy to make, and easier to keep. The second- 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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“Ah, Trader, I’d heard you’d arrived.” It was Parseek, summoned no doubt by the eprouvette’s shots. He was smiling, but it was strained and 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. Only parts of that poor woman had made it back from the war. 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?” Somehow, his Mayor’s title had escaped him, but Hoar was sure to smile as he imagined a Vaicour gentleman might smile when his rival entered the ballroom. 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 Hrullt’s mayoral house and the shop 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 ignored Crater as though he were a somewhat ugly piece of furniture that, as a guest, he was too polite to mention. He addressed the Trader. “When will you be done, here?

The Trader, sweating despite the cool, took refuge in Vaicour manners. “Mayor Parseek, my business here is almost done. I trust you will still be available to discuss the price of gold?”

“I may be available. I am a busy man,” the mayor said, as chilly as a mountain stream that had been cheeked by an uppity fish.

Parseek,” Crater growled at the same pitch a dog growled just before it leapt.

“Friends, if you need to discuss things-”

Parseek silenced him with a glance and turned back to face his host. He noted the rising color and the vein pulsing in Crater’s forehead with apparent detachment. “I am speaking with this fine gentleman right now. Go back to whatever dreadfully important things you were doing.”

“You will tell me where you got that.”

“Corporal, do not order a superior officer. I will deal with you later,” Parseek snapped. Crater recoiled, as though his rifle had unexpectedly gone off. Parseek ignored this, focusing his attention on the Trader, “You will tell me your news as well, I am very interested in the affairs of the delta.”

News in a town like Hrullt was like the honey comb gum the Trader, and vicariously Crater, pedaled. It was chewed over and over until it was nothing but tasteless white wax clogging the gaps where teeth had been. Crater imagined his sergeant’s teeth scattering across his store’s floor like carnivorous hail. He turned scooped up a box of papers and went back to the dreadfully important things he had been doing.

“I was hoping you would have news for me. Has your Link received any far cry messages about Ravnasill?”

“We do not permit a Link here,” Parseek said icily, “Why.”

“Oh, nothing really,” the Trader said. He remembered the small, two story brick building he’d seen in Arenholm last season with the “For Lease,” sign, hanging in the window. He might have been there now, if not for the lure of rising fur prices in the delta and the dream of one last payoff and buying outright. “Nothing at all. It was fine when I passed through a week ago, but a day’s journey up the mountain something woke me and the poor donkeys. I couldn’t get a clear view, but there was a red glow bellow. I’d wondered if there’d been a fire. It’s all thatch and fieldstone down there.”

“You’re the only outsider we’ve had in a month. If there had been a fire, I’m sure the military is already there, setting things straight.”

Parseek was likely right, though Crater would never have admitted it. The Peace Core had garrisons in every major city, and roaming patrols for the protection of the people. After the reconstruction, most patrols had skilled builders as well as soldiers. He might have gone back down there, but he would have been homesick for his mountains sitting around on his helmet, doing nothing more exciting that clearing rubble and overseeing the laying of roads. If there was another war, things would be different. He longed for the thrill of it, the challenge, the fight. Here, at peace, he’d have to make do.

“I’m sure you’ll make a tidy little profit off them the next time you come through,” Parseek said but was cut off when a blast like a small cannon went off. The result was instantaneous, Parseek dropped into a half crouch, heavy cane whistling up, poised to bayonet the threat. His head swung about wildly, neck so tense a muscle might have snapped, eyes searching. And found Crater, calmly loading another carefully measured shot into the eprouvette.

“What in the seven angel’s names are you doing.”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry, just checking the quality of the gun powder. It’s my dreadfully important business see, can’t have shoddy powder. I would have warned you, but didn’t want to disturb whatever dreadfully important business you were up to in my shop. Please carry on.”

He pointed the eprouvette at the ceiling and fired again, watching in satisfaction the mayor jump. Parseek forced himself to lower the cane. He gave Crater a look that should have boiled him inside his skin.

“We will continue this conversation in a quieter local,” he said to the Trader, and made for the door, limping along stiffly as though her were crude, windup soldier.

“Going so soon? Please, stay,” Crater said, firing the eprouvette again.

When the smoke cleared, Parseek was gone. Crater managed to hold it together for three full seconds and then burst out with hacking coughs from the inhalation.

“Fine gun powder you have,” he said to the Trader, carefully placing the testing device back into its case. He stopped, running his fingers over the mole skin interior.

“Spike me,” he cursed, the spoke to the Trader who was wistfully thinking of lath and plaster and bricks he could call his own. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have to close up the shop. You’ll be back to finish up our business?”

The Trader seemed surprised, “I thought we would be finishing things up now? Something amiss?”

“I hope not. I have to pay a visit to an old friend.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad?” the Trader said bemusedly, trying to get his samples together.

“If I come back with an arrow between my eyes, the store is yours my friend.” The Trader laughed a jolly, ingratiating laugh. Then he saw the expression on Crater’s face.

“You’re serious?”

“And if you have to sell to Parseek, make sure to spike the bastard.”

Crater looked up smiling at his mayor,

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 his 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.