It was a small noise. Just a sad, little snap, like a twig beneath the boot of a careless hunter. But from the stillness in the cabin that followed, it might have been a church bells last knelling. Hoar swallowed, and forced himself to look up. The old man’s visage was the cold that cracks iron bands and freezes the salt from tears. Not that Hoar would cry, he was stronger now. He was strong, he told himself, even as his chest tightened until he could hardly breath, as though the words “I’m sorry,” had lodged in his windpipe and would never come out. Three possible futures hung from the backside of the cabin door, the switch, the strap and the scourge. The first was pinky thin, wasp sting birch Hoar replaced each year. The second was heavy belt leather, old, and frayed from use. His grandfather’s hand landed on the top of the third, a kraken of leather with a dozen barbed lashes and Hoar thought that this time, he might die. But then, his grandfather gripped the woven handle of the strap instead. It was the first time Hoar had been glad to have the strap.

“Shirt,” came the

He watched his grandfather like the deer watches the wolf, too frightened to run.

icy fury on the old man’s face, Hoar was sure he would k

A cold snap that, once gone, might hardly have been there at all. Unless you looked to the frost killed buds, just peeking out of the spring thawed ground.

The fire curled up in the cabin’s hearth grumbled and wheezed, like an old, hound with crackling joints settling into bed. Basking in its warmth was an aged man, fretting over the strings of his instrument. He had lived far longer than any in the village had thought, or hoped, he would. In happier day’s he’d return his wife’s greeting of “Aren’t you in the ground yet?” with a cheerful, inconsiderately animate “I’ll outlive you all, just you wait and see,” and a whiskery kiss. Only during those days, with his mother’s soft smiles never scarce and his grandfather’s crooked toothed jests too plentiful, did Hoar, always a solemn child, would come close to laughing. He very nearly did.

Scattered at his grandfather’s feet like a fortune teller’s bones, Hoar’s dearest and only friends dozed. Already several fingers taller, Crater sprawled, half covered by a quilt and so flushed from the halo of heat radiating from the flames that he looked red. Despite the last hour’s increasingly incoherent vows that he was not tired, Crater was fast asleep. Gili had slipped into unconsciousness more gracefully, laid out to listen to the old man’s playing with all the dignity of a duchess. This was undercut slightly by the soft, whistling snores that escaped her petite nose. These, however, were nothing to the rhythmic, thunderous snore that cut through the bedroom door like a pig being sawed. She shivered, despite the fire and blanket. Hoar, the third child, crouched with his knees drawn up to his chest and his grandmother’s solemn, first days of winter expression. He didn’t seem to notice the lateness of the hour, or the snores, or the cold, but he did notice the shiver. He rose, and made to grab the other boy’s quilt but the old man, plucking an experimental note on his svelsa’s strings, said sternly, “Let him alone, Hoar.”

Hoar jumped, pulling his hand back as if burned and buried his face between boney knees till only his eyes peeked out. His grandfather chuckled quietly as he twisted a final peg and set thick fingers, forested with hair, to strings. With a deftness that belied his age, he played three, gentle, pure notes and grinned mischievously at his audience. “What shall we sing. Miller by the Water? Cannadray? Old King Parsley?” The corners of Hoar’s mouth twitched at that; he and his grandfather had rewritten the words as ‘Old King Parseek,” including many quite creative comparisons to goat dung, Hoar’s addition, and a stanza about Parseek’s mother that Hoar didn’t understand but had been happy to sing. Crater hadn’t understood either, but apparently Parseek, who was fourteen and already shaping into as much of a black foot as his mother, did. He had given Crater a hiding when the first heard he’d heard the boy singing happily and offkey. They had sung it three times that night already at Crater’s insistence but Hoar was tired of it and, thankfully, so had Gili when she put her foot down. “I’d teach you ‘The Laundress from Karthess,’ but I think your grandmother’d flense me.” The old man chuckled again, glancing toward the bedroom door.

Without warning laughter slid from his face, like ice melt off a roof leaving a contemplative expression. He looked at his grandson, and Hoar had the sudden feeling that he was being weighed in the scales. “You’re growing so fast, so fast,” he mused. Hoar didn’t move, waiting and wishing suddenly that he had adopted a more mature sitting position. Quietly, and with a slowness that Hoar had seldom heard, the old man said, “This is an old song, Hoar, a very old song. Don’t tell your grandmother I sang it for you.” His wiry eyebrows were pulled into an overly fierce, almost comical V. In the hush, Hoar waited for his grandfather to grin, to make it all a joke again. He didn’t, and Hoar hesitantly nodded, pulling himself a little straighter. Something was off. His grandfather nodded, and gently placed another, muting fold of cloth into the bowl of the svelsa. He struck a chord, soft and sharp and sorrowful as the keening of wind through the valley below. Hazel eyed held hazel eyes as the opening notes began to drift like the first snowflakes of winter. Then, he began to sing.

When the night grows long | and harvest’s gone and | winter bares her teeth,

When the sky weeps ice | and rooftop heights are | buried underneath,

When the hart of wood | has frozen blood and | hoarfrost covered horns,

Then the Azil weaves a crown of iron thorns.

When his store of rice | is only dust and | meat a fantasy,

When the ravening | of his nothing leaves | naught but agony,

When his body’s bare, | and skins he wore were | eaten long ago

Then the Azil dons his crown and greets the snow

First they seemed like on | ly shadows, or the | dream the Azil sought

Then he saw the gleam | of demon eyes and | knew that he was caught

But instead of leap | ing on him they raised | muzzles to the wind.

Smelling chimney smoke the wolves and Azil grinned.

Stealing through the night | upon the light and | warmth of men inside

Who became the prey | of lupine grey and | that which should have died.

But its hunger was | not sated, growing | stronger than before

Naught can fill the hollow at an Azil’s core.

No, naught can fill the hollow man turned vendigore.

The last notes of his silver voice melted into thin air and Hoar allowed himself to breathe. He’d closed his eyes, letting the haunting words bear him far up the mountain where he ran with the wolves. Cold swirling over and around pack but never inside, like water breaking stones, and the air was so crisp he could almost smell the color of snow. A disapproving cough severed the smell like an steel muzzle and Hoar’s eyes flicked open. His grandmother Roa perhaps a few years past fifty had opened the bedroom door to glare at the pair. Though the brunt of her withering gaze rested on her husband who met it with the wide eyed innocence of a guilty child, Hoar still felt his insides shrivel.

“I thought I told you not to play the boy horror stories, he’ll have nightmares,” she said as though Hoar wasn’t there. He didn’t correct her, rather wished he had a blanket to sink his head beneath.

“You were snoring so loudly, I didn’t think you’d notice” the old man began but Roa cut him off, her nostrils flaring.

“I do not snore!”

“Hush, hush, people are sleeping,” he inclined his head to the jumble of arms contained within the chair and Gili’s prone form.

“Do not lecture me on keeping quiet,” she hissed, lower this time but advancing on him like a mother bear. In panic, Hoar realized he was squarely in the middle of the warpath and could no more discretely slip off to one side than sink through the floor and become one with the mountain. “You don’t understand how miserable it is to wake up tired.

“I know, I know,” the old man tried in conciliatory tone but she was getting into her rhythm.

“You go on at all hours of the day and night, slamming doors and singing,”

“You like my singing,” interjected the old man, but his wife ran right over his aggrieved voice, oblivious to her rising volume. From the shadow that had fallen over him, and the pair of calves shot through with varicose veins, Hoar knew Roa was leaning over him getting right into his grandfather’s face. He stared at his toes. They were small, and pink, and curling as if somehow they could hide beneath themselves.

“and stomping around in big boots and testing the springs on your traps!”

“It was one time!”

“It was twice and you know it, Hoar.”

Hoar’s namesake was about to reply but the sleeping Crater gave a snuffling snort and flopped into a new seemingly impossible position. Both adults went quiet, and moved to pick up the fallen quilt.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Hoar said, his bones popping as he bent to get one end of the blanket.

“I thought I told you not to play that horrid song,” she said, her wrath cooling as she tucked the sleeping boy in. Then, as if registering for the first time that the other children were there, her nostrils flared and she burst out in an angry hiss.

“You were supposed to put them to bed hours ago”

“Yes, yes, I was going to but they fell asleep and I didn’t have the heart to wake them,” Hoar waved at her in a vaguely soothing manner, laughter in the dimple of his cheeks. His grandson’s nose reappeared from behind his knees and he risked a glance up.

“Didn’t have the heart to wake them? What if Relya barged in right now and saw them just sprawled out like animals?”

“They’re children, what do you expect?”

“Why did you have to write that song?” Roa carried on, oblivious. The boy winced, feeling guilty for the first time for his part in the song. “You don’t understand how much trouble this could bring down on us.”

“Yes.” Hoar set the svelsa onto the side table with a quiet click that none the less had the effect of a blow to the diagram, cutting Roa off mid diatribe. “Yes I do understand. And so should the boy. He needs to know what our people are,”

“You mean your people.”

“Yes, yes my wicked, morally blasphemous, wife thieving people. It’s important the boy learn what an Azil really is, rather than get the wrong impression from me or his mother.”

I,” The old woman glared at him, then all at once her frown broke and she laughed. It was a laugh with ragged edges, just the beginnings of the illness that would subsume her life and boy Hoar, listening now, would learn to hate it. He would carry every note of that cracked glass laugh in his heart, looking back in time through unbroken decades of conscious, living memory to those moments and hate, and hold each one.

“I didn’t mean you were a bad influence, only that some of your songs are too sad and, and too close to what is real for a child.”

“He’ll grow up someday, and better hear it true from me than hurled at him by the Relya’s boy, or that Gorgem.”

“She’s harmless,” Roa said, avoiding mention of the younger Parseek. Not even her iron clad pillar of certainty in the goodness of humans would tolerate that load. “And it isn’t true.” Acknowledging her grandson’s presence for the first time, she took Hoar’s hands in hers, squatting down so she was on a level with his thin, solemn face. “It’s just a story, you understand? Some people are frightened by what they don’t understand. Look at your grandfather, is he a monster?” The old man gave a cheery wave, then made a face, his wild, white beard making him look like a snow bear with its long winter coat. The old woman swatted his knee and he desisted. “Is he a monster?” she asked again. The boy looked his grandfather squarely in the face and shook his head. “Azil aren’t monsters, and you aren’t either.” The boy nodded again, so seriously that his grandfather chuckled. “If you keep making that face, it’ll stick that way, you know?”