A cough like a declaration of war sounded from the cabin’s porch. Not that the thin woman a few years past fifty leaning aggressively against the cabin door, her angular face somehow managing to cram extra cheek bones beneath brown straight hair shot through with silver, always sent the diplomatic formality of a cough before going to war. Hoar’s Grandmother, Roa, was sharp of body, mind and temper, and the toughest human Hoar had ever known. Her knees and elbows so bony she could impale him were seemingly connected by steel cable and bile, but if she wanted to all those sharp edges could fold inward and he could lay his head down in her lap and let her stroke his hair while he closed his eyes and they both pretended he could fall asleep. This was not one of those moments. She glared at them. 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 tell the boys horror stories. They’ll have nightmares,” she said as though Crater and Hoar weren’t there. Crater, not in the direct war path, was skirting away from the line of fire. Hoar, right between his grandparents, didn’t have that option. He withdrew into the coat, partly to weather the conflict and partly to hide his face. If Val shined his charming grin and apologized this could all be over without Roa seeing his bruised face.

Val shined his charming grin. “You were snoring so loudly, I didn’t think you’d notice.” Roa’s nostrils flared. And Hoar dug himself deeper into the fleece lining.

“I do not snore!”

“Hush, hush, Gili’s sleeping,” he made a conciliatory gesture toward the cabin that was completely successful at enraging his wife further.

“Do not lecture me on keeping quiet,” she hissed, lower this time but advancing on him like a mother bear. About to be crushed beneath her claws, Hoar begged Crater with his eyes for salvation but Crater was apparently inexplicably fascinated by the night sky as he backed toward the cabin. “You don’t understand how miserable it is to wake up tired.”

“I know, I know,” the old man tried too late his conciliatory tone but Roa was getting into her rhythm.

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

“You like my singing,” interjected the old man, but his wife ran right over his aggrieved voice, oblivious to her rising volume. Hoar was so far down in his coat he could no longer see much beyond a strip of landscape and a pair of calves shot through with varicose veins but from the shadow that had fallen over him, Hoar knew Roa was leaning over him getting right into Val’s face. He balled his toes 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, Val.”

There was a clatter of logs as Crater, master of stealth, stepped back into a pile of firewood. Roa’s head whipped around like an adder pinning Crater to the ground with her glare.

“You were supposed to be in bed hours ago,”

“We- we” Crater stammered but Hoar, finally found his voice.

“We didn’t mean to wake you. We’re sorry. Grandfather.” Hoar, head still lowered half in abeyance, half to hide the black eye, felt Roa’s burning eyes fix on him.

“The boy’s right,” Val said without the playful goad he had before. “You just take Crater off to bed and we’ll be off.

“You were supposed to have had him in bed hours ago,” Roa said, unwilling to let go.

“Yes, yes, but you were sleeping and I didn’t have the heart to wake you by putting him to bed.”

“Didn’t have the heart to wake me? What if Relya barged up here this very instant and saw them? Me? I’m their guardian and I heard just yesterday about a certain song Azil are singing in the village?”

Hoar’s breath caught. If he’d know Roa would have

elp write that song about Parseek and it included a number of choice stanzas about the mayor, Relya Parseek, that Hoar didn’t understand but Val laughed and said it was perfect.

“They’re children, what do you expect? And I have no idea what you’re talking about. I haven’t heard a word about a new song”

“Why did you have to write that song? Why do you have to keep antagonizing her?” 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. What kind of example are you setting for Hoar. He needs to learn how to behave and you don’t understand!”

“Don’t I.” Hoar said, humor dissipating like chill breath in the dawn air. He set the svelsa case down on the ground and Roa winced, cutting off mid diatribe.  
 “Of course you do. I only meant the boy needs to learn what is expected of an Azil.”

“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.”

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

“Adriel’s harmless,” Roa said, avoiding mention of Gorgem. Not even her iron clad pillar of certainty in the goodness of humans would tolerate that load. “He’s just young. He’ll grow out of it, mark my words.” Hoar felt a twinge of pain in his eye and resolved to keep his head down a little longer.

“Because Reyla’s sure to teach him,”

“Don’t talk that way about her,” Roa said, voice rising. Val opened his mouth to reply but the opening of the cabin door interrupted him. Standing there silhouetted by candle light, pudgy hands set on hips and hair tossed back like she was about to lecture them, was Gili.

“I was sleeping,” she said as though accusing her hosts of shaking the baby’s creche.

“Now look what you’ve done, she’ll be up half the night.” Roa snarled. Then, transforming she turned to Gili and with smiles and roses said, “I’m sorry dear, Val was just leaving. Go back to bed, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You too, Crater. It’s well past time you were tucked in,” Val said sweeping past Hoar and flashing one of his charming grins at the angry women. He laid one hairy arm over Roa’s shoulder, steering her towards the cabin. “You won’t be so upset tomorrow morning when you wake up to rice drizzled with syrup and venison crackling over the fire. I promise, I promise! I’ll be as quiet as a fox.” He swooped down and gave Roa a whiskery kiss on the cheek.

“Hah,” Roa rasped disbelievingly, her face, set in a frown, twitched as though she were fighting not to smile.

“I promise.” Val said again, noticing the tremor the same way a mountain lion sees signs of fatigue in a deer at the edge of the herd. With explosive speed, he kissed her again and this time 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.

But Val didn’t know that yet, and, on his way to the cabin door, scooped up Crater as easily as if he were a bundle of sticks. Crater made a show of struggling but now the excitement had worn off tiredness was taking its tolls. He yawned widely and Gili yawned too, as though it were a cold passing from person to person and Hoar was immune. He wondered what it was like to feel drowsy.

Val herded the humans into the cabin he’d built and did not own and closed the door.

I,” The old woman glared at him, then all at once her frown broke and she laughed. “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.”