Hoar glowered at the richly adorned facade as if machine behind his eyes could bubble the paint, scorch the word and turn the brass lettering above the door to molten rain. He’d been standing there full four minutes, muscles stubbornly refusing to reach out and knock. It was a forty minute hike back to where the frostbitten girl might already be dead; would be dead if he wasted another second. Hoar didn’t move. Then a trill of laughter broke out on the mountainward road and a pair of girls strolled round a corner. The giggling choked off when they saw him, turning to expressions of fear and disgust, as if a white haired wolf spider had crept up on them unannounced. They were too young. Old enough to remember a time when a missing limb had been rare but too young to be properly afraid. Hoar turned his glare on them and they retreated, back the way they’d come, back toward the Mayor’s home. He didn’t have time to waste. Hoar reached out and took the knocker as though it was a baby viper. It was an ornate thing, wrought in the shape of a fox head from brass, just like the lettering above it which spelled “Ms. Lina Ague, Linctus, Apothecist, Veever.” Hoar gave a solid, wood denting knock.

“I’ve been up since dawn slaving away so unless this is an emergency, come back tomorrow,” came a woman’s annoyed voice from somewhere deep within the house. It was a voice that Hoar knew well, and still made his stomach suddenly hollow and cold. Wondering if he would spit venom if he spoke, he knocked again, louder this time and more insistently. There was splashing, a few bumps and bangs that sounded as though a kettle had been dropped. The door was flung open. Gili stood there, ample bosom supporting the fluffiest towel Hoar had ever seen. She did not look her age, and hadn’t for twenty years if the tidbits Ulma fed him were to be believed. Smooth skin, full lips and breasts, a face free from the ravages of time; the perks of being a Veever. “Oh,” she said, surprise, anger, embarrassment and something else warring for control of her face. Anger won. It usually did. “Come to apologize, have you?” Hoar almost stuck her. He could feel his hands curling as though they were grasping her fat neck. With an effort, he changed the strangle hold to a major chord, the opening to Ritatin-tin-tin.

“No,”

“Well then? Are you just going to stand there and stare? Say what you want,” she said petulantly. For her, it was almost a regular speaking voice.

“Get your bag,” Hoar said, remembering why he had come. The look of resentment was replaced by what Hoar might have thought was concern for him, if he didn’t know better. She looked him up and down, noting the blood stain where the woman’s dagger had pricked his belly. She reached out to touch him, the expanse of thick white towel slipping from where she’d held it revealing another finger’s breadth of skin. He drew away from her touch.

“I’m fine,” he said, pulling his wolf’s skin and frown tighter around him like armor. “It’s not for me.”

“Who then,” she said, that odd look which had been there before returning and winking out just as quickly.

“I don’t know.”

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“Idiot. If you can’t hold it in, go and find me someone who can.” Gili’s voice cut like her knife, through Hoar’s flesh piercing his pride. He choked back his bile and in the privacy of his own head sand the tune of Violet Tears, weaving a world away from the cabin in the snowy crags of the Golemel mountain range on the verge of the Vaicour empire. The knife didn’t make much sound as it slid through the swollen black skin, but the woman did. She screamed, and Hoar’s Violet Tears broke.

“God dammit. Why is she still conscious? Ketamine. Now.” Hoar looked at her outstretched hand blankly. “The tinted bottle that says Ketamine on it. Hurry.” He found it swiftly and passed it to her. She drew another cc, quickly and expertly from the vial tested the flow from her syringe and readied the needle. The thick bore pressed against the skin of the prone woman’s for an instant and then slid in. Hoar felt his stomach churn. “I said if you can’t hold it in,” began Gili but Hoar cut her off.

“I’m fine,”

Gili rolled her eyes, “If you say so.” She pulled the needle free and pressed a boiled rag down so the blood could clot. Then she turned on Hoar. “So, Mr. avoid-me-for-sixteen-years, who is she and why am I cutting off what’s left of her fingers on your God damn living room table?” Hoar frowned, organizing his thoughts one by one, like a man with an axe lopping off the branches to a fallen tree. The important thing, when alone in the woods and wielding a wedge of sharpened steel was not to let something slip.

“I found her on the mountain, dressed for a delta night and half frozen.”

“You found her, did you? And I suppose she’s just really bad at lighting fires,” Gili said sarcastically, nodding on the burn that lanced across the woman’s face. Hoar didn’t answer. “God dammit Hoar what the hell happened.”

“I don’t know.”

Gili’s eyes flashed. “Interrupt my bath after a long, long day, bloody as a gutted pig, drag me out in the middle of the night to some half dead girl and then don’t tell me anything. Is this some childish game to you?”

“No,” Hoar’s voice almost came out a growl, and Gili suddenly remembered the night he’d earned his cloak. She looked down at her patient, pinching the meat of her arm again savagely. The woman gave a weak cry. “God dammit!” Gili shouted to nothing and no one, “She should be out cold for a week,” Gili turned on Hoar, reading his frown like Grimor’s Introduction to the Vivisectionist’s Art. “You have to tell me everything. Is she some delta tart looking for adventure? Is she on anything? Stimulants? Amphetamines?”

“I’d never let someone go up the mountain dressed like that,” Hoar said, offended and entirely avoiding the question.

“Is she on anything?”

“She is Azil,” Hoar said through clenched teeth, as though every word were being dragged from by a train of draft horses. Gili’s eyes went wide as saucers, and Hoar thought he saw a flash of fear within them before grimaced and hissed,

“Idiot. Idiot. Idiot, idiot idiot!” Her voice rose with each, punctuated syllable until Hoar thought the villagers kilometers down the mountain might hear her and she hurled the rag at him. The bloody cloth hit him in the chest. “Ketamine doesn’t work on your kind.”

“Why?” Hoar said, his forehead wrinkling.

“I don’t know, do I look like an Angel to you? You’re the one it doesn’t work on.” Gili lifted her scrubbed clean hand to run it through her hair then caught herself. “I might have something. Check my bag for a vial labeled Veercyclidine. Hoar obeyed, rummaging through the neatly arranged bottles, tins and wickedly sharp tools of a Veever’s craft. His hands were passing over a bone saw when Gili interrupted, “Never mind. I’ve got it.” He turned to see her drawing a scruple of clear liquid from another vial. It disappeared into one of the many pockets sewn into her coat in a flash and then she was drugging the woman once more. This time, Hoar didn’t wretch, though he still grimaced as the needle plunged.

“VCD has some side effects,” she said to Hoar, waiting for the analgesic to take effect.

“Like what?” said Hoar. He didn’t like what he’d heard in Gili’s voice.

“Mania. Excited delirium. Phyrexia,” recognizing Hoar’s confused frown, she rolled her eyes. “She’s going to get feverish and think she’s very strong. She might turn violent.”

“Why,” Hoar said, appalled.

“Because,” Gili said with a knowing grin. “It has its uses. It can make a human go for twenty four hours without sleep. It keeps you fresh and feeling no pain. And funnily enough, it’s the only drug I know that numbs Azil too.”

“It won’t knock her out?”

Gili laughed. “With that much VCD in her system? It’s likely to make her more lively. Twice that and she’ll perform the surgery herself. Five times that and she’ll dance the harvest jig all the way down the mountain on bleeding feet. At least, until her heart bursts.” Hoar blinked. He didn’t ask why the Veevers in Kirch had developed something so dangerous. Those had been different times, a world and a war away. “I’ll need your help holding her down while I fix her up. Think you can do that without being sick?” Hoar nodded, and remembered the fox.

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The same hands that played the svelsa so beautifully that Hoar wished his heart might stop just to hear it better brought the scarless mallet down with a crack. That’s what they called it, down in the village, the velvet touch. Ladies down on the delta paid more for perfect pelts, so the trappers and woodsman in the Golemel learned to kill without them. A scared, scarlet fox fur scarf didn’t sell. Hoar’s grandfather lifted the little creature into the air, still anchored to the ground by the trap. In a movement so natural he might simply have been playing a chord he cut its throat. In the woods, on the mountain side, a living thing died.

“They can’t feel it if they’re stunned. Nice and quick, that’s the way. Put them out nice and quick. Can you do that?”

Hoar nodded, though his stomach lurched and there was a hunted look in his eyes contrary to their business that night. He was almost eight years old, too old to be afraid, Hoar told himself. But then, he never had been a very good liar.

They heard its scream over a kilometer away, and the gnarled old tree of a woodsman quickened his pace. “Best be quick. It wouldn’t do to leave the poor thing there a second longer than we need to.” He needn’t have said anything. Hoar practically ran to the creak where they’d laid their trap a fortnight ago. A fox has a very human like scream, almost like a child. It was all too easy for Hoar to imagine it was Crater up ahead, or Gili.

One paw locked in the steel jaws of the trap, the fox tried to rise to its feet when it saw him. The leg was torn and a stained a deeper red than the foxes almost orange pelt which was not sleek but shot through with flecks of dirt and pine needles. Last year, Hoar had cleaned the pelts for his grandfather. It had been fun, almost like a game. His grandfather pressed the scarless into Hoar’s limp fingers. “Don’t hesitate, and don’t be shy. Right between the eyes.”

Hoar approached the fox. Its mouth was open, a red tongue lolling on a bed of spittle. Golden eyes looked at him flecked with a vital defiance. It barked a raw throated bark at him and pulled back as far as the chain allowed. Hoar halted. “Don’t hesitate,” his grandfather urged him, standing reassuringly at his back, confidence and trust resonating in his bass voice. Hoar clutched the scarless tightly and swung. Just before it hit, he closed his eyes.

“Well done, well done. That’s the hardest part. Now finish it, nice and quick,” the mallet was tugged from his unresisting hands and the flensing knife proffered. Hoar took it numbly, the stunned fox lying before him as though it already dead. It’s just an animal, he told himself. And picked it up gingerly by the scruff of its neck, like it was a kitten and he its mother. Nice and quick, he thought and touched flensing knife to throat. The fox came to life, thrashing wildly within his grasp. It clawed, and bit, and screamed and screamed. His grandfather darted forward, strong, deft fingers driving the hammer blow down but the scream continued and Hoar realized he was screaming.

“Did it get you? Are you hurt?” His grandfather was shaking him and Hoar stopped screaming, more for lack of air than anything else.

“No,” he blubbered, once he’d regained his breath.

His grandfather hugged Hoar tightly to his chest, “Don’t scare me like that. I thought it’d taken a finger off you, you damn silly fool.” After a breathe, the old man seemed to calm himself, and spoke in the same, velvet tone he used to speak to the dogs whenever thunder or lightning sent them cowering beneath the bed. “Hush, hush. It’s all right. I should have waited another year, for you to be stronger. It’s harder to stun that it looks. Next year, next year you’ll get it.” Next year, Hoar did. But he never forgot the scream of the fox and the dead thing come back to terrified half-life within his two hands.

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When the Trader’s cart rolled over the final rise and Kirch spread out before her in ivory and blue Gili thought her heart might sing. Crater, squashed into the third of the driver’s seat that remained after the trader’s bulk rolled over, was speechless. The Trader just smiled and shook his head, taking in their reactions rather than the majesty of the delta’s city. For one, shining, ivory and blue hour Gili imagined that Kirch had been her one and only dream, and it was a dream come true. She would learn the Vivisectionist’s art from the hands of the masters in Hallowed Tower and become the greatest Veever that ever lived. Then, she’d met Master Illutan, and her dream had become a far-off pinprick of light so out of reach it might have been a comet, burning to cinders and hot gas before it could every reach her.

“Three cc’s of Calantris. Three, idiot child.”

“I did use three,” Gili lied. She’d only used two but two should be more than enough.

“I’ll strangle Aleth next time he pokes his fat neck in here, bringing me a child like you.”

“Not if I get the corpulent bastard first,” Gili bit back. It had been nothing but shear abuse since the day she’d come to this third rate- this fourth rate Veever. He didn’t even work with people. Dogs. He worked with hairy, filthy, stinking dogs day in and day out. No other Veever in the city would take her, the Trader had explained, not some backwater girl from the Golemel without so much as a letter of recommendation from an Apothacist. She’d been lucky to get a position with a Veever, any Veever, at all, he’d said. After a year, with Illutan’s letter of introduction, she’d be able to enter one of the lesser universities, he’d said. He’d been ever so pleased with the arrangement when he’d made it, passing Gili over to the hack Veever like unsuspecting spare parts. Corpulent bastard.

They were in what her master laughably called a surgery. A single, dog sized slab and cold room barely suitable for storing onions and leeks through a hot summer. The equipment was a mongrel collection of spare parts, much like Illutan’s ancient, foul smelling dog Sixart which dribbled and dozed on the far side of the room. The very first surgery Gili had witnessed had been on that dog. Her last functioning kidney had wavered and shut down, the first link in a chain of organs slowly and steadily being lowered into the ground for their final resting. Fortunately for Sixart, there’d been a brutal fight at one of the Omasta rings in the lower quarter, and Master Illutan’s Augmentation Emporium had received a good number of spare parts. Last night they’d reaped the Omasta hound pit’s crop of fresh parts. One, which had been named Kallith, reposed on the slab now, heart beat its last tattoo within the walls of Kallith’s chest as Calantris did its work. She’d live on in other, Gili told herself, so long as she didn’t botch the vitrification.

“Foolish child,” Illutan barked. Gili’s trembling hands had almost knocked the tray of instruments to the immaculately scrubbed floor as she replaced the syringe. She’d scrubbed it, working on her knees like some serving girl. That was not what an apprentice did. An apprentice was supposed to learning the craft. “Do I need to send you back to shelving’s salves and scrubbing floors.”

“No, sir,” Gili said with clipped politeness.

“If you can’t do it then say so, child. I won’t have you ruin perfectly good parts.”

“I’m fine.” She snapped. Illutan’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t comment. That was just like the man. He’d give her just enough rope to hang herself then watch her swing. Well, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Gili forced her hands to stillness, and picked up the scalpel. It was angel steel, almost three times as heavy, and at three centimeters long, just under the legal limit. She found the jugular and prepared to cut. Just a quick, centimeter cut and then attach the pump. The vitrification fluids were waiting nearby, ready to flood veins and arteries with glass once emptied. It would be easy. “I’m fine,” she repeated within her head even as her stomach churned. From the corner, Sixart whined and Gili plunged the knife blade. Kallith writhed to life, arcing blood and thrashing in her bonds. Gili leapt back, shrieking.

Illutan snatched the syringe up and slamming the thrashing creature down. This was no meager feat, the fighting hounds of Kirch having been bred and augmented for strength, speed and ferocity in the fighting pits. It was over in a flash, and Illutan’s strong hands were dragging her to her feet.

“Did it bite you.” Gili’s mouth mumbled something unintelligible “Did it bite you!” he was shaking her, wide eyed boring into hers searchingly.

“N-no,” she managed. He dropped her and, surprisingly, her legs took her own weight.

“Stupid, foolish child. I said three cc’s. Three! You’re back to shelving and scrubbing till you’ve learned how to listen to simple instructions. Can you manage even that?”

Anger cut through her shock, but before it could take hold of her tongue and ruin everything she’d worked so hard for these past months, a black wave of shame smothered it. “Yes, Master Illutan.”

“Get out.”

Gili rose and left the surgery leaving Illutan to clean up her mess. She’d earn her way back into surgery, complete this abominable apprenticeship and become a full fledged Veever. Eventually did. But she never forgot the snap of the razor teeth a fingers breadth from her hands and the dead thing come back to terrified half-life beneath her knife.

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A ruddy glow crept beneath the woman’s skin, as though her face was the door to a freshly stoked furnace coming to life. The tatter of lips that were left peeled back, revealing white teeth, white as the snow she’d been plucked from and Gili realized she was smiling. A gurgle of sound clawed its way out of her throat, but once the dam had burst a clear flow of laughter sprung forth.

“That would be the delirium,” she said to Hoar who was wearing his frightened frown. There was a slight widening of the eyes forcing through the oppression of his brows. His hair had gone almost pure silver, since she’d last seen him. It suited him. There were some men in the village with hardly a hair left on their heads and more fingers than teeth but not him. He’d aged well, like fine wine, like her.

Gili casually pricked her patient’s palm. There wasn’t even a flinch. “We could butcher her and she wouldn’t feel a thing,” Gili declared. Hoar put on his disapproving frown, a pursing lips and a straightening of his shoulders, as if he was looking down on her. Contrary to the purely physical difference in size, she’d never felt looked down on by him. With the smoothness of a natural born con artist, her memory passed over the one exception to this without a rollick in the waves. “Spike me. Just relax, I’m a Veever. Now hold her down so she doesn’t kill herself while I save her life.”

Frostbite wasn’t rare in the Golemel. Mostly the villagers learned the signs, but how many fingers and toes it took for them to learn was another question. Sometimes, if a group were caught away from their snug homes in an early snow or some damn fool thought he could navigate the twenty steps from his front door to the woodpile in a blizzard things got bad. They didn’t half realize what was happening until the feeling had been gone. If they were lucky, a friend would come dig them out and Gili was called to do what she could. If they were very lucky, she could save the fingers, though some preferred the amputation. Nerve damage, like red hot needles being forced through pad, core and nail wasn’t uncommon. This case, however, was one of the worst she’d seen. Whoever this Vaicour voyeur was, she’d be lucky if she could count to five and that was including her toes. With an almost depressing experience, she stripped back the swollen black flesh, Hoar nailing the arm to the table with his weight. Even still, the woman tried to twist that girlish, giggle erupting in disquieting outbursts. Gili hated working on Azil.

“Bone Pliers,” she ordered. Hoar frowned confusedly at her and she rolled her eyes. “Bone Pliers. There, right there. Look where I’m pointing.”

“Why are they called that?” Hoar asked, as he handed the steel, snub nosed cutters to her. She rolled them in her grip, finding the right length for leverage. They didn’t look particularly thick, but still. “Look and see.” Hoar did for half a second, before turning his gaze fixedly skywards. Gili smirked, and squeezed.

One of the serious drawbacks of using VCP on patients, Gili mused, was that it tricked their heart into thinking a mountain bear was bare stride away and gaining. Not only did this tax the heart to the point of collapse, it sent her patient’s blood pressure sky high. It was threatening to burst the flaps of skin pulled tight over the stubs of bone and stitched down firmly.

“Can you replace them?”

“What?”

“Give her new fingers. New hands.”

“Of course I can. If I had an extra set lying about. So unless you’re willing to donate your pretty svelsa hands I think I’ll just try to stitch her up. Now stop asking stupid questions and hold her still. I know I make this look easy,” her last three words were grunts as she sheared off another millimeter chip of bone. She felt little right now, in the heat of the moment, but come morning her hands would be aching fiercely. And there were still all the toes. Another shock of metal shears shutting ran up her own finger bones and the woman giggled. “That tickles.”

Hoar looked up to Gili. He’d been able to watch her repair of the last two fingers on this hand. She’d left her a thumb and middle finger. They were the thickest digits, and least damaged, but she was an Azil if they’d heal without burning nerves. “What did she say?”

“Don’t distract me.” The woman spoke in Vaicour, but not a delta dialect. Gili was still trying to place where she’d heard that accent before when the woman spoke again. “Are you giving me new hands mother?”

“You could call it that,” Gili grunted. Her regular steel scalpel ringed the pinkey, slicing black and blue necrosis away like when Parseek had killed the sapling maples by cutting into the heartwood of the tree and severing the veins all the way around.

“What did she say?” Hoar asked again. Gili ignored him.

“I’ll be better this time. I promise. I promise, mother,”

“I am not your mother,” Gili said, tugging the flesh back. It resisted. She must not have cut all the way through.

“No,” the woman sounded confused, and hurt, like a child realizing she had been lied too. Gili glanced up to discover that she was the focus of an intense, penetrating gaze. The ruined face was, like the smoldering cloth of a tent just before the flames reached the powder kegs, but her eyes were crystal orbs of hatred piqued by VCD.

Gili’s knife edge intake of breath was all the warning the old woodsman got before her patient flipped from docile Azil to thrashing, screaming devil. There was a second of coiling muscle and then Hoar was crashing backwards and the mad woman was reaching for Gili. Through the Veever’s art, Gili had kept her body curvaceous in the face of time’s passage, but beneath the fat, powerful muscles that had carried her through the bracken and sucking mud of the \_\_\_\_ Campaigns. She caught the clawing hands and wrestled them onto the table, pinning them down with her weight where they couldn’t do any more harm, to her or themselves. But the Azil curled like a viper, a wild kick aimed at her skull. She dodged, partially, and the bony shin struck the meat of her shoulder. Gili grunted in pain.

Then, Hoar appeared like a revenant rising to seek vengeance and slammed the VCD crazed woman down onto the table, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped for air, but Hoar, frown gone, a snarl in its place, was up on the table, his knee pressing into her thin chest. She kicked at air, and Gili let go; Hoar had nailed her hands to the table with his own. Anger and pain twisted his face. He only looked up when she struck him across the cheek.

“I said ease up! You’re choking her you fool!” Her hand smarted, it was like slapping a rock. But it had the desired effect. Hoar’s face went from anger to horror in a second, his eyes wide and frown sickened not angry and he removed his knee from her diaphragm. “Stay there,” Gili cautioned. “God dammit, I’m used to working with an experienced crew.” She saw the look on his face and relented, “No, that’s not what I mean. You’ve never done this before is all. She’s flying high as heaven right now, no telling what might set her off. I just never expected her to have that much strength. I should have restrained her first, but it’s been a long time since I’ve done this.”

This didn’t seem to help. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have- that wasn’t- it wasn’t something a human would have done.”

Gili felt like shouting. Instead, she rolled her eyes and said, “hold her down. We can determine who’s a monster after we save her life.”

Surprisingly, none of the stitches she’d put in had burst, but it was still almost dawn before they were done. It would have been sooner, but Gili had to keep feeding the fire which had died from neglect, she noticed, sometime before the Azil’s explosive mania. As the fire wood dwindled, energy evaporated from Gili’s bones, leaving her more drained than she had been in years. It did not help that when the Azil wasn’t crying, she was intermittently begging or cursing Hoar. Gili refused to translate, but from the set of his frown, she guessed he didn’t need her to.

“Please, you’re an Azil too. Don’t you understand? Why can’t you understand?

“There’s a special place in hell for traitors and cowards monster!”

“Please. Please! You can stop this. We can find mother, she’ll save us both.”

“It’ll take you apart next. Pick you apart, piece by piece and you’ll deserve it.”

“Please. Please?”

Just as she was finishing packing the last bandage on the woman’s melted face with enough antibiotics to kill a sheep, she spoke. “Vaicour flesh witch.” Her tone was neither pleading, or furious. It was plain, flat, as if she were commenting upon the weather. “I’m going to eat you.”

“What did she say?” Hoar asked.

“I’m going to bind her hands down, so she doesn’t hurt herself. Or do anything stupid.”

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Outside the hut Hoar and Gili sat on the stoop, overlooking the village. Neither of them said anything, which was not the same as neither of them saying anything. A growing bubble of silence was manufactured, traded and taxed until Hoar unearthed a safe, unimportant topic, collapsing the silence economy.

“What do you usually do with the bones?”

“Hmm?”

“The bones,” Hoar said again, running forefinger over palm.

“Bury them somewhere no one’ll find them. Burn the flesh and scatter the ashes. Just get rid of it. When I was a girl, one of father’s apprentices lost his finger to a carless slip of the knife. Idiot. He kept the bones in a vial on his mantle.

Down in the village a few people were stirring, those whose days began when the sun’s first rays peeked over the curtain of mountains and ended when it’s last sank beneath the horizon. There were rooves to clear, paths to cut and fires to rekindle for the morning breakfast. Winter has fallen, and Hrult was ready for it.

“What’re you going to do about the Azil?”

Hoar shrugged, watching with hawk like eyes a three dots that were children made almost spherical beneath layer upon layer of coats in the village bellow. One child was plowing a path to the village square, the other two chasing in their wake.

“Hoar, she’s an Azil.”

“I know.”

Hoar’s frown was inscrutable. Gili tried again, “Hoar. She’s- she might be dangerous. Did you ever consider you saved a v- an Azil not worth saving?”

“I did.”

“Then why did you bring her back?”

Hoar shrugged. The children had reached the elder tree in the village center. One, the tallest, was hoisting their fellows into the lower branches.

“What are you going to do when the drugs wear off and she’s some sort of monster?”

The last, earthbound child raised their arms and was pulled up by their friends, leaving the mundane ground for loftier goals. The old man remembered climbing the tree so many decades ago and felt very old indeed.

“Hoar. Hoar! Look at me!” Gili was glaring at him. “God dammit Hoar, we have to be sensible about this.”

“What? If she is a monster what do you want me to do?”

“Take care of it.” Hoar frowned at her, strands of silver beard tickling his face in the high altitude wind. “I’m not saying she’s going to come down a blood thirsty beast ready to slit our throats but she wasn’t exactly acting sane.”

“You said that drug makes people do things,” Hoar said with the air of a man adrift finding a piece of flotsam to hold tight to.

“It can,” said Gili, carefully, “but sometime people do violent things because they’re violent people,” Hoar shifted his gaze back to the village. The children were halfway up the tree. The one who had helped the others up had halted, but the leader was climbing further and further up daring the wind to rattle the branches.

“Maybe she’s a perfectly normal Azil, who decided it would be a great idea to go up into the mountains just before the first snow fell and is very bad at lighting fires. Or maybe there’s a reason someone was trying to kill her.”

“I’m not going to try and hurt her just because someone else did.”

Gili fought back the urge to shake him.

“Will you at least promise me that you’ll watch her? For any signs that something’s going wrong or that you made a mistake.”

The child had almost made it to the top, climbing thinner and thinner branches. They’d either OTHER CHILD IS CHASING REWRITE THINGY BOB IF SVELSA SURVIVES?

“How much do I owe you for the medicine,”

“What?” said Gili, caught off guard.

“For the medicine. Erythromysin.”

“Nothing. That stuff’s dirt cheap,” Hoar winced, as if bitten by an insect.

“For your labor then. The VCP, working late.”

“Nothing! Hoar, I know you can’t afford this.”

He glowered at her. “Not at the Azil price.”

Gili tossed her head angrily. “Not at any price. I saw what you called living, you barely have enough for one person to make it through the winter. It wasn’t like that when we were kids.”

“We’re not kids anymore.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know why either? Go to Crater, talk to him. You know he’ll buy your furs at twice the price you’ve been getting and you can live like a human being again.” Hoar stood with an avalanche of cracks moving up his spine as he straightened. “Or let me take the Azil. You can’t support her and yourself if you continue to be this pig headed,” Gili said. Far, far below, the climber was resting on branches so thin they were hardly thicker than a hair at this distance. Below, their pursuer waited, confident that the child would come down, either in their own time or at a time of the wind’s choosing. MOVE THIS TO END. RESPACE CHILDREN DOWN BELOW.

“No.” He turned to cabin.

“God dammit Hoar, can’t you see I’m trying to do you a favor?” Gili scrambled to her feet to follow after him but she was sluggish. Tired and the felt onset of chills like birds can sense the coming change to the dark season.

“Will this favor end with her strung up by her feet, throat open for the flies?”

“Spike me, what is wrong with you?” Hoar heard the hurt and anger in her voice and told himself he didn’t care. He

“I have some purchases to make.”

“Who’ll you sell to if you won’t go to Crater. Who?”

“The only honest human in Hrult.”

Hoar, looking anywhere but at the Veever’s battleground, was caught completely off guard. With an explosion of VCD strength the woman twisted like a viper striking the off center woodsman and sending him crashing to the floor. Then she was on top of Gili, a howling, clawing demon. Gili threw up her arms, trying to shield her face, and felt teeth sink into her arm and hold on. A deep, vicious cold spread from the bite, greedily sucking out heat and feeling as if it were starving.

The dark mass of Hoar came out of nowhere, cannoning into the feral woman’s side like a leaping wolf. They went down with a crash and Gili heard what might have been a shriek or a laugh was cut off. She got gingerly to her feet, examining her arm. The pink imprint of teeth was left on satin white skin. A bead of rich, red blood so dark against the white that it was almost black, welled up. Of course, it didn’t hurt.

“Help?” asked Hoar from the floor and Gili realized she had just been sitting there, staring at her wound. The Azil woman was splayed out on the ground of the hut as though she had no bones, a point belayed by the stick of white still poking out of the missing finger. It was bleeding.

“Goddammit,” she swore and helped Hoar hoist the unconscious Azil onto the table. “If she doesn’t get infection from the burns, the frostbite, or the dead animals you buried her in, she’ll get it from your floor.” Hoar grunted. “And that head would you gave her certainly won’t help.”

“I apologize for not letting her strangle you.” This time Gili was the one who grunted. “At least she won’t move now.”

“I still need you here to hold stitches and to brain her if she goes savage again.”

They worked in mute tandem until the light of dawn began to reflect off the snow outside. At last, Gili capped the Erythromysin, realized the pinky vial was empty, and threw it into the pile of discarded gauze and gut. With a weariness that set in so rapidly it was frightening, Gili

Even Hoar looked strained, as close to tired as he ever got. The last few days had not exactly been a vacation,

When Gili came back to consciousness, it felt like punching up and through river crust thrashing from unimaginable cold into merely excruciating chills. Her teeth were chattering so hard that she thought they might shatter. But there was warmth around her, and it was seeping in. “Hoar?” she said, weakly. The warmth shifted, pulling back. She tried to follow it but it slipped away. Gili opened her eyes to see Hoar settling himself beside a newly kindled fire, feeding more wood into the flames. “Hoar,” she said again, more sure this time.

“Don’t move. You’ll heat up faster.”

Write about Gili’s knowledge about missing limbs. Gili understands what the woman is shouting about, delirious. Lies to Hoar (partial truth at least). Pact to kill her if need be.

interrupt me Is this some childish game to you? You

Hoar took his

sang Violet Tear in the privacy of his own head weaving a world away from the here and now.

On a table specked with a different reddish brown, through air that was thick with fumes from alcohol and blue with curses and sometimes thrashing, sometimes pleading cries that Hoar and Lina weathered as best they could, the woman had said her name. She had said much else, Lina translating for Hoar what the woman half mad with pain and fever babbled. In an unspoken pact sealed with blood and catgut and boiled rags bound tight, they chose silence, and a new name for the Azil had survived her pursuers, the snows and Lina’s knife. Svelsa.

. She’d taken the gut out during the last visit, and smiled in pleasure at a job well stitched. Hoar had given Svelsa a half skin of brandy and then held her wrists while the Thumbdraught sheared the dead flesh away until she found live tissue. In spite of the drink, woman had passed out when Lina’s razor found living nerves. That had been well timed, for Lina drew out a pair of steel pliers Hoar appraised to be worth several high quality skins, and, a millimeter chip at a time, cut out the stub of bone. Hoar had only frowned, though Lina caught him rubbing his own fingers absentmindedly while she was stitching the flaps of skin over. It wasn’t the first time Lina had amputated a limb.

Hoar was pulling the final, hastily mudded slat from the opening in his front door where actual glass had once been painstakingly set when he heard her coming up the muddy path. He turned to face Lina and her stick making their squelching way up the muddy path. Time had not been kind to the

The first worry lines in Lina’s round, red face were making themselves apparent by the time she changed her name

Hoar came into the world and now she had almost completed her transformation into a desiccated cherry with sagging skin hanging loosely off the pit of her skull. But out of spite and dogged pride, she still managed the six kilometer journey carrying her out bag to Hoar’s cabin, just like she had at the beginning of last winter.

“Come to see her. She in the meadow?” Lina said by way of greeting. Hoar nodded, face set in its usual frown and set his battered mallet down. He went inside and retrieved two chairs. One was a rich, reddish brown and of the same age as Lina herself. The other looked like it had been fashioned by someone who was both blind and, judging by the number of splinters, had a pants seat of solid timber. He’d cobbled it together out of firewood and it would go right back to being firewood as soon as the freshly split planks had finished curing in his grandfather’s meadow and he could do the job properly. The ancient Thumbdraught took the seat fashioned by Hoar’s far more adept grandfather and Hoar stumped back outside and down the curving path the hundred meters to his great great grandfather’s meadow.

A few sorry bundles of hides were rolled up or stretched out for fleshing, and the tanning barrel, repaired by Hoar’s mother and repaired again by Hoar, stood empty. Along the northern slope, flat stones were placed at regular intervals into a sudden rise amid a few small but determined clusters of white flowers. To the south, were the most light would fall, a few green leaves were sprouting from tilled earth. They would be fat turnips and onions by the fall, if he was fortunate. Enough split log boards lay out on runners to make a good start on a second cabin, and in the heart of the clearing, a growing stack of shingles piled up beside the woman who had been remade, name and all.

She didn’t seem surprised to see him, though that meant little. What could be called her face so rarely showed the thoughts of the mind behind her penetrating eyes, one half obscured by grotesquely healed skin. The frost had taken its due. A nose, an ear, seven toes, four fingers and the tips of four more. A smile too, if she’d been the type before Hoar found her in the snow. She’d kept her thumbs, enough to hold the axe head and, albeit clumsily, split cedar shingles from her seat on a stump. Eyes looking out from above cheeks that were more ragged edged craters than cheek watched him approach. Her mouth contorted into what Hoar had come to recognize as a smile, though she had hardly more lip than a snake. Hoar hated having to look at that face, especially when it was smiling at him or eating. He knew she had trouble eating, even the specially prepared meals that were more watery porridge than meat and vegetables. He frowned at her smiles, and beckoned for her to make her hobbling way back to the cabin.

Both seats were empty, but Lina’s out bag perched innocently next to them on the narrow porch. Hoar scowled, and opened his door. The old woman was closing the cabinet’s top drawer and turned to stare down Hoar’s suddenly fierce glower. She didn’t seem abashed in the slightest, only raised one wizened eyebrow at the woodsman.

“Good morning, Lina,” Svelsa managed in halting Golemell when she saw Lina exiting the house, Hoar slamming the door pointedly. Svelsa had a hard time forming the drawn out syllables, the hard p’s and k’s to beginning with, and Hoar wasn’t the best teacher.

“Hold still, child,” Lina said slowly though that didn’t matter. By now, Svelsa knew the routine. Lina sat her down in the midmorning light and began her prodding examination. She took the woman’s mutilated hands and clucked satisfied at her handwork

Crater still had both arms, but they weren’t the one’s he’d been born with. He’d donned the Vaicor red and made NCO in the royal army along with Parseek. They had led good Golemel boys and girls to glory and freedom marching down from their mountains singing songs of bravery and heroism. That had been late in the war, but news trickled slowly uphill. Only the recruiting sergeants, beating their drums and decked out in brass and red, had made it so far as Hrult, and they seemed happy to sign on every shinning youth who’d heard the stories of gallant combats and beating the rebels back that the Trader had brought last season. Every shining youth and one aging woman tasked by the elders to make sure their children came home in one piece. She never lost sleep over the job she’d done out there, in the mud and smoke laced rain on the steel and powder shattered plain. Every night since returning with the pieces of men and women she’d managed to hold together, she brewed the foul tasting Valerian leaf into a tea before bed and slept without dreams.

One unanswerable question was why Parseek hadn’t raised a fuss about Saskia. She had a sneaking suspicion that Crater had intervened, but would never have dared ask either Crater or Hoar. Fit of body, sixteen years of age, human. Those were the only prerequisites the recruiters had, and they would have let anyone who looked old enough to hold a rifle the right way round join if the elder’s hadn’t put a stop to that. They hid their desperation for fresh bodies well, but the wiser Golemel should have thought to question louder why recruiters were coming this far into the mountains when the fight was going so well, when the rebels were all but beaten back, when they were fight beleaguered, cowardly humans. On those nights, she brewed an extra leaf, despite the almost intolerable bitterness. One question she knew the answer to without asking was that if Hoar had known the enemy had deployed Ursars, he would have followed Saskia regardless of what the royal army would have done to any Azil even an Azil citizen of Vaicour, during the Unification.

Lina returned her attention to the task at hand. Do the job in front of you. It had been how she’d made it through the Unification. But she’d never been good at stopping herself from thinking, and right now, she was thinking about a woman who looked Vaicour but spoke it with an unsettling ghost of an accent, showing up wearing clothes that, in the crags in winter would kill her surely as wearing slabs of red meat in a snow bear’s cave would. It was a wonder she’d made it so far up the mountains. Though what humans and Azil were capable of when giving the right motivation didn’t surprise her anymore. As the Thumbdraught ground ashroot into a paste that would harden like sun dried mud and tipped a whole finger vile of Erythromysin into the pestle and appraised the burns that sliced the woman’s face as neatly as a compound fracture, she wasn’t surprised. It had been years since she’d seen such wounds as that, in the medical tents twenty kilometers, packaged up neatly by the front line surgeons and sent to her like a box of ripe apples, the expiration date stamped neatly on the lid.

“Eryth doesn’t come cheap,” Lina said, spreading the compound on her patient’s unconscious face. “And only god can tell how much good it’ll do, if any.” Hoar didn’t say anything, only frowned and checked the pot over the fireplace to see if the rags were boiling yet. “It’s been a hard winter,” she continued, tactfully ignoring the conspicuously empty shelves usually stacked high with furs, and the forlorn sacks of millet by the cabinet. Hoar still heard exactly what she wasn’t saying. Nothing was said for the time it took to excise and stitch up the dead flesh of the woman’s nose. Lina took a breather, and thought carefully about what she was going to say. Hoar wasn’t going to like it. “Two mouths, well, two stomachs, is hard to feed but there’s an out.” She paused. She’d have to get the timing just right. “The harvest is in, and the mayor’s made his collections for the granary,” she hadn’t risked saying Parseek’s name, not with Hoar’s frown so dangerously furrowed from the mere mention of his title. He turned his back on her. “If you borrow some now, while his stores are fat, he might not scrape you too badly. You can pay him back in the spring, and me.” First, show him the noose, then lure him to the water. “But, if you’d rather not, I heard Crater’s bought every kilo of grain the trader had, down to the last thumb.” There was no reply, only the roil and hiss of the pot, which in a way was good. It meant he was thinking about it. “It might be good to see Crater. I remember when you two were boys-”

Hoar got to his feet with a salvo of cracks like distant cannon fire and when Lina saw his face, she stopped talking. She paled, but did not balk. His eyes, buried in the tangle of wiry white brows were looking past Lina to the sacks of grain and to where a fifty-five kilo doe wasn’t hanging and then to something else above the Thumbdraught head. Then, as though he were stepping into his grave, he nodded. He reached for his bearskin cloak. “I’ll be here when you get back,” she said to him. Hoar never was a man to put off a bad job

But Hoar had surprised her. He hadn’t borrowed, but had bought. And he hadn’t gone to Crater. So far as she’d heard from Ulma, whenever Lina visited, Hoar hadn’t spoken to Crater more than a fistful of words in the last year. He barely came down to Hrult. He was like his grandfather in that regard, and so many others. He visited for three reasons. He would always make the journey into Hrult if the Trader was in town, to barter his furs and scrimshaws for grain and steel and whatever else he needed to make it through the next season. If the Trader wasn’t in town but there was something he needed, he would go to the likeliest homesteads and see if he could trade a pelt for a liter of lantern oil or whatever else it was. He was often turned away, even at the outrageous rates he invariably ended up paying, but he never visited the general store. Not unless there were no other options. The third reason he would visit the town was to see Ulma and then only when regular people were in doors and he was sure no one else was out on the lane. Lina thought this wise of him. Life for Ulma had been hard enough since her husband had died, and her sons had never come back from the Unification. She didn’t need her neighbors know about Hoar, and whatever she thought, Lina had kept her own council, as always.

“I don’t know how long we can keep this quiet, people aren’t blind,” only someone listening very intently would have caught the slight slurring in Lina’s voice when she transitioned from saying “Parseek isn’t blind,” at the last second. Perhaps the Azil girl had. She was picking up Golemel frighteningly fast and her gaze was intent on Lina’s eyes as Lina smeared another salve across her burns. Amazingly, it hadn’t putrefied. It looked like she would recover. “Someone’s bound to notice how often I’ve been visiting, and some might question how much food you bought,” she said, mulling over everything she hadn’t found in Hoar’s cabin.

“Make of a story. Make of a story that is empty inside,” Svelsa said evenly. She hadn’t learned the word for lie yet.

“And how often have you done that before, my girl?” wondered Lina inwardly, and frowned like Hoar.