They were sixteen, and cocky as shoots first piercing into a blinding, sunlit world. If he were standing, Crater would have towered a head over Gili. But he squatted in the dirt by the rough cut lumber wall, hands laced into her foothold. Hoar stood well back, sporting a thick, brown beard which in combination with his muddy pants and tan shirt made him look like a paranoid tree twitching every tumbling acorn and familiar bird cry. Crater grunted, he wasn’t scrawny, but neither was Gili with the same round face and thick thighs of her butcher mother. Between the two of them, Gili managed to scramble up and inside. There was a hefty scrape followed by several clattering bangs, a curse and a wild laugh. “You have to see this, Hoar!” Crater’s face lit up to match Gili’s exhilaration. Hoar looked over his shoulder.

“Quickly” he said to Hoar, his voice low even though they should be the only people around for kilometers. Hoar frowned, dragging his eyes away from the surrounding forest and approached the structure apprehensively. It was a small window, and high up. That wasn’t the issue.

“You first. I’ll climb.” Hoar cupped his hands but Crater didn’t follow in Gili’s footsteps.

“Hold these.” He handed Hoar the rifle he carried everywhere and took a few steps back. Gauging distances and trajectory with a critical eye, he sprinted at the wall, large feet pounding the earth and sending grass flying. He leapt in a graceful arc, soaring, arms outstretched like an enourmus bird of prey and abruptly hit the all too solid oak. His slipped off the sill as if it were buttered and he landed on his backside.

“Are you hurt?” Hoar asked, but Gili’s testy voice rode over his.

“What are you fools doing?”

Crater was up on his feet in a second. As though nothing had happened, he smoothed the front of his shirt and nodded to Hoar “You first.” Hoar nodded, handing the rifle gingerly back to him. In three short steps, his hands more there to hold him close to the wall than to haul him up, he was at the window and pulling himself through.

Inside.

She carried a hefty pale which sloshed glutinously and popped something into her mouth every few steps. Crater was tallest, and willowy, and

Crater shrugged and sat down in the dry leaves. Hoar still stood, like a deer wanting to run but caught in a moment of fatal indecision. Crater forgot the rifle looper over his shoulder as he leaned against a maple and grunted in surprise as it jabbed him in the back.. He fought to get free, causing Hoar to topple over in alarm as the muzzle swung perilously in his direction.

“Careful, you idiot. Do you want to blow my head off?” Gili snapped. A flush crept into Crater’s face, though it was hard to judge if it was one of shame or anger.

“It’s not loaded. Obviously.”

Gili rolled her eyes, popping another of the sweet drops into her mouth sucking lazily. “Well it was still stupid.”

“Careful, Crater,” Hoar said in his soft voice. Crater whipped around, snarling.

“I said it’s not loaded!

“Lay off him,” Gili said, more amused than anything else. “Do I always have to defend you?” Both Hoar and Crater looked uncomfortably at the stones before their feet, not meeting her eyes. Gili laughed again, and there was a click of teeth on teeth as she bit a little too heavily into a sweet but she didn’t seem to mind. When she was done, she spoke to the air, as casually as if she were discussing its weather, “There’s a Vaicour family coming to Hrult. They have a daughter” Crater stiffened, the red flush creeping back into his face though he didn’t realize it. Hoar looked up too, frowning slightly at his friends.

“A Vaicour girl?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Gili continued, pretending not to notice Crater’s blush. Hoar noticed it, and tried to marshal his words. It took so long to get everything he wanted to say lined up neat and orderly by the time he was ready to speak, someone had usually jumped in and messed up everything he was trying to say. Crater could usually do it in just one word,

“When?”

“Any day now. I heard she’s very pretty, and about our age.”

“Really?” Crater’s voice broke and broke again even as he tried a more manful tone, “Why’s she coming here?” Gili laughed, wobbling slightly on her perch and giving Hoar almost enough time to layout his words before she turned everything about again.

“Probably because she’s heard so many wonderful things about hole in the mud Hrult. Like our stinking dead animal trade, or our slush, or wood. I don’t know, obviously.”

Hoar’s grandfather was a trapper, and his jacket was lined with ermine fur that when Hoar closed his eyes and breathed deeply in, he could smell the cabin and the rich, stained wood of the svelsa. He had even opened his mouth to speak when Crater suddenly burst out,

“Demons below, it’s on my rifle.”

Gili laughed and a chuckled cracked through Hoar’s dour demeanor.

“It isn’t funny!” Crater shouted at Hoar whose face immediately reverted to stone.

“I told you to pack them carefully.” Crater grumbled something but Hoar didn’t catch it and the clearing went quiet save for the smack of the last maple candies disappearing and Gili licking her fingers clean again.

“Do you think, do you think they might like some syrup?”

“The Vaicours? Or do you have syrup only for their daughter. You’d better keep your excitement in check.”

Spluttering as if he’d just come out of the pond and blushing scarlet as a bird berry, Crater folded his legs so tightly, he might have been a strangling vetch. Gili laughed again, musical and light and nothing like the songs woven from Hoar’s svelsa.

“Stop laughing.” To Crater, Gili and most of all Hoar’s surprise it was his own voice. For once, Gili seemed at a loss for words and Hoar felt them welling up from his chest. Once you’ve broken through the ice, and the current has taken you, the only way is to keep fighting up. “We didn’t laugh last week when Bron turned you down for the harvest festival.”

Gili had gone scarlet, and Hoar felt the creep of heat in his face too so that the three of them were so many more bright autumn leaves flaming from gold into red. None of them looking at each other, and each one feeling the acute chill of the turning season, they let things cool. Hoar’s heart was still beating fast when Gili breached the silence.

“There’s trouble beyond the pass, my brother says.”

Crater took the bait gratefully, and Hoar retained his usual frowning recalcitrance. “Father said Ruhiel’s trying to appoint an Azil war minister now. I overheard him discussing it with mother last night when they thought I was sleeping upstairs.”

“It won’t happen. It can’t.”

“But an Azil war minister! Think of it!” repeated Crater. Hoar was thinking of it. He didn’t like the idea at all. It’d be bad for Azil everywhere.

“Orturiel won’t stand for that.”

“It’d crush them if they did.” And every feckless Azil too foolish to get out before the mob turned up.

“Oh? And what do you know about it? Ruhiel’s Veever’s have been making monsters.”

“What monsters?”

“Monsters.” Gili said, slowly, as though Crater was being stupid. “Sleepless things that can snap swords in half and eat babies. You’d better watch out.” Hoar was trying not to listen, humming to himself silently to drown them out. He knew there’d be consequences for his outburst. It have been a stupid, stupid thing to say.

Crater grabbed for his rifle. “They’d never get close to me. I’d shoot their eyes out at fifty meters.”

“They’d eat your powder before it burned and break you in half.” Hoar opened the pack he’d brought, thinking his friends only wanted to wander aimlessly through the woods, shooting at squirrels and joking. As loudly as he could, he rewrapped the fist of syrup and the few drops of maple sweetness. He thought about doubling back, but the other’s would have noticed.

“What do you know about it, Gili? Orturiel’s Veever’s are ten times as skilled as anyone from Mograthi.”

“Obviously. But It wouldn’t stoop so low as to order them to make monster. Orturiel’d beat Ruhiel without using Azils.” Gili kept her eyes trained on Crater, but he knew this argument was for him.

“Obviously,” echoed Crater. “I’m just saying, an Azil war minister!”

“It can’t happen, I’ve told you. Azil’s can’t change.” Her words were like a winter wind, cold and cruel cutting through Hoar’s summer weight garb. Crater didn’t reply. He felt a prickle on the back of his neck but when he flicks his eyes upward neither of them is looking at him. He undoes the rags around the bottle of syrup, ties it up and undoes it again. He tastes the evidence of sweet, boiled sap still caking the edges of his beard and lips.

“I’m going down to the delta next season,” Crater declared. Hoar felt some of the tension in his hands and back lessen. Crater was a good friend. “I’m going to join the royal army.”

“That’s not a terrible idea, Crater. You might be good at it. You’re halfway decent with a rifle.” He wasn’t halfway decent, he was phenomenal Hoar knew. He could stop a hart dead in its tracks at a quarter kilometer, and once he’d hit an elk at nearly three hundred meters. Crater swelled with pride at Gili’s compliment.

“The Trader said he’ll take me back with him next time he comes. I’ll bring my rifle. I’ve been practicing my Vaicouric. I’m getting good. They’ll make me a corporal on the spot.”

“A corporal? Really? Vosh scurrem bettarien au telev ra?”

“E-et scurrem bettariel kin- kin” he falters. Gili smirks. She’s been talking of going to Kirch for months now, and has always been better at Vaicour than Crater. Hoar doesn’t understand a word. It doesn’t matter for him.

“Have you told your mother?” asks Hoar, thinking only of how proud the woman had been of her baby last autumn, and the tears that froze the winter. It had been a reaping baby, there one month and gone in the next.

“No.” Crater’s pride seems to deflate. He is thinking of the little “She thinks I’m just going down to learn the trade.”

“We can travel together next spring. I’m going to study to be a Veever when I go to Krich.” Gili says, some of the imperiousness drained away. “You should come too, Hoar.”

“I can’t.” Hoar makes up a lie, which is even better because it is partially true. “My grandfather needs me here, and grandmother’s cough is getting worse.”

“Just come with us, your grandfather does the work of two and Roa’s always coughing. They don’t need you.”

This isn’t true. Young Hoar does the work of two. Bent, wickedly grinning old Hoar does the work of four, and it is still barely enough for the Azil price of rice. Hoar just shrugs.

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Add in Song? Steal Svelsa, echos Parseek taking it from Hoar in the future

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“I think he just steals the work of two, don’t you? What else does he do at night, creeping about like a starving wolf.” Parseek steps into sight. He is shorter than Crater, but more thickly muscled. He is handsome with straight, white teeth and a casually graceful mess of chestnut hair.

“He doesn’t steal,” Hoar says, rising to his feet. His heart beats quicker, like a deer when a wolf approaches. Parseek’s eyes slide down to the fist of syrup, still clutched in Hoar’s suddenly sweaty hand.

“Oh dear, you’ve been very naughty.”

Crater is on his feet, hands balling into fists. If he’s not careful, he’s going to hit the mayor’s son. Hoar can’t think of the right thing to say. He can only think of the disappointed look on his grandparent’s faces, how his grandfather will pretend to laugh it off and scold him, how his grandmother will slap him and shout, when her husband has gone out. And he will go out, immediately, to make apologies, or just to redouble his efforts to catch their supper and blankets. He’ll have to.

Instead of a soothing song, a high ringing fills his ear in the pump and flow of blood.

Parseek remains unimpressed, eyes only for the cornered Azil.

“That’s mine, Parseek,” it is Gili. She isn’t stupid. She knows what the Azil price would be if Hoar is caught with stolen property.

“Really? Seems he’s eaten half already, like a goat.” Parseek reaches out to Hoar, who is too startled to move, and pulls a quick, pinky of bristles out of his beard. It is a second before the sharp rip registers as pain, and Parseek is crumbling the syrup caked hairs between his hands, a wrinkle of disgust etched into his strong features.

“I’ve told you before, Gili, Azil’s can’t change.” Gili rises to her feet in a flash storming up to him and even though she only comes up to his chin the titan is in her again.

“Don’t you dare say such an awful thing. Hoar is worth ten times what you are, Old King Parsley.”

Parseek colors violently, and pushes her away. It isn’t a hard shove, just enough to get her out of spitting range, but Crater loses control. Hoar just stands there, clutching the bottle of stolen syrup as Crater punches the big boy a glancing blow on the cheek. Parseek’s roar of anger is echoed by another roar, coming from the tapper’s sheds that Gili had led them too, that Crater had entered on a dare, that Hoar had stolen a bottle of maple sweetness from.

In that moment, Hoar knew that he loved his friends. That winter, when Roa’s cough goes form tearing to grave, the mayor has bought every finger vial of Kirch manufactured Eryth from the Trader. She says she’s keeping it for the flu that sweeps through after winter. Neither Crater’s nor Gili’s family can convince her otherwise, and by the solstice, the elder and younger Hoar play Roa’s favorite songs, and weave her crown of iron thorns.