Gili sat atop the evaporator as though it were a throne. Her thick calves crossed casually before her like she’d been there all morning, not just a minute, Gili popped another sugar drop into her mouth and smiled at him. Hoar, sixteen and already bearded like an old, moss covered boulder, looked warily around at the stacks of sticky pales, tin molds, scrapers and most significantly the securely bolted door. He frowned.

“We were just going to have a look,” said Hoar, accusingly.

Gili bit into a sweet drop and rolled her eyes. “We are just having a look.” Hoar stared pointedly at the drawstring bag she had out and she clicked her tongue. “Lighten up, Hoar. Would having a little fun kill you?”

There was a crash from behind Hoar who whirled and then hurled himself to the ground, not because Crater had just jumped enthusiastically down from the high window and landed badly, scattering taps and pail lids, but because of the rifle he obstinately took everywhere with him. It had slipped from his shoulder, the muzzle swinging like the tip of the reaper’s scythe slicing the air where Hoar had stood.

“Careful, you idiot. Do you want to blow my head off?” Gili snapped. Crater got to his feet, red rising in his neck and cheeks though it was hard to judge if it was from the fall, or from shame.

“It’s not loaded. Obviously,” Crater mumbled. Massaging his ribs which had made sudden acquaintance with a hardened stirring pole, Hoar pulled himself upright.

“Careful,” he winced. Why hadn’t Crater just left the rifle leaning against the stump outside where Hoar had left his grandfather’s svelsa when it became apparent he’d be climbing through a window after boosting Gili in first.

Crater whipped around, snarling, “I said it’s not loaded!”

“Lay off him,” Gili said from her high vantage, towering over even Crater. “Do I always have to defend you?” She said, more amused than anything else. Hoar studied the room rather than meet her eyes. Huge, amber ingots of the tapper’s crystalized syrup were stacked like gold bars against one wall. They would sell like gold down in the delta cities, not that the Azil who harvested and boiled the sap would see a fraction of that. She had a son, Rand. Some rare days in spring, Hoar would hear the ring of their hammers, echoing through the still frost bound woods. On rarer days still, he would greet them, Rand usually shrieking as if he were a frost sprite materializing from the wood. What would he say if she found him here?

Crater had found the wall hung with hooks, taps and small hammers. He reached for one, managing to tug it out of its hook to take several experimental swings. When he tried replacing it, the twisted took sprung free with a sound like the click of Gili’s teeth as she bit into another sweet a little too heavily and the hammer fell to the ground. Gili gave a short, sharp, musical laugh and Crater walked quickly away from the pegboard to play with something else, leaving the hammer where it lay. Just as Hoar was replacing it, glancing nervously at the door and the nearly empty bag in Gili’s hands, she spoke. “There’s a Vaicour family coming to Hrult. They have a daughter,” She said it with a casual air, as though she were merely commenting on the weather, but her eyes were fixed on Crater who had stiffened, the red flush creeping back into his face though he didn’t realize it. Hoar frowned slightly, but didn’t say anything. It was best to keep quiet and out of other people’s business.

“A Vaicour girl?”

“That’s what I said isn’t it?” Gili continued, pretending not to notice Crater’s blush. Hoar noticed it.

“Good for trade, new blood in town” said Hoar, though it was unlikely he or his grandfather would ever speak more than two words to any Vaicour, ever. “I heard you’re father’s having trouble with the new field?” He had heard, everyone who Gili had talked to this week had heard about the escape of two goats, which had wandering loose for an hour.

“It’s been grueling,” Gili expounded, “I’ve had to watch them every day to see how they got out! I keep telling my father the gate was firmly latched and there’s no way they could have gotten out, it must have been a fluke but he won’t listen. But he won’t listen. All he cares about is if other’s had escaped or if wolves had gotten them.” By now, Hoar had formulated his own idea as to how the creatures had made a bid for freedom, but Gili always stuck to her story once she’d told it. Hoar settled back more comfortably against a wall, straining to hear any signs of someone approaching the sugar shack. But Crater had his own ideas.

“You’ve already told us twenty times. When’s the Vaicour girl coming? He said, cutting Gili off mid complaint. A flash of vexation crossed her brow and then a smile spread across her face. It was a smile with barbs in it.

“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, rocking slightly on her perch. It was a hyena’s laugh.

“Probably because she’s heard so many wonderful things about hole in the mud Hrult. Like our famous slush, or heaps of firewood, or our stinking dead animal trade. I don’t know, obviously.” The first time Hoar’s grandfather had taken him to check they trap him by the shoulder, grinned down from his lofty, cloud bearded height and asked if Hoar was ready. He’d lied. They wended their way up the mountain, checking each site where his grandfather had set the little steel jaws held back by little more than a finger’s weight. They’d found a fox in the fourth trap. It had lain so still, Hoar thought it was dead. His grandfather had handed him the knife and as he approached, knuckles the color of fresh snow on the hilt, the trapped creature had opened its eyes and screamed. It sounded so much like a human Hoar had dropped the knife. The fox thrashed, its legs starting to bleed again where the thick metal jaws bound it tightly. His grandfather had swept past and in a single quick thrust, ended the scream. He’d cradled Hoar in his big arms then, whispering meaningless sounds that stilled his crying. “Hush, hush. It’s all right. It’s over. You have a soft heart, Hoar. But this is the way the world is. This is who we are. We must kill, all we can do is make it as quick for the poor beast as possible. Harden your heart.” So Hoar had. He’d been nine.

The only other child who’d slaughtered as many animals as Hoar was Gili, though her dislike of the task was the polar opposite of his own.

“Do you think, do you think they might like some syrup?” Crater was holding up a bottle syrup almost as red as he was.

“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 the syrup, Crater turned to face the table. 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. A sweet drop slipped from the handful Gili had scooped up, half emptying the bag. For once, she was 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 rolled her eyes, annunciating 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. It have been a stupid, stupid thing to say.

Crater slipped his rifle off his shoulder, “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 wished he hadn’t left his svelsa on the stump. He’d brought, thinking his friends only wanted to wander aimlessly through the woods, shooting at squirrels and joking.

“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. Hoar,” she said. His name ripped through the song in his head and he focused on her. “Be a lamb and get me another,” she was holding the drawstring bag, empty of sweet drops, out. He took it, numbly, as though he’d been out for hours in the driving snow with nothing but summer weight garb.

“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?” asked Hoar plucking a new bag of sweets from their box. He was thinking 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 was thinking of his nameless brother too. “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 said, some of the imperiousness drained away. “You should come too, Hoar.”

“I can’t.” Hoar made up a lie, which was even better because it is partially true. “My grandmother’s cough is getting worse. They need me here.”

“Just come with us, your grandfather does the work of two and Roa’s always coughing. They don’t need you.” This wasn’t true. Hoar did the work of two. His bent, wickedly grinning grandfather did the work of four, and it was still barely enough for the Azil price of rice.

“I think her just steals the work of two, don’t you? What else does he do at night, creeping about like a starving wolf.” Parseek leaned in the open doorway, one hand resting on the handle casually blocking their exit. Parseek was shorter than Crater, but more thickly muscled. Handsome with straight, white teeth and a casually graceful mess of chestnut hair, he was beautiful.

“He doesn’t steal,” Hoar said, his heart beating quicker like a deer when a wolf approaches. Parseek’s eyes slide down to bag of sweet drops still clutched in Hoar’s suddenly sweaty hand and a lazy grin spread across his face.

“My, how disappointed he’ll be then. His own grandson, a thieving little vendigore.”

Crater sprung to his feet, hands balling into fists. Parseek raised a single eyebrow at the bravado, ignoring the rifle over Crater’s back entirely. He only cared about the cornered Azil. Hoar could only think of the disappointed look on his grandparent’s faces, how his grandfather would pretend to laugh it off and scold him, how his grandmother would slap him and shout, after 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. A high ringing of the pump and flow of blood filled his ears. He couldn’t remember a single one of his grandfather’s songs.

“That’s mine, Parseek.” It was Gili. She wasn’t stupid. She knew what the Azil price would be if Hoar is caught with stolen property.

“If stealing makes it yours then this is mine.” The hand that had been hidden by the sugar shack door came into sight strangling the neck of the svelsa. Hoar felt his blood freeze. “I’ve told you before, Gili, Azil’s can’t change.” Gili slipped off the evaporator, and in a flash had stormed up to Parseek jabbing her finger into his chest.

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

Parseek colored violently, and pushes her away with the svelsa. It wasn’t a hard shove, but the scream of a snapping string mingled with Gili’s as she stumbled into the unforgiving metal of the stove. Crater let out a roar of rage, but didn’t get the chance to swing. Someone small, and lean brushed past him like a leaf carried on autumnal winds and a shoulder, hard as a spike of ice with a hoarfrosted mountain behind it rammed into the handsome boy. Hoar blinked down at the sprawling Parseek, his grandfather’s svelsa cradled safely in his arms. He didn’t remember grabbing it back. He looked about confusedly, seeing in Crater a dumbfounded mirror. His eyes met with Gili, who was looking at him in a way he’d never seen before. A hole blossomed in his chest, like pocket of air trapped in ice just waiting for a little more pressure. Then Parseek sucked in a deep lungful and howled. Hoar ran. Where, did not matter. He ran to escape the howl and the hollow at his core.