The atonal thud of the garden gate cut through the soft music like a ligament wrenching in a familiar movement. Aen’s lids fluttered open to reveal eyes the hazel of cracked mica. She was not sleeping. Only humans slept. Rather, she was drifting, letting her mind wander and her body bath in the embrace of her husband’s soft music. Drifting was the closest Azil could get to sleep, but they were still awake and undreaming. With a calloused hand that someone might have though belonged to a human, she swept back a few errant wisps of hair from a face that would appear very human to anyone who didn’t know better. It was a pleasant enough face, a little thin perhaps, a little angular if she were feeling critical that day, but it had strong brows and an exceptionally human smile.

Aen shared a quizzical glance with her husband, who shook his head having managed to recover the flow of the music. Tarn was human, mostly. He had a thin face, graceful and seemingly carved from smile lines. It was framed by dark brown hair the same color as Aen’s, and had the most aggravatingly endearing habit of making her laugh. But what Aen loved the most about him were his hands, which payed the svelsa so beautifully it could make you weep. He played the summer and winter solstices, festivals and he played for her. Azil or human songs, once he set fingers to strings most humans down in the village quit muttering about his choice in family and settled down to listen.

Outside, a twig crackled like grinding joints and Aen winced, swiveling to search the room. Their son was there. Sten was five, and to the dismay of many in the village, as sleepless as his mother. Currently, he was wholly absorbed in pursuing his passion as the avatar of entropy. With geometrical precision he’d spread the hand carved animals across the floor of the main room just in case his father woke for a cup of water and didn’t remember to put on hobnailed boots. He was definitively *not* playing outdoors by the garden gate, crunching over autumn leaves and rattling the lock on the chicken coop.

If their nighttime visitor it had been Aen’s father-in-law, they wouldn’t have heard him until he was indoors with his boots off, tuning his svelsa to join in the music. That left human children from the village, doubtless carrying a bucket of sap and vandalism on their mind.

Tarn plucked the final chord then let the svelsa’s strings sing themselves to silence. The sounds of the untamed mountainside seemed to magnify but the exploratory rattle of metal had gone still as if the visitor were waiting for the music to resume or the opportunity to sneak away. Aen sighed and stood, arching her back to loosen the knots and fighting down a sudden urge to pee. Her pregnancy was starting to show, and people down in the village were beginning to mutter again about how ”lucky” the halfbreed and his Azil wife didn’t live down on the delta where they upheld the old traditions.

“Parseek and that Gorgem girl, I’ll bet you,” she said darkly. They couldn’t see the coop from the window, but she didn’t see any candle light through the front door’s glass.

“You always blame Parseek,” said Tarn, resting the svelsa on the table.

“And I’m always right.”

“Have you tried talking to him?”

Aen snorted. “How well did that go?”

“I think I got through to him last time,”

“I think you’re being fooled by that little devil,” Aen grumbled but she slid her hand into Tarns. He chuckled.

“It might not be him,”

“Just Gorgem then?”

“Could be a wolf?” he said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. She snorted.

“Wolves can’t lift the latch.”

Husband and wife went to the door. Behind them, Sten continued to play with the wooden deer his grandfather had carved him, unaware of the things folk whispered about his kind.

Light poured out the back door like wine from an uncorked bottle freezing two men mid-break in. There was little enough to see. Long, travel scarred coats covered them from grime speckled boots to collars drawn up so high the only part of them that could be seen were wild eyes peeking out from above inky black Vaicour noses. Worse were the things unseen. Regimental insignias had been ripped from shoulders, ribs poked through skin that had not yet lost all its muscle and long, dark shapes hung across their backs. There was a ferralness to the way they crouched, like cornered animals ready to spring into flight or fury.

Aen’s mind flashed to the washing dolly, a meter of wood like iron tipped with four brutal pegs boiled hard. Slam the door, grab a weapon, find Sten. But if those were rifles along their back then what? All it would take was one wrong move. One wrong word.

“Spigot’s around the side,” Tarn said in calm, clear voice that could be heard all the way to the edge of the glade. “Tastes like tin but it’s clean.”

There was a heartbeat of tensed muscles as the strangers eyes strained in the sudden burst of lamplight, raking the blinding figures before them. Then, in an instant, beasts melted back into men. The taller man straightened from his crouch and squaring his shoulders like a man at parade rest. “Thank you, sir.”

“Supper’ll be on in half an hour. Always room for a few more at the table.”

As if he were taking his finger off a trigger, the shorter man slowly released his grip from the chicken coop’s latch and stepped back palms out. Aen fervently thanked the angel’s she’d had the foresight to install the lock t season to keep foxes and Parseeks out. “Supper,” he said hollowly.

“Just so. Spigot’s around the side,” Tarn repeated, nodding slope ward. He watched them trudge around to the side of the house with curiosity and pity. “Do we have enough to feed both of them?” he asked in hushed tones.

“By all the court’s angels what are you doing?” Aen hissed, closing the door so the window glass rattled. By now, Sten had noticed something was wrong with his mother and was watching the two intently, the deer floating in limbo.

“Did you see them? They’re half starved.”

“Did I see them? Did you? They’re deserters!”

“We don’t know that,” began Tarn but Aen growled her frustration and he relented. “All right- all right they’re probably deserters.”

“You’ve heard Trader’s stories. And you invited them in for dinner?”

“Can’t hardly blame them for deserting then. Bad things on the boarder. Even if the parts about the other side’s Azil are exaggerated.”

“Not the fighting Mograth stories, I mean the ones were deserters becoming highwaymen. They were trying to steal from us!”

“Did you see how young they were?” Aen paused halfway through preparing her next retort. She hadn’t seen the faces- only the grey metal of the carbines. Tarn took advantage of her momentary pause to say “They might be Azil. You wouldn’t turn away your own kind, would you?”

“They’re human. Azil aren’t allowed in the regiment’s”

“Then there’s no chance their face’ll split open and swallow us whole into their Vendigore stomachs,” said Tarn grinning.

Aein frowned, glancing to Sten. “I’ve asked you not to use that word.”

“I’m sorry,” Tarn said, dropping joking demeanor. “What do you want me to do, turn them away? They’re folks like you and me,” Tarn said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. “Everyone deserves a chance.” Aen searched her husband’s eyes and wished she’d married a less earnest fool, but knew she didn’t mean it. Uneasily, Sten returned to playing.

\*\*\*

Tarn had been right, at least on one count. The would-be chicken thieves were younger than the night had made them out to be. Not a day older than eighteen if Aen was any judge. Leo was the tallest Vaicour, she had seen and would have put her childhood friend Crater to shame for gangliness. Not that she’d seen many of the swarthy delta dwellers. Both Leo and Wilhelm sported the Vaicour nose and high cheekbones, but while Leo came off as little more than an awkward young man, there was something off about Wilhelm. Whether from naiveite or rote, Tarn had asked if they would need sleeping arrangements. Thankfully, Wilhelm had cut that possibility off before Aen with a curt, “We’ll be moving on after dinner,” that still managed to convey deep suspicion.

After a prayer that was more a passing acknowledgment that the angels exist than a benediction in their name they began to eat. Wilhelm waited a until Aen and Tarn had taken the first bite, the intensity of his stare boring into Aen like beetles gnawing through bark.

Leo did not wait. “This is miles better than anything they had at the neck. It’s been ages since we’ve had anything that wasn’t dried or salted,” Leo said through a mouthful of hash ending in a choking cough. It might have been the speed which he was inhaling his food, or a response to the thump under the table and Wilhelm’s carefully blank glare. Abashed, he attempted unsuccessfully to sweep a half-chewed fleck to the floor and blushed when he realized Aen had noticed.

“What town is that down the mountain side?” Wilhelm said, breaking his loaf over the stew. Snow flakes of sugared crust tumbled down to melt in the stew.

“Hrult,” Tarn said, watching his handiwork disappear in ravening mouths. “You might have heard of us. Famous for our fighting dogs and liquid gold.”

“This is the place they make syrup?” blurted out Leo. “I always thought it was- well, I don’t know where I thought it was made, but not this place.” Leo let out a strained laugh that no one echoed and swiftly dropped his eyes to the stew.

They had carbines, well used and scuffed. Leo had left his by the door with his traveling cloak. Wilhelm had kept it hanging across his shoulders, drawing their uneasy hosts attention like a disfigurement. Only after his companion had whispered a quick flurry of Vaicour in his ear did he lean it against a wall easily within arms reach.

“Dogs, yes. Syrup, no,” Wilhelm said, tearing off a hunk of bread and drowning it in soup. “Big town?”

“Big enough for me,” Tarn continued but while his usual smile was unfaltering, Aen could hear the tint of apprehension in his voice. Too late now. “Nothing like those down on the Delta. I heard is can take an entire day to walk across one city.”

“I mean how many people. One, maybe one hundred and fifty people in the village?”

“Hrult’s emptier than it looks. A little over a hundred. Drum beaters came through last Spring.”

“Really. I’d never have guessed.” Wilhelm said in a flat, bitter voice. “And the out-lying farms?”

“Fifty six, but Helma is expecting any day now,” Tarn replied, a little too jovially. “How about you two? From a big city?”

“I’m from the-”

“The Delta.”, Wilhelm finished for Leo. “How many humans.”

There was an awkward silence, Tarn and Aein sharing a look. “A little over a hundred.”

“Leaving fifty-six vendigore.” Wilhelm said terminally.

“Fifty-six Azil,” Aen corrected, a bit of steel entering her voice. “Just Azil.”

“Azil.” Wilhelm said, an odd timber in his voice. Aen thought of washing dolly and tried not to look at the gun. “Like you can tell the difference before it’s too late.” Beneath the table Tarn’s hand found Aen’s. She gripped him, hard, and didn’t let go. “Why do you live so far from the village and the rest of the humans?” A sickening pause followed. Wilhelm’s arm twitched in the direction of the carbine and Aen tensed to leap. Then Leo was speaking, and the moment was gone.

“Will. It’s safe here.” Leo laid a hand on his companion’s arm. “These people’ve offered us a place to sleep. Sleep, understand,” he muttered two short lines in Vaicouric and Wilhelm shook his head like a schoolboy who’d been reprimanded. “I meant no disrespect.” Wilhelm’s hand closed over Leo’s and didn’t let go. “Do you have any more bread?”

The rest of the meal disappeared in relative quiet. Aen was relieved to see her husband was as disquieted as she. He gave her hand a quick squeeze beneath the table. They’d done what they could and fed some strangers. Now it was time to be moving on.

As the dishes were gathered up and Tarn made forced small talk with Leo, Wilhelm suddenly spoke up again.

“How far until Iskenhold?”

“Iskenhold?”

“The last village before the pass.”

“This is the last village. Iskenhold’s just a pile of stones to navigate by. Don’t tell me you’re thinking of trying the pass?”

“What if we are.”

“It’s just wind and cold up the mountain, and snow’s on the way. And once the snow falls, not a soul’s getting through there till thaw, unless you count the ice maidens,”

“We’ll make it. There hasn’t been any snow yet.”

Tarn opened his mouth to protest but Leo stepped in first. “What if we stayed here, Will. We’ve come far enough, haven’t we?” Leo said, lightly touching his companion’s arm. Wilhelm pulled away.

“We can’t.”

“Will,” Leo began placatingly.

“It’s not safe here.”

“But he said the pass-“

“It’s not safe here!”

“Why?” everyone looked down. Sten had crept out from his father’s room at the sound of raised voices.

Wilhelm half sneered, half grinned. “A third of your neighbors aren’t human. What do you think vendigores do to little boys?”

“Do not use that language in front of him,” Aen said, grabbing Sten and stepping in front of him.

“What’s a Vendigore?”  
“It’s the monster inside every Azil,”

“There’s a monster inside mama and me?” Sten said in horror, face screwing up to wail.

It took a second for Wilhelm to process what the little boy had said then his eyes widened. “You,” he cursed, stepped back too quickly and stumbled into the travel bag he’d laid to rest along with his carbine. One hand curled around the barrel.

Things were moving too fast. Too loud. Sten was wailing, Leo was shouting, Tarn was trying to be heard over the clamor and Aen made her choice without thinking. She was on top of the deserter in an instant shoving the barrel away pummeling his chest and face. He seemed surprised, fighting for control, The gun went off beside her ear erasing sound and music from her world. One moment was all he needed. Wilhelm twisted and shoved, bearing into her with all his strength and weight. Aen’s head struck the corner of the table and her body went limp.

“What did you do!” Leo screamed, bent over their would be host trying desperately to staunch the bleeding. The gunshot had taken Tarn in the chest and dark, red blood was flowing out from between Leo’s fingers as if they weren’t there. His mouth gaped open and shut but only gurgling noises came out which were drowned by Sten’s wails.

“She attacked me first,” Wilhelm said to no one in particular. “You saw it that Vendigore tried to kill me first.”

“Help me!” Leo shouted. “God and all his gory angels help me.” But Wilhelm was backing away, his gaze locked on Tarn’s trembling movements. His hands, the hand’s that played so beautifully, groped toward where his wife had crumpled and touched her face. Her eyes, eyes like cracked mica, were glassy.

“We have to go,” Wilhelm said, tearing his eyes away and heaving up his satchel.

“What?” Leo said, fingers slick with his benefactor’s blood.

“We have to get out of here, now. There’s nothing we can do now- they got what they deserved.” Wilhelm was nodding to himself. Slowly at first but then more rapidly.

“What in the hells are you talking about?”  
“They’re Vendigores, don’t you get it? They were trying to lure us in. But we showed them.”

“We?”

“You and me Leo. We’re in this together. Remember? Together,” his voice rising excitedly to be heard over Sten’s screams.

“I never,” Leo began but Wilhelm spun him around, tearing him away from Tarn.

“Yes you did, same as me now are you with me or are you going to wait here for more of their vendigore buddies to show up and find you covered in blood? Well. Well!”

It’s getting late and you must be tired,” Aein said, noting her husbands stiffled yawn.

“It’s been a long day and I for one could do with some sleep.” Tarn rose, signalling the rest of the table to begin gathering their bowles and cutlary. “Dear, can you take Sten for a walk? I wouldn’t want him waking the guests.”

TALL was in the midst of gathering his companions plates and didn’t hear but SHORT stilled, his eyes suddenly burning with suspicious. “You are human, aren’t you?”

Tarn gave a

why?

between him and the guns

He made a lunge, knocking aien to the side who fell with a cry

TALL was yelling no

Tarn rushed towards his wife

you fucked an azil you fucking skum

NEED SOMETHING TO SPARK RECOGNITION AS AN AZIL. Make it STEN.

Someone furious that an Azil and a human had a halfblood child.

Deserters from the front. Come to try and

Tarn and Aein were

Two men in long, travel stained coats that seemed to envelope them, though the days were warm. Their faces were Vaicour, and the empty

Tarn judged them to have been hiking cross country for several days. “

The question of beds or chairs answered itself. Bloodshot eyes and Under the steady glow of the lamp red

bags beneath the would be chicken thieves eyes.

The taller of the two nodded, thirst and gratitude flashing across his face. The shorter man, face mostly hidden by sweat caked beard only nodded. Tarn watched them trudge around to the side of the house with pity and, he admitted, a fair bit of curiosity.

Make small talk. learn about the world. Setup fakeout problems on the horizon. get to empathize with all of the main characters and make Sten someone, rather than just a log (playing with the svelsa). TALL wants to talk about the front. SHORT keeps tryung to tell him to shut up. Clearly unhinged in some respects.

They were younger than expected [insert description].

.

“We’ll

. And just one bed,” he’d said so firmly that Leo, who was the tallest Vaicour Tarn had seen, blushed a fierce plum red.

Sitting across from them at the

, or at least slunk back into the recesses behind their eyes.

“Thank you sir. We didn’t bring anything I’m afraid.” Old potlucking habbits took over before he could stop himself.

Two things the audience needs to know. Azil don’t sleep. Azil can become Vendigore. Racial tensions.

Establish that Vendigore are monsters. Suspence. Know the stakes for what will happen if they discover the family is Azil. Azil are sleepless.