The Man in Wolf’s Clothing

Chapter 1: The Azil Price

The fire in the ash pit grumbled and wheezed, like an old, hound with crackling joints settling into bed. In the graveyard filled with Azil, living and dead, it was the only thing that could. Every one of the sixty odd Azil scattered about the clearing, backs resting against the moss blanketed tombstones, was wide awake and spellbound by the story that flowed like quicksilver from the aged man by the fireside. Just the far side of gloamlight when humans go to sleep, the cracks and wrinkles of his face pooled with shadows, like the hidden valleys of the Golemel, and in his hands he cradled an instrument. Down on the plains, it would have been called a lute, but here, where the air was clean and the stars could be seen, it was and would always be a svelsa and the man who played it was the greatest musician who had ever lived. Elder Parseek had said so and despite being a Parseek he would know; he’d been as far as Ravnesil and that was at the very foot of the Golemel mountain spine.

In a clear, strong tenor that wove through the music like quartz in granite the old man sang clever wanderers and ancient gods from the shadows at the edges of the listeners mind. It was the voice of an angel, and only the most truant of children could have done anything other than listen enraptured. Hoar crept guiltily through the brush like some fey child to the edge of the crowd. So long as he kept quiet, and settled in some shady cradle of rock, the angel need never know he’d been anywhere else.

“Which story is it!” Crater hissed, managing to find the only piece of kindling a kilometer not scavenged for fire and trod heavily on it. There was the unmistakable snap of a perfect plan breaking. The music paused as Val, oldest Azil in Hrult, finest minstrel of the Golemel locked hazel eyes with his eight year old grandson who had frozen like a startled deer. The music resumed and Hoar prayed that darkness concealed his black eye.

“But Vlesch the Cruel was clever, and did not trust the stranger arrived at the gate. He may look like a wolf, howl like a wolf, but only a wolf smelled like a wolf. Vlesh bent its mighty neck, as thick as an oak, down, down until its eyes were on a level with Kel’s. The Vendigore’s jaws were so massive it could have swallowed Kel whole but the bard did not show fear. Vlesh puffed, and a fowl wind of meat and rotting teeth bathed Kel. Then, with its great snuffling nose, Vlesh drew in a breath. The tribe held theirs.”

Throughout the clearing every Azil ceased breathing.

“Which one is Vlesch?” the only human whispered, adding a jarring note to the chord the old man held. Hoar shot him a withering look. If they’d really been hidden in Kel’s magic satchel, then the Vendigore would have heard them and they would all have been gobbled.

“But the Azil did not call their savior Kel the Trickster for nothing. Kel had sealed the inside of the of the wolf skin she wore with a mixture of wolf urine and sap and not even the stink of fear radiating from the tribe she hid within her satchel reached Vlesch’s nostrils. Vlesch growled with pleasure. ‘If it looks like a wolf, howls like a wolf and smells like a wolf then it must be a wolf. I am sorry I doubted you, pup, but the Azil trapped within this valley are cunning and deceitful and none more so than Kel”

“’I have heard of this Kel, down in the villages. Kel the Clever, they call her. Kel the Beautiful they say. Kel the humble.” Val flashed wolfish grin at the crowd and the stifled their laughter. “They say that she is even cleverer than you,” Kel said demurely, turning her eyes downward.

Vlesch roared, setting every creature within the valley that had survived the famine running for their burrows. “Kel the Liar! No one is as clever as Vlesch! No one is as mighty! No one is as quick!”

“Down in the villages, they say Kel is too quick to be caught by your claws,” Kel said, goading the great Vendigore further.

“We shall see if she can still spread such lies without a tongue!” bellowed Vlesch the Cruel.

“But great Vlesch, you cannot leave this gate. You must guard the entrance to paradise lest the Azil slip through into the human world.”

The wolf headed Vendigore paused, regarding what it thought was cub with one great, grey eye. “You will guard this gate until I get back. I shall tear the village from the ground and shake it till Kel’s body is broken! Then we shall see who is clever.

“But I cannot guard this gate, I am too small and have no weapons to defend myself,” Kel said, trying to hide her mirth. But Kel had pushed her luck too far. The great Vendigore stabbed fixed her with one, steely grey eye. Then, with a quick slash the Vendigore pricked its paw. Blood welled and Kel suddenly wished she had remained very far away indeed. Vlesch squeezed three drops of blood into Kel’s head. Kel’s feet tried to flee but she forced herself to stand tall and let the cursed droplets fall. One. Kel felt it seeping through the skins she wore. Two. She felt it touch her skin and knew she was tainted forever. Three. For the third she almost held still but her will wavered and she shied back. The third droplet fell on her chest and sank into the satchel.

“Do not fear, little pup. My blood will strengthen you. Any Azil who tries to cross into human lands cannot hope to stand against even a fraction of my strength. Should you see Kel, howl and I will return to crush her.”

And, leaving Kel to guard the gate against herself, Vlesch the Foolish charged into the forest knocking down trees and bellowing for the Trickster’s head. As soon as it was gone, she tore the tainted wolfskin from her head and scrambled through gate to behold a beautiful sight. Green pasture and warm air, blue skies and game bounding through the trees. Kel had to show the villagers at once! She slid from the wolf skin she wore and tore open the satchel but had forgotten Vlesch’s blood. Had she been more careful, she might not have let the blood slip inside. She was quite swift, and caught her mistake almost before she had made it but a few flecks of Vlesch’s blood touched Angar, the clever boy who had found where Vlesch had hidden Kel’s Svelsa, and who had entered the satchel last. And as the Azil tumbled from the satchel into the land Kel had promised them, so too did the wolf’s curse. It followed Angar, and was passed onto his descendant, their descendants too in a chain unbroken until today.”

It was several seconds after the final silver chord died away that the spell broke and the Azil normal sounds returned to the world. The men and woman who’d come to watch rose, stretched and scooped up their children in their arms to leave. But one little girl, a full year younger than Hoar and therefore little more than a toddler, slipped away from her father and ran up to Hoar’s grandfather. The old bard paused, halfway through tuning a peg on his svelsa that had loosened during the performance.

“But what happened to Kel, grandpa? Was she cursed too?”

Val chuckled, his white beard quivering like cirrus caught in a sudden wind, and smiled down beatifically on the little girl making his real grandson squirm.

“Many things, child, many things. Kel was tenacious and never stopped stopped searching for a way to cure herself and her people. Hoar!” He barked, dragging the hapless boy from the crowd. Hoar had been trying to slip off to the cabin hidden safely in the pack heading down that path. Now, he was trapped. Coming here had been a mistake. “Hoar, tell little Roan what Kel did next.”

Hoar stopped just short of the firelight, hoping the green of his embarrassment would conceal the black and blue ring that throbbed painfully at his eye and temple. “

“Come closer, come closer. She doesn’t bite.”

There was no choice. Hoar took a few casual steps to the side, into the light but facing the girl. His eye, the left eye that throbbed with a nimbus of pain, remained coolly in shadow. The old man’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“Kel sought the advice of an angel who ruled a far-off land of the humans and though Kel was of the Azil, the angel was fair and just to all, no matter how lowly. The angel-”

“Seraphriel,” Val interrupted with the snap of the clasp, sealing the svelsa into the fine leather bound case. The boy flushed further still.

“Seraphriel,” continued Hoar, “Told Kel that she would have to act fast, for the transformation was already happening. Kel must complete eight impossible tasks for the angel, and only then could she embark on the final task, not of slaying Vlesch, but making peace with it and returning its blood.”

“And that is a tale for another night. Eight tales, truth be told,” Val said, laying one gnarled root like hand on her shoulder. She pouted, turning to her mother.

“I like it better with music,”

Hoar’s retreat into the neck of his coat was impeded by the hand that clapped him firmly on the shoulder. “And music you will have, whether I or Hoar tells it. I am teaching him everything there is to know about the svelsa. He’ll be just like his grandfather.” Hoar looked up, forgetting momentarily the pain cushioning his eye.

Roan looked like she had her doubts, comparing Hoar’s round face and close cropped black hair to the snowy gorse running rampant from the crest of his head down to his chest. She looked like she was about to say something but by then her father had caught up and took her firmly by the hand. Even if she had pointed out his head was shaped funny, or his nose was too pointy Hoar wouldn’t have cared, or even heard. He peeked out from the woolen cave mouth, up the hairy tree trunk of an arm twice as thick as his thigh to the hazel eyes that sparkled after the last Azil, leaving the clearing. Hoar was going to be just like him someday.

Like a clearwater trout jolted from its languid rest in the sun by a raptor’s claws, Val’s hand sunk into Hoar’s shoulder. Hoar tried to twist away, but was caught dead in his grandfather’s talons. A yelp caught in his throat as the old man yanked him around, big hands cupping the boy’s chin and forcing it towards the light. Val studied him, turning Hoar’s head this way and that as though he were a scrimshaw with a defect and the old man was wondering if he could salvage the piece. Hoar clamped his jaw shut and stopped struggling. He would not whimper.

“What did you do?” the Azil growled in the same voice he did for Vlesch. But where Vlesh was stupid and easily tricked, Val wasn’t.

“Hoar was incredible!” Hoar felt the hand release immediately. Val’s head had whipped round to find the watcher. It was Crater. Now the Azil were gone, he’d come out from behind the stone and was loping towards them across the grass. “You should have seen it! Hoar was incredible!” With a flash of dread, Hoar realized Crater was going to actually tell Val what had happened. Abstentious Hoar would too. But there was truth telling, there was lying and then there was diplomacy. Just then, Crater tripped over his large feet and almost fell. He didn’t see the tight, sharps shake of Hoar’s head and in any case, wouldn’t have only have asked confusedly why Hoar was shaking his head.

Crater came right up to Hoar senior chest heaving from the acceleration and exhilaration of coming to the rescue. “Parseek didn’t expect a thing, the oaf. Not a thing. And Hoar- and I just jumped in there and whack! I think he might have been crying. The Azil girl was crying but Parseek was too. He was definitely crying. It was incredible!”

Despite his mastery of the word ‘incredible,’ Crater was not gifted with the story tellers art.

“Slow down, slow down,” Val admonished, “Take a deep breath and tell me everything,” He took Crater gently by the shoulders, stopping what would have been a blow by blow recreation of events had Crater been able not to interrupt himself halfway through each punch and duck to pantomime the start a new scene. Crater took a deep breath. “There was Parseek and Gorgem, pushing around some Azil girl,”

“Ulma,” Hoar interjected, trying to read his grandfather’s face. It was like reading the mood of a stone.

“Right. Ulma. The goat girl. Parseek and Gorgem were saying the most dreadful things you’d ever heard, insults, curses and threats against her very life. They said they’d throw her mud pond and drown her and-

“They said it looked like she washed her hair in the mud pond,” Hoar said hurriedly, reeling the ecstatic Crater down to earth again. “They weren’t trying to kill her.”

“They might have been! Anyway, they’d pushed her into the dirt! And she scratched up something bad, blood all over.”

“Sap. It was sap,” Hoar cut in once more and this time took the reins. “I don’t know what was going on, only Ulma was crying and Gorgem was laughing and Parseek-”

“Was saying the most dreadful things,” Crater said, jamming a sentence into the crack in Hoar’s narrative. But before he could hammer the wedge in, Hoar continued.

“Parseek was being Parseek. So I stepped in there and asked what was going on.”

“He shouted at Parseek!”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen, but Ulma was crying and I did like you said,” hoping to past instructions could be stretched into some defense. “I got hit, Ulma got away and it isn’t any big trouble” Hoar paused, searching the old man’s craggy face hint of anger or pride but Hoar might as well have asked the wind. Hoar wished he hadn’t, because after half a second, Crater’s patience had run out.

“That isn’t what happened at all! Hoar just leapt down there and shoved Parseek and I was coming up to help of course but that fatty Gorgem was there and I had to deal with her so I didn’t see exactly what happened but then Hoar punched Parseek right in the chest. Parseek hit him back of course, in the face! They knew they’d met their match and ran off quick. It was incredible! A few more seconds though, and I would have had Gorgem,” Crater said with incredible inaccuracy. If the story continued to grow in scope and heroism by the sixth retelling Hoar and Crater would be fighting off a Mograthi invasion force.

The truth was much humbler. From where Parseek had knocked Hoar to the ground, his vision bursting like his head were full of fireflies, Gorgem was sitting on Crater’s back pinning him as effectively to the ground as a fallen tree traps a logger. Parseek had to pull her off, and they’d left hurriedly through the trees before either of the would be heros had regained their feet.

Story told, Hoar’s grandfather contemplated them for a long moment, long enough for even Crater’s seemingly boundless self confidence to waver. Then, like a judge extracting testimonial, said “You struck the Parseek boy?”

“They had Ulma cornered.”

“You struck the Parseek boy.” Val held out the question like it was a hot coal and he was waiting for Hoar to hold out his ungloved hands. Hoar did.

“Yes.”

“First.”

“Yes.”

At last, Crater seemed to grasp that, after explaining the nobility of their cause, they weren’t going to be congratulated. So when the old man’s directed his next question at Crater he gulped..

“And you fought too.”

“I was the only one fought. Crater,” Hoar began but fell silent beneath the reaping gaze of his grandfather. Crater could still take it back. He hadn’t actually hit anyone, that dubious honor went to Hoar alone. Crater looked to the gallows resignation on his friends face. Hoar shook his head, hoping Crater took the hint. Crater stuck out his chin.

“I fought too so I get my portion of the punishment.”

Val nodded and led the boys back along the Kladbische path.

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There is a cabin overlooking the valley of Hrult and, as far as the mayor knew, it was the highest spot in the Golemel anyone had ever built. On official records held in the town hall, it belonged solely to Roa, Hoar’s seniors wife. He couldn’t own it; no Azil owned land. But he had made it his own, etching the imprint of his soul into hand carved chairs, the ornate cabinet filled with useless, precious things and the single bed. For the past month, there were two extra mattresses. Roa had laid them out for her wards and would pack them back up when the military cots down on the plains were packed away, the Mograthi campaign was over and done with and the human conscripts returned to Hrult. Till their return, Crater, the store keep’s son and Gili Ague, daughter of the butcher and breeders, futures were kept by Roa and her husband.

For Hoar and Crater, three immediate futures hung from the backside of the woodshed door. The switch, the strap and the scourge. The first was a pinky thin, wasp sting birch Hoar replaced each year. It stung like a hornet bite and came out each time Hoar swore or committed the crime of talking back. If his grandfather was angry, it would leave red lines that echoed the switch’s first sting whenever Hoar used his hands the following day. But if his grandfather was truly angry, he brought down the belt. It was made of heavy leather, old and frayed from use. Val’s grandfather had used it on him, and he had used it on Hoar’s father. The angry red wheels that marked its passing wouldn’t fade for weeks, burning like poison oak beneath the skin. Its use was rare. Hoar had only incurred its bite three times. Twice for fighting with other Azil children and once a year earlier, he had been careless with his grandfather’s svelsa and broke a tuning pin. That was the angriest he’d ever seen his grandfather. That night, standing shirtless in the grass behind the woodshed so he wouldn’t ruin one of his few shirts, Hoar wondered if his grandfather chose the scourge. For a second, his grandfather’s hand had dragged across the top of the third future, a kraken of leather with a dozen barbed lashes and Hoar thought that this time, he might die. But then, his grandfather gripped the woven handle of the strap instead. It was the worst hiding he’d ever received but Hoar had been glad of it. He knew the strap and the future that awaited them now.

“Don’t think. It’s easier if you don’t think.” he whispered to Crater who was waiting defiantly in the chill night air as his grandfather unlocked the woodshed door.

“I’m not afraid,” Crater said back.

“And don’t look. Focus on a point ahead of you and stare at that. Or close your eyes tight as you can.”

The old man disappeared halfway into the shadow, feeling along the wall.

“I’ve been beaten before. I broke my mother’s vase, the blue one, and she’s got a temper.”

The old man found his tool and unhooked it.

“Don’t listen. Listen to the rushing in your ears so you can’t hear the whistle.”

“My mother uses a broom, not some stick. A broom hurts. A stick doesn’t.”

Hoar forgot his advice and looked to Val. His grandfather had the switch.

“Hands.” He said to Crater who grit his teeth and put out both hands. Val nodded with approval and brought down the switch. Once, twice three times the branch wailed through the air and Crater did not cry out. The old man nodded once more and Crater stood noticeably straighter, a proud jut to his jaw.

Hoar took his place, looking with fear and a glimmer of hope at the judge of his world. Val only said, “Hands.”

Steeling himself, Hoar raised his hands. He knew, knew something was coming. The punishment for fighting was the strap. That was all there was to it. Yet the blows that landed on the meat of his palms was almost comically weak. It was over before Hoar knew it.

While Val was returning the switch to its hook, Crater leaned in and spoke into Hoar’s ear, “You’re so lucky! That was nothing, mother’s much harsher than that!”

“Yeah,” stammered Hoar, still not trusting his grandfather wouldn’t return for the real punishment with the strap. But Val only swept up the svelsa’s case from where he had laid it down and spoke in his voice that could carry across a crowded glade as clear as music.

“I am proud of both of you.” Val knelt so that he was eye to eye with the little boys. “Stand up for yourself. Stand up for the weak and accept the consequences. That is the Golemel way. Be like Kel the Brave. Fight for what is right.” The budding head of hope blossomed in pride soaking up the rays. He’d done well. Crater and maybe Gili too’s coming to live with them would be a buffer, keeping his Grandfather happy. They were the best thing to come from his mother and father going away.

“Off to bed with you, and be quiet. You know Roa hates to be woken,” Val said, chivying the little human toward the cabin. He was smiling a warm, paternal smile.

“Goodnight Hoar! See you tomorrow!” Crater said, cracking a yawn so wide a swallow could have flown in and disappeared. Hoar smiled a rare smile. Tomorrow there would be mighty towers to climb and forts to garrison, though as Gili always said whenever Hoar and Crater looked like they were having too much fun, “You’re just climbing trees and stacking rocks you know. If any of this was real you woundn’t be acting so silly. You might even be dead.” She was right of course. Gili was always right.

The cabin’s door closed with a splinter driving creak sealing the human’s candlelit world from the Azil’s moonlit world. This was the Azil time. This was Hoar and Val’s time.

“Can you teach me how to play that last song? I want to tell Vlesh’s story to Gili and Crater! Can I borrow the svelsa tomorrow?”

“How dare you,” Val said. Clouds had passed across the moon and Hoar couldn’t see his grandfather’s face but he didn’t need to. “How dare you,” Val repeated, lower this time. It wasn’t the voice he used for Vlesh. It was colder, pitched so softly that no one but Hoar could hear and carried more fury than Vlesh ever could. “You think you deserve to play the svelsa after what you did?”

“I don’t,” Hoar began but Val’s stone crushing hands shot out gripping the frightened boy by both arms, almost lifting him from the ground.

“Don’t speak. Don’t say a word. You struck a human. Not just any human but the mayor’s son.” Val hissed, shaking Hoar. The old man was half bending, half lifting Hoar off the ground up to his terrible face. “And you struck first,” Val spat. He dropped Hoar who managed not to collapse, despite every muscle having frozen like sap in a tree killing winter.

“I see your father’s been soft on you. I shouldn’t have been so soft with him.” Val said, striding to the woodshed and pulling it open. The clouds shifted, and moonlight fell on the tools hanging from the back of the door. The switch. The strap and the scourge.

Hoar’s throat unstuck. “But you already punished us,” he squeaked.

“Did I tell you to speak? Did I?” Val snarled, the bones clenching his fist so hard the bones ground. Hoar closed his mouth.

“Yes you paid the human price for children scuffling in the dirt. But you aren’t human, Hoar. We aren’t human. We are the monsters from the stories that mother’s tuck their children into bed with. We aren’t like them and even if you forget it, they never will. They know we are Azil and it’s time you learned what that means.”

“This is the price a human who fights another human must pay.” Val said running his hand along the length of the birch that had nipped Crater and Hoar with all the bite of a teething puppy.

“This is the price an Azil who fights another Azil must pay,” Val continued, fingers curling around the handle of the thick strap but he did not stop there. Hoar had stopped breathing. He knew what was coming next.

“And, if he is very, very lucky, this is the price an Azil pays who fights a human.” Val took the scourge off its hook. Hoar closed his eyes. *Don’t look. Close your eyes tight as you can.* The crunch of his grandfather’s big, heavy boots over leaves, circling around made the hair on Hoar’s neck stand straight as pine trees in the shadow of a great mountain. *Don’t listen. Focus on the rushing in your ears so you can’t hear the scream.* He didn’t notice how his legs quivered like a sapling in a breeze, only followed the mechanical motion of Val’s command “Shirt,” pulling it over his head. Something was pushed into his mouth. He bit down and tasted leather. Then, there was a long, long pause. *Don’t think.*

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When it was over, someone picked the quivering little boy up, off the ground and bundled him into strong arms. The belt leather was gently tugged from the boy’s mouth, a semi-circle of indents pressed deep into the hide. Then, svelsa case under one arm, boy cradled under the other, someone carried them both down the Kladbische.

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Hoar returned to his senses when he realized someone was tuning a svelsa. *Strange,* he thought. Val had put the instrument away in perfect tune. Curled in a ball on the lap of his Grandfather, Hoar felt him take a breath and sing.

When the night grows long | and harvest’s gone and | winter bares her teeth,

When the sky weeps ice | and rooftop heights are | buried underneath,

When the hart of wood | has frozen blood and | hoarfrost covered horns,

Then the Azil weaves a crown of iron thorns.

When his store of rice | is only dust and | meat a fantasy,

When the ravening | of his nothing leaves | naught but agony,

When his body’s bare, | and skins he wore were | eaten long ago

Then the Azil dons his crown and greets the snow

First they seemed like on | ly shadows, or the | dream the Azil sought

When he saw the gleam | of demon eyes and | knew that he was caught

When instead of leap | ing on him they raised | muzzles to the wind.

Smelling chimney smoke the wolves and Azil grinned.

Stealing through the night | upon the light and | warmth of men inside

Who became the prey | of lupine grey and | that which should have died.

When its hunger was | not sated, growing | stronger than before

Naught can fill the hollow at an Azil’s core.

No, naught can fill the hollow man turned vendigore.

The last notes of his silver voice melted into thin air and Hoar allowed himself to breathe. He’d closed his eyes, letting the haunting words bear him far up the mountain where he ran with the wolves. Cold swirling over and around pack but never inside, like water breaking stones, and the air was so crisp he could almost smell the color of snow. He could almost forget the streaks of burning pain across his back.

“The song isn’t complete,” Val said huskily, as though he were fighting back tears. Hoar looked up and knew that couldn’t be true. His grandfather’s face was serene, not sad. “It doesn’t tell how the humans in the village hunted the vendigore down. It doesn’t tell how they put the other Azil out into the snow down to the last child and babe. It doesn’t tell how they froze, starving and hunted because of the actions of one Azil.”

“I didn’t cry,” Hoar said, the chill of the song still numbing his back.

“You didn’t,” Val agreed, and there was the quaver in his voice again. He had a tight smile on his face, and looked so proud Hoar dared to hope.

“I did good?”

“You did marvelously,” Val said, hugging his grandson to his chest, still holding the delicate svelsa.

“You’re hurting me,” Hoar said but not complaining. It was good pain, he told himself. It was right.

“I’m sorry,” Val whispered into his hair, lessening his hug but not letting go. “I’m sorry but you have to know the Azil price. You have to know that I’m a monster.”

“Then I’m a monster too,” Hoar said proudly. “I’m an Azil.

Chapter II

A flash, and then, a crack. Not the greedy crack of ice giving way beneath an unwary boot, but the sullen, capitulation of something too old, and too worn to be of use. An instant later, Hoar’s right ski tore free and momentum took over. For an instant he defied gravity, seemingly floating down the unmarred slopes. The craggy planes of his face, scarred by sixty years of Golemel winds, had time to register split second surprise, then gravity reasserted itself and he crashed into the ground. One leg, still trapped in a tangle of wood, leather and metal gave a sullen pop as it twisted while the boot remained locked in place. The heavy, fur lined boots were new. He’d haggled them out of the Trader up from Vanholm three years ago, and they’d finally broken into the cozy, supple shape that was just right. For six fox pelts, the trader had thrown in new steel clasps for his cloak.

The weight of the carcass strapped to his back slammed down, crushing the remaining air from his lungs. He skidded forward in the snow, his head and shoulders the anchor that dragged him to a bone jarring halt. And everything was still.

Slowly, like mist dissipating on a weeping morning when the icicles drip and snow grows heavy, the world came back into stinging white focus. He couldn’t breathe. Hoar heaved the deer off to one side, in a grunting, joint popping effort. Lined doeskin gloves fumbled at the straps of the harness cutting into his chest. His stunned lungs spasmed, sucking in snow only to be violently coughed back up. The last buckle came free and the pack rolled away entirely. The old man curled into a ball, gulping in long breaths in the embrace of his cloak, just waiting for the terrible ache in his neck to lessen and the throb in the bones of the arm he’d tried to break his fall with to ease. The cloak was a wolf pelt, silver grey like the wisps of cirrus hair that clung to Hoar’s head, and held rather more firmly by a steel clasp, forged in a three braided knot. It was not a pretty fur, the kind the Trader would sell to Vaicour fops wanting to impress their friends. Old, ragged and riddled with the wounds of living it looked like what might remain in a Kirch dog fighting pit after the victor had been dragged out. And like a Veever who never gave up on a patient, Hoar had stitched the holes and tears closed as if to let them heal. But three he’d left. Three long, scorched punctures that making of which still burned in his memory as if decades were days. They had not killed the wolf. There was no mark of the killing steel head, only a hollow where the right eye had glared at Hoar with hate and hunger and desperation just before he let the bowstring go.

Last summer, when the passes were open, he’d given the Trader a necklace of bear teeth and a jar of its grease for new bow strings and twelve sharp steel heads, thinking the fall would be bountiful. The lump of his quiver, full of unneeded arrows, pressed against his hip. He had been foolish. He’d only needed six, and he wished he had bought extra rice from Arenholm. Now, he doubted he’d make it through the winter. It wasn’t just the fall; it was the autumn. Seven out of ten traps had been barren and hunting hadn’t fared much better. He’d been out three days longer than he’d meant on this expedition, and the deer in the herd had been skinny. Not as skinny as the wolves, which by midwinter would be little more than hunger held together by bones and skin. Hoar wondered if the wolves would outlast him. It was comfortable where he lay. Warm. Hoar closed his eyes, snowflake preludes to the first real blizzard catching in his eyelashes and melting on his skin. For the thousandth time, he wondered what it would be like to sleep, to slip into the Long Dream. It wouldn’t be painful, like his father and grandfather’s deaths. It would be easy. Especially here in this bed of snow where the air was thin tasted of copper. It was the first real snow of the winter. He remembered resting his head on his grandmother’s lap while she hummed a lullaby and drifted off to sleep. He’d tried and tried to sleep but it had been so hard then. He always gave up when Roa’s lilting voice broke into wracking coughs.

Hoar opened his eyes. He was staring into his reflection, distorted and bloodshot in the glassy mirror of the dead deer’s eyes. She hadn’t seen the white wolf with a steel knot holding its skin in place. Hadn’t heard the whistle of ash and steel until it was too late. Hadn’t the strength to run more than a kilometer before her bloody, staggering steps through the endless sea of snow had come to an end. If it hadn’t been for him, it would still be alive. Hoar stopped humming. He needed to move.

Hoar heaved himself up, the familiar choir of pain in his back protesting in harmony to the fresh melody of pain from neck, arm and leg. He gritted his teeth as his weight returned to the damaged leg but his chance to lay down had passed and there was no chance of rice in moaning over a bit of pain. What had passed had passed. He undid the boot still stuck in the ski harness and surveyed the fallout. Holes in the snow and half buried equipment stuck out of the drifts like the ribs of storm wrecked ships.

He took a deep breath, hauled his creaking joins straight, and hum the opening bars of the first song to come to mind. Cannadray. The lullaby resurrected gentle memories, like a hand, white as alyssum, pushing up from beneath the ground. It soothed him, as long as he didn’t think. He found the yegaatek mask, bone carved goggles with a slit over each eye he wore to keep the snow from blinding him, and strapped it back over his skull. He gathered up the too full quiver of arrows, fletching red against the snow. The pot of dye, and a skin of summer brandy from Kirch were had for a scrimshaw hart, two rabbit pelts and a story from before the days before the Unification. The brandy had lasted nearly two months, the dye would hold out for another two years, and the story would last forever, or until Hoar had no one else to tell it too.

He ordered everything by the scrawny doe, gutted and lolling pathetically against straps that held her tightly to a wooden frame. Miraculously, the frame had survived the fall unscathed. Rice or no, with she’d get him through the winter. If he could make the journey home.

Far more slowly than he would have even ten years ago, he knelt to examine the broken camber ski. One leather strap dangled uselessly, fluttering in the wind like the charms they hung in the village to ward off evil spirits. Where there should have been a thin, steel pin hammered shut, there was a hole. He scowled at it the ski, stained the same reddish brown as the body of the svelsa that haunted his home.

Hoar’s svelsa had come from the Trader. Like all Vaicour, he’d called it a lute but he was wrong. It was a svelsa. Battered, with a slightly crooked neck, like Hoar’s, and two frets needed to be held firm with wire, it was still a svelsa. It was not as beautiful as the one his grandfather had played a thousand, thousand sleepless nights ago before a crack running the length of a laugh had widened, before the hand that clutched his had lost its grip, before the Unification and the lie that had changed his frown from a rut to a chasm that could not be crossed. That instrument lay as it should with its master. Hoar had sworn a wordless oath never to play again, but when he’d seen it on the Trader’s cart his resolve cracked like frostbitten iron. It had been madness, pure madness, to hand over a set of antlers, hardly worried at by mice, eight pelts, six rabbit, two ermine, and a whole buck skin he’d tanned himself all for the little, cursed instrument.

Last season, the blacksmith had told him the metal was aging, had said the entire boot lock would have had to be replaced, but the price he had asked of Hoar, would only have asked of the old Azil, was too much to bear. He’d thought, then, of trading the svelsa in. He always did, when times grew thin. Every stop the Trader made in town, he brought it down to trade for bags of grain and a sack full of onions, or a handful of nails and a window pane for his front door which faced east over the valley and framed the dawn’s beauty. But each time, he returned home with the cursed thing, more often than not with a new string or a pinky vial of linseed oil or amber resin and placed it in the top drawer of his solitary cabinet. He wouldn’t even look at the cabinet, not that he spent much time in his cabin during the summers and fall. But when the blanket of winter swept across the land, and he was buried in his cabin like a bear in her cave, he’d take the svelsa out, reverently, and set fingers to strings. He’d play the hundred songs his mother and father had taught him and the thousand his grandfather had. He’d play them all, as he had for his wife and daughter, and those he’d dreamed in waking. Then he’d play them all again. Like the hare shedding her brown coat for white, his fingers shed their trappers trappings and dormant callouses rose from the soil of his flesh hard as flints. By solstice day, he’d play for an audience of none for hours on end, lost in the melodies and memories he hated to his core. When spring came, he’d put the svelsa away, and swear to uphold his oath. He’d sell the evil thing, and be free.

What he would have given to have it with him now. Quickly, he dug around in his bags, two hung on the chest of the harness, two flaring to the sides to distribute the weight, for the bundle of twine. By the end of the third excavation top to bottom he moved his search to the area he had fallen when the binding had broken as he glided down the rocky slopes. Nothing. Discordant notes of desperation were beginning to play within his heart. A minute ago he had been ready to sleep but now the thought of freezing frightened him. It was thirty hours back to Hrult, by ski, and more than twice that by foot without snowshoes. By the ache in his collar bone, there was a squall if not worse on its way and all the venison in the Golemel was useless if it and he were frozen. He quashed the beginning panic, changing tunes from Cannadray to Soldier Boy without thinking. He frowned then, anger replacing the melody. He studied the hole.

A minute later, he’d made a windbreak of his body and was coaxing the lantern flame to life. The metal was still warm from its privileged position next to his body. He couldn’t afford it to crack in the cold and leak oil or fat that cost him a third more than any other man or woman paid in the village. It had survived his tumble, slightly dented with the metal hook bent the wrong way. He’d levered it until it broke, then stuck it like a spear in the snow within arm’s reach. It had failed to fit the hole in the ski’s binding, but just barely. He only needed a sliver more room. He put the flame to the iron of the hole, shielding the wood with the lantern’s hood. He waited, the stab in his neck reminding him helpfully of its presence. When the metal was too hot to touch, he snatched up the icy rod and rammed it into hole, pinning the strap back in place He wiggled it forward until the temperatures equalized and it jammed. It wasn’t pretty, but it would do the job. Like Hoar. A feeling of triumph in his heart, Hoar rose to his feet and took in his surroundings.

Slowly, like two tectonic plates colliding forcing up mountains across their expanse, his brow wrinkled. He sank back into his usual, choleric frown; his face barely remembered any other shape. There had been a flash of light up the ridgeline before everything went wrong. Through valleys of creased skin, hazel eyes appraised a snowdrift nearly thirty paces up the slope which had formed on the leeward side of the tree. Snow drifts didn’t mound downwind of trees. Carefully, taking the time to do every strap properly and seat the weight about shoulder and hips, he donned his load but not before stringing his bow and checking that his quiver was easily reached. With a swish like velvet on velvet, he began to cut through the powder uphill.

When he saw the leg, brown and frosted with rime like white mold consuming a leaf skeleton he reached for an arrow and doubled over in pain. He’d moved so rapidly when he realized what was under the snow, he had forgotten his battered arm. But the leg, and the body, he could see it now, did not react.

Hoar stopped, a ski length back string taunt but not yet drawn. Out from beneath a gorse thicket of eyebrows, icy eyes bored into the man shaped drift. Dark leggings, thin enough to see through failed to cover all the way down to the shoes which would have filled with snow, each step leeching another finger of heat. The calf that showed beneath the ragged, ripped pantleg was mottled brown and tinted blue. It was cracked and pierced by frosted hairs like reeds poking through the surface of black ice on the night of the first major freeze. Vaicour. Unprepared for the Golemel peaks in summer, let alone on the eve of winter. Dead.

Hoar lowered the bow. He crossed the distance to the corpse and brushed snow off the man’s head and shoulders. Blue lips ringed by black, cold eaten skin and bloodshot eyes looked back at him from a man’s face, perhaps forty-five. His shirt, a linen white, yellow against the snow, was just as useless for warmth as the pants, but that didn’t mean they were worthless. Hoar could get something for it when the Trader came that spring. There was no cord around his neck to mark him meaning he was human. If he stole from humans and was caught, he’d pay the Azil price. If he were caught. Perhaps it would fetch a thumb of salt, or a new needle and skin of brandy. Hoar didn’t hesitate. He’d need to get it off the man, hunched up and stiff. Hoar paused in his efforts to clear away the snow. The torn cloth from the pants, filleted like a deer carcass and bound tightly to the back of his thigh, was crusted with something blacker than the man’s skin. Apprehension building behind his permafrost frown, Hoar slipped a knife from his belt fluidly and slit the knot.

He still had to pull the cloth away to see the long, deep cut that had been a battleground between fevered rot and icy cold until the wind’s greedy sucking voice had won. The slash was straight, and thin. This was not the work of a beast; or at least no beast that walked on all fours. Hoar’s frown deepened and he took a measured scan of the surrounding trees.

Satisfied that no one lurked in the trees above him, Hoar was still deeply unsettled. Something was wrong, beyond the wounds inflicted by humans. There was something missing from the body. He bent down again, and brushed more vigorously at the body dislodging small avalanches of snow. If his wife had been there, she would have paled at the idea of robbing the dead. Vaicour sentiment. He hauled at the body, bigger than him, but it didn’t budge. It might be frozen to the ground, glued in place by the dead man’s frozen urine, perhaps. He stepped around, brushing yet more snow off the man who was curled, huddling in the hollow behind the tree. There was something big, which the man was curled around. Hoar bent down to investigate then froze.

A blade hovered around his navel, poised to disembowel him. It wasn't a blade for chopping vegetables, skinning rabbits or whittling scrimshaws. It was short, triangular, built for piecing ring mail. Like the slow eddys in deep waters where no sun shown and blind fish hibernated, Hoar’s eyes drifted up from the blade.

A woman whose fingers were swollen tight with frostbite around the hilt was staring up at him from the cold embrace of her human coffin. She was soldered to the ground, sunk two inches into frozen mud. In another decade or two, her face might be as cragged and lined as Hoar’s, what remained of it. Even before winter’s teeth had begun to gnaw and nibble, someone had burned nearly a third of her face, brown turning to flaky black. Something of that fire still burned within the pits of her eyes, staring at Hoar with a hunger he did not know. Her hand, too cold to shake, pricked through the fur and cloth and found his stomach. Hoar did not look down, though he felt blood steaming in the icebox air. It trickled down, painting her dirk crimson and mixing with the blood her cracked skin still managed to ooze. She would lose half the fingers on the hand, if she were lucky. If she was unlucky, she’d make a good start at field dressing him before he could reach his flensing knife. They fixed gazes, neither backing down, neither speaking for half the time it takes for a footprint to be swallowed up by the driving snow. Then, lips cracking, she broke the silence.

“Ludranon vol sa Sorena, vanethe. Atras sekalla vish.” *Bastards. Killers. I’ll butcher you and eat Sorena too.*

The words came out like chunks of ice falling from the eaves, each block carefully broken off by numb fists more hammer than hand and striking the ground with shattering force. Hoar didn’t reply. He knew only a handful of words in Vaicour, though his wife had tried to teach him. For all her efforts, he understood only one of her words, vol. It meant to eat. He stood, uncomprehending, hunched over like a mother snow bear over a kill and felt his heat drain through the prick in his skin. Perhaps he would die here, as a blanket for a woman soon to follow and a sheath for her blade on the eve of winter. What a stupid way to die. Hoar began to shiver, though a moment ago he hadn’t realized he was this cold. His mind buzzed, searching for an escape route. There had to be a way out, something he could say or do if only he could concentrate. The drip of his blood against snowpack made a steady rhythm that he latched onto. Music had always focused him and he began to hum a tune in time. The first song to come to him was the cradle song he’d sung his baby daughter to sleep with, something he hadn’t sung in over twenty years. Frozen bewilderment at the song glimmered up, through the depths of numbness in the woman’s face. The wetted dirk quivered and Hoar’s heart quickened. Then, the mangled hand and triangle of steel fell away. A decision had been made.

“Ule rakratha,” *What are you?* she murmured, and relinquished Hoar his life and hers. She let go, sinking into the deep snow, mind and body. The light within her eyes dimmed, but she did not close them. Hoar looked at the dead boy with a frown as deep as the sifting snow, then at the dying woman in summer clothes. The weight of the doe’s carcass dug into his aching neck. Wolves would soon smell the bodies out, and the pack would feast. Nothing would be left, come the spring, save a few cracked bones scattered by the scavengers and dispersed further by the ice melt. It was thirty-one hours back to Hrullt, if the weather didn’t worsen. There was little shelter for kilometers, and no hope that the woman would survive the trip back. He needed the doe, desperately, if he was going to make it through the winter. The choice was obvious. In the spine of the Golemell mountains, the wind and the wolves howled as one.

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*Introduce Gili. Character description.*

“When are mother and father coming back?”

Immediately, Hoar knew he’d said the wrong thing. Val hadn’t stop sanding, but the motions which had before been careful stokes taking bare microns off the raw window sash became mechanical. If he wasn’t careful, he’d end up taking an unnecessary stroke. Hoar pointedly avoided looking at the woodshed, rather ducked his head back to the washboard, redoubling his efforts.

“Autumn, obviously,” Gili said with distaste, short of breath from stirring the mass of sodden clothes in the tin washbasin that doubled as a bath. Her nose was wrinkled from the smell of the pot ash. They were in the clearing behind the cabin, taking advantage of the last few warm days before the flood of red and yellows touched the maples in the valley and the nights began to dream of rime. “More heat, Crater. Do I have to do everything around here?” Gili ordered.

“I’m doing it,” he said, hastily poking another branch into the flames beneath the basin.

“Anyway, my father said he’d be back before the first snowfall,” Gili continued.

Hoar’s head came up hopefully. “Are you sure?”

Gili stopped stirring. “Of course. It’s just a boarder skirmish.”

“The Mograthi are going to be crushed!” chimed in Crater, excitedly. “Mother was telling me,” he said, brow furrowing in recitation, “They don’t have the supply lines for a long camp.”

“Campaign.” Gili corrected. “And what’s really important is the Vaicour Cuirassiers. We have the best cavalry in the whole world,”

“Keep stirring,” Val said, still apparently focused on his carpentry.

“You’re turn,” Gili said, handing the paddle off to Crater who took it grudgingly. Gili sat down by the stack of wood her face a picture of suffering. “And do a full turn this time.” Gili, a pudgy girl of nine, had arms twice the girth of Crater’s twig like limbs and could carry a calf by herself. Hoar scrubbed fretfully, ignoring the dull sting in fingers turned pink and wrinkled from the caustic water.

“Nothing can beat the Vaicour Cuirassiers,” Crater said confidently, clutching the paddle before him like it was a rifle and he were a soldier on parade. Hoar’s dirty reflection frowned up at him, unconvinced.

“What if Mograthi use Vendigores.” The words slipped out before he realized what he’d said. The sanding block’s rasp stopped and Hoar clamped his mouth shut. Vendigore soldiers weren’t to be talked about.

“You have another load after this. Keep scrubbing,” Val said in a flat voice that Hoar knew meant he’d pay the Azil price for the slip up later.

“The Mograthi can’t use Vendigores. Orturiel wouldn’t let them,”

“That’s why we’re fighting them, silly boy. And they’re called Ursar in Mograth.”

“If you have so much free time to talk, I’m sure I can find you more work.” Val said, this time allowing a note of displeasure to darken his voice. That shut the humans up.

After a minute, Crater said, “More wood,” pausing to wipe the perspiration from his forehead with trembling arms. This was made pointless by the personal cloud of steam enveloping his head and shoulders.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just do this while we’re sleeping,” Gili said, poking listlessly at the fire.

“You need to learn the value of hard work,” Val said, testing the fit of the sash.

“I know the value of hard work. But you Azil don’t have to sleep so why should I spend my time when you could do it so easily. I need all the time to study I can get.”

“Keep stirring,” was Val’s only reply.

“The fire’s too hot,” Gili said sulkily, taking the paddle from Crater.

“You’ll wish you had a fire that hot one day, up on the mountain, when winter bares her teeth and the wind freezes anything not covered.” Val said unsympathetically. Hoar’s attention began to wander.

“Only a fool would go up the mountain when it’s still snowy.”

Perhaps even now his mother and father were facing a vendigore in the pass, backed against cliffs with nowhere to run. His hands slipped and he felt a caustic burn as a rough tooth of metal tore a jagged cut along the pad of his index finger allowing the scummy water to flow in.

“We can’t all own a hundred goats” Crater said, throwing a handful of sticks into the fire. Hoar heard Val’s suppressed snort. Maybe Gili did too.

“It’s almost two hundred.” Gili said, primly. “And your mother owns the store, if I remember correctly?”

“So?”

“So you can stay inside you’re nice warm house while I have to go outside in the snow and cold and take care of the animals, obviously.”

“My father’s taking me hunting next Spring! It’ll be plenty icy and muddy!” Crater

Guiltily, Hoar remembered it wasn’t just his parents that were off in the war. “If they’re back safe by then,” Hoar whispered, but so softly that neither of his bickering friends could hear him.

“That’s stupid.”

“Is not.”

“Is too. Only a fool would go up the mountain when it’s still snowing.”

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Thirteen hours into the twenty-seven-hour journey the scattering of fat flakes drifting through the trees picked up. Squinting against the grey sky, Hoar tried to gauge if this was a passing squall or the overture to a blizzard. Sightless, arboreal sentinels looked down on him, mute and ancient. He scowled back at them, uncomfortably aware of the fatigue settling deeper and deeper into his aged bones for every passing hour. He couldn’t afford to slow down. Resettling the load on his back he pushed off, gliding onward with the faintest crunch of ice crystals. Over the next hour, the snowfall intensified.

If it was just a flurry, he could ride it out. Keep making for Hrult and he’d be there in half a day. But if it were a blizzard, he’d be caught out in the open. Not for the first time, Hoar wished for a compass, a skipping stone sized disk worth four kegs of sweet, pure Hrult gold a fortune he would never see in his lifetime. Without one, there was no guarantee he’d make it safety even if he abandoned his burden. Get turned around in a white out and he might as well make it quick and slit his own throat. Unbidden, a memory of a voice, bubbling and spitting blood rose from the black canyon he’d buried it in.

Hoar hummed the opening lines of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Drown the memory. Force its heads under the water and hold it there no matter how it writhed and tried to shriek. Something shifted on his back and Hoar’s concentration wavered. The memories slipped from his grasp, twisted and struck. And Hoar remembered. There was another option: a cache of food, firewood and blankets just three hours cross country up the mountain. The food had surely fouled decades ago, but the blankets and firewood were at the back of a cleft in the rock. He hadn’t been on that route in nearly forty years, but he could still find it.

“What do you think,” he said to the woman bound to his back in place of the deer, sapping his warmth and strength.

“Thehan Ro?” *Where are we?* she murmured. Still awake with enough strength to speak. A good sign. But could she hold onto life without rest? Hoar frowned deeply, weighing the options as the meters slipped by beneath his ski.

“Just hold on for three hours,” Hoar said.”

“Thehan?” *Where?* she repeated, weaker this time.

It took Hoar three and a half hours. The flurry had worsened and by the time he spied the little fissure in the rockface, his beard and eyebrows had accumulated so much snow someone might have mistaken him for a snowman. Icicles of snot and sweat had frozen to his nose, forcing the salt out like a protective jacket. He skied the last twenty meters to the cave face. Silently, efficiently, numbly, he slid into the dark.

Immediately, the sucking cold of the wind abated and warmth began to spread through his limbs. Without waiting for his eyes to adjust, he slid his passenger to the ground, depositing her in a shallow drift of snow that had blown past the occlusion of rock. Hoar straightened with in one, glorious stretching motion almost feeling his spine elongate. Cramped muscles sang with relief feeling the accumulation of aches crack like a thin skin of ice. His sweat drenched clothes peeled back from allowing air to percolate. He nearly welcomed this draft of cool air that accompanied the motion. But he could not give in to the exhaustion completely. He bent to undo his ski then frowned. The makeshift repair was stuck firmly in place as if welded by cold. He debated trying to work it out but decided better of it. It would be an awkward rest stop without removing his skis, but not as awkward as breaking the boot for good and ending up stranded on the mountainside. It wasn’t like any human would be coming to rescue him. Through the slits of his iyegaatek, he reexamined his charge, focusing on the burns across her face. Humans wouldn’t be searching for him, but that didn’t mean there weren’t humans on the mountain searching.

After Hoar had returned from the cavemouth, confident that the narrow tracks he’d left behind would be obliterated by the snowfall, he found the woman was shivering. Hoar hesitated, then then stripped off his wolf cloak, rolling her up in it like baby in swaddling clothes. He’d explore the recess of the cave for the old blanket momentarily, but he couldn’t leave her lying on a snow pile to freeze. But as he bent down her mangled lips worked. “Kusin. Thehon vol?” *Hungry. Something to eat?*

“Vol?” Hoar said back, frowning.

“Vol,” the woman echoed. Hoar drew out a few mouthful strips of smoked venison poking one into her mouth and biting down on his own. It was hard as granite and just as old. As he worried his own piece, he saw her feeble chewing stop and the meat slipped out to the floor. He prodded the food back into her mouth only to watch it fall to the ground seconds later. Hoar frowned, thinking.

At first, she hadn’t understood, swollen remnants of lips protesting as much as she could but he forced her mouth open anyway and put cracked whiskery lips over hers. Then she realized, and accepted the food. He made sure she swallowed, frowning fiercely all the while. In a grotesquery of mother bird and chick, Hoar chewed the dried meat her. She stared back, too tired or uncaring to muster a glare or a thank you or even fear. When she’d had enough, she nodded, like a branch springing back after dislodging its crown of snow, just a flake too heavy, and Hoar straightened from his awkward, ski bound seat.

Working on his own piece of teak like venison, he stumped deeper into the cave, lifting his skis like a show horse so as not to scratch the surface. It was noisy, but that didn’t’ matter here. There had been a rock shelf at the back of the cave, perhaps fifteen meters in, where they’d cached the food and blankets. The blankets might have rotted away, but that wasn’t a death sentence here. The air was warmer than he’d hoped, and even without the embrace of his blighted cloak the chill was evaporating from his bones. Even his nose was thawing. Hoar breathed in and smelled it a hot, primal, animal fug. And that wasn’t a pile of old blankets at the back of the cave. With a snuffling, rumble, the mass of thick, brown fur shifted in its hibernation. They were in a cave with a grizzly.

When Hoar started breathing again, he didn’t rush. It was early in the season, and this hibernation was barely a nap compared to the deep sleep of winter. It wouldn’t take much to wake it. Hoar grimaced at the ski clattering cacophony or his entrance and tried to make up for it now. Like a glacier, he began to move backwards, painfully aware of each scrape his skis made when replaced against the stone floor. The bear moved again, uncurling one passive paw. His fingers itched to draw his bow but it was with the rest of his gear by the entrance. Even if he did have it, the bear was large, huge stores of fat to get it through the winter while he only had a handful of smoked jerky and a second mouth to feed. Only an exceptionally lucky shot would do anything more than enrage the bear, and then it would still have enough time to rend him limb from limb before succumbing. Hoar took another tentative step backwards and then another. The bear didn’t move still seemingly locked in slumber.

With a quiet, rapid efficiency Hoar began to reload his harness. Every clink of glass or gentle thud of metal hurt like physical wounds, but at least the adrenaline had burned the tiredness away. He’d loaded everything but his bow and cloak when his attention turned to the human. He had to put hoist her dead weight into the harness first, then the cloak over that before he could strap his bow in place. But when he rolled her out of the cloak, she squeaked in protest. “Hush,” he whispered swinging her around. Again, she squeaked and this time he slapped her. There was no thought behind it. It was just the natural reaction to quiet a crying child. But instead of shutting her mouth, the woman let out a shriek and echoed through the cave. Hoar’s calloused hand clamped down over her mouth, furiously silencing her but it was too late. He heard the rumbling ursine roar from the back of the cave. He scooped her up in his arms, still tangled in the cloak and realized his bow was a meter out of reach. He hesitated a bare second, but the choice was made for him by the mass of fur and teeth loping from the deepest part of the rock cleft. Hoar shoved off backwards out of the cave, leaving his only weapon behind.

The bear didn’t follow them into the blowing snow and Hoar stopped a hundred meters downhill, dropping the bundled woman in the snow. Wrinkled face contorting with rage he opened his mouth to scream at the stupid girl then stopped. Her eyes were glistened with tears, and she’d curled into a ball, expecting the blow. Only then did he realize his fist was raised. He lowered it, and picked her up. She settled onto his back, wrapping her arms around him as he threw the wolf cloak over both of them.

“It wasn’t your fault.” He whispered, looking back at the cave and the mountain path he’d only ever taken once. “It wasn’t your fault.” He squinted up at the sky. The snow was still coming as fiercely as ever and there was only one path to follow. He set his skis downhill towards Hrult, away from the cave and the path and what lay at the top. The woman’s weighed against him, heavier than a deer carcass and far less useful. She would only get heavier as the nights dragged on, like a cairn of stones being built stone by stone overhead until he could no longer move.

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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.

Once, three and a half kilometers west of a black lake, he’d come across the markings of a herd no more than six hours old, fresh in the snow left behind by the flurry that had officially shepherded winter into the Golemel. He’d frowned intensely, the crags of wrinkles on his forehead colliding in thought. Then, he pushed himself and the millstone around his neck, back up and reseated her in the harness with a grunt. He moved on. Occasionally, the woman would murmur into his ear in the vexing language his wife had spoken so sweetly and memories like poisonous snakes would try to slither through the cracks of his mind. He ignored them both until the woman went silent, and let him walk in peace again. Every hour he looked over his shoulder to see if she was dead, to see of undoing the straps and throwing her body away to stop leeching his heat and his strength. Yet every time, her flinty eye met his, defiantly alive. She didn’t sleep. Not once in the twenty-seven-hour march, over nearly two score kilometers of snowy mountain terrain did she drift off. Azil, thought Hoar and frowned at the questions, past and future, that the woman posed.

She was as close to unconsciousness as Azil could be when he got the woman back to his cabin, wedged between two outcroppings of rock like a piece of gristle between grey molars. Inside, it the howl of the wind was muted and its teeth had been pulled. His cabin was large, and all but empty inside as if its inhabitants and all they owned had vanished overnight. But there was only one inhabitant, his hearth, a table, a chair and a cabinet on the lake of empty floor. Hoar undid his harness, and let her slide to the ground along with the bearskin. Hoar returned to her side shortly, a fire sputtering into life next to what seemed like half a grove of neatly stacked, neatly split firewood. He’d gotten the axe head from Ulma, the goat woman in Hrult. It was as dull as millet gruel was tasteless but he’d sharpened it on a whetstone and he’d paid the goat woman back a week later in a cord of wood, the first of several promised. The goat woman had even offered him a bowl of her millet gruel, which he’d been too proud to refuse as was sensible. Hoar wondered what the goat woman would think if she knew what he’d done and what he was going to do.

The woman watched Hoar approach with the bundle, and didn’t try to stop him when he knelt and pulled off her shoes. The sole of her foot was mottled with dead flesh, black against the relative lightness of her soul. Every toe was black. He pinched one, and she didn’t cry out. Soon, they would poison her blood. Hoar’s frown went as dark as Glassnine valley, rimmed and shielded on all sides from the sun. He knew what had to be done, knew what that he didn’t have the skill, and the knowledge ached worse than the dull roar which had spread from his neck down his back and shot through his arms like a metastasis. They’d thought the years would sooth the lie, like spring’s verdant green overtaking shell shattered stone. Instead, the barbed words had cut anew, working their way deeper every time as unable to heal as earth poisoned with lead and nitramide.

When Hoar’s rough hands began to undo the thick cloth band that held her pants she gave a delirious, cry and tried to club him across the face with a claw of a hand. The blow was feeble, almost childlike, but Hoar knew little Vaicouric and it would have taken an ox hitched to his tongue to drag from him the repulsive language. He ignored her cold addled protestations and stripped her naked as a babe. Out of her sodden clothes and hoisted her in the cradle of his arms and carried her to the wolfskin rug by the fire. He began piling more furs on top of her. Wolf, deer, bear and even a patchwork quilt ten kilos heavier with the stink of wood smoke and wet fur. Her glassy eyes watched him stacking up more wood by the fire. It would last several hours, at least. When he was strapping the bone and sinew meshes to his boots once more she finally spoke

“Vanahale, koldrin.” It came out a croak, and whether it was a prayer, a benediction or a curse, Hoar didn’t look back.