**Season 1**

**Before**

The fire crackled merrily, setting the cabin aglow with life. Basking in its warmth were three children of thirteen and a man who had lived far longer than any in the village had thought, or hoped, he would. The taller of the boys, Crater, was flushed from the halo of heat radiating off the flames, the much-repaired quilt that had covered him slipping from his sprawled form. He was fast asleep, despite his often and firmly stated resolution that he wasn’t tired. The girl, Gili, was plump and just as deeply asleep, but she had laid down with more dignity. The soft snores which escaped her petite nose were dwarfed by the overwhelming snore that cut through the bedroom door like a pig being sawed. She shivered, despite the fire and blanket. The third child, knees drawn up to his chest, was solemn, and didn’t seem to notice the lateness of the hour, or the snores, or the cold, but he did notice the shiver. He rose, and made to grab the other boy’s quilt but the old man, who had been fretting over the tightness of his svelsa’s strings, said sternly, “Let him alone, Hoar.”

Hoar jumped, and retreated to his seat, hiding his chin between boney knees. The old man chuckled quietly as he twisted a final peg and set thick fingers, forested with hair to strings. With a deftness that belied his age, he played three, soft, pure notes. He grinned mischievously at his audience. “What shall we sing. Miller by the Water? Cannadray? Old King Parsley?” The corners of Hoar’s mouth twitched at that; he and his grandfather had rewritten the words as ‘Old King Parseek,” including many quite creative comparisons to goat dung, Hoar’s addition, and a stanza about Parseek’s mother that Hoar didn’t understand but had been happy to sing. Crater hadn’t understood either, but apparently Parseek, who was fourteen and already shaping into as much of a black foot as his mother, did. He had given Crater a hiding when the first heard he’d heard the boy singing happily and offkey. They had sung it three times that night already at Crater’s insistence but Hoar was tired of it and, thankfully, so had Gili when she put her foot down. “I’d teach you ‘The Laundress from Karthess,’ but I think your grandmother’d flense me.” The old man chuckled again, glancing toward the bedroom door. The laughter slid from his face, like ice melt off a roof leaving a contemplative expression. He looked at his grandson, and Hoar had the sudden feeling that he was being weighed in the scales. He froze, waiting and wishing suddenly that he had adopted a more mature sitting position. Quietly, and with a slowness that Hoar had seldom heard, the old man said, “This is an old song, Hoar, a very old song. Don’t tell your grandmother I sang it for you.” His wiry eyebrows were pulled into an overly fierce, almost comical V. In the sudden hush, Hoar waited for him to grin. When he didn’t, Hoar hesitantly nodded and pulled himself to the edge of his chair. Something was off. His grandfather nodded, and gently placed another, muting fold of cloth into the bowl of the svelsa. He struck a chord, soft and sharp and sorrowful as the keening of wind through the valley below. Hazel eyed held hazel eyes as the opening notes began to drift like the first snowflakes of winter. Then, he began to 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

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

But 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.

But 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 called vendigore.

The last notes of his silver voice melted into thin air, Hoar’s ears straining to catch every haunting word. He’d closed his eyes, the better to feel the music and felt as though this moment would stretch on forever. A disapproving cough shattered the enchantment. Hoar’s grandmother Roa perhaps a few years past fifty had opened the bedroom door to glare at the trio. Hoar quailed beneath her withering gaze, but the brunt of it rested on the old man who looked serenely unashamed.

“I thought I told you not to play the boy horror stories, he’ll have nightmares,” she said as though Hoar wasn’t there. He didn’t correct her, rather wished he had a blanket to sink his head beneath.

“You were snoring so loudly, I didn’t think,” the old man began but Roa cut him off, her nostrils flaring.

“I do not snore!”

“Hush, hush, people are sleeping,” he inclined his head to the jumble of arms contained within the chair and Gili’s prone form.

“Do not lecture me on keeping quiet,” she hissed, lower this time but advancing on him like a mother bear. “You don’t understand how miserable it is to wake up tired.

“I know, I know,” the old man tried in conciliatory tone but she was getting into her stride.

“You go on at all hours of the day and night, slamming doors and singing,”

“You like my singing,” interjected the old man, but his wife ran right over his aggrieved voice, oblivious to her rising volume. Hoar was sitting almost between the pair, his grandmother looming over the chair staring over his head. He had sunk so low into his chair that he was practically horizontal.

“and stomping around in big boots and testing the springs on your traps!”

“It was one time!”

“It was twice and you know it, Hoar.”

The elder Hoar was about to reply but the sleeping Crater gave a snuffling snort and flopped into a new seemingly impossible position. Both adults went quiet, and moved to pick up the fallen quilt.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Hoar said, his bones popping as he bent to get one end of the blanket.

“I thought I told you not to play that horrid song,” she said, her wrath cooling as she tucked the sleeping boy in. Then, as if registering for the first time that the other children were there, her nostrils flared and she burst out in an angry hiss.

“You were supposed to bring them home hours ago!”

“Yes, yes, I was going to but they fell asleep and I didn’t have the heart to wake them,” Hoar waved at her in a vaguely soothing manner, laughter in the dimple of his cheeks.

By reflex, she grumbled “Didn’t have the heart to wake them. It’s bad enough the mayor’s already thin with us. Why did you have to write that song?” The boy winced, feeling guilty for the first time for his part in the song. “You don’t understand how much trouble this could bring down on us.”

“Yes.” Hoar set the svelsa onto the side table with a quiet click that none the less had the effect of a blow to the diagram, cutting Roa off mid diatribe. “Yes I do understand. And so should the boy. He need to know what our people are,”

“You mean your people.”

“Yes, yes my wicked, morally blasphemous, wife thieving people. It’s important the boy learn what an Azil really is, rather than get the wrong impression from his mother and I,” The old woman glared at him, then all at once her frown broke and she laughed. It was a laugh with ragged edges, just the beginnings of the illness that would subsume her life and boy Hoar, listening now, would learn to hate it. He would carry every note of that cracked glass laugh in his heart, looking back in time through unbroken decades of conscious, living memory to those moments and hate, and hold each one.

“I didn’t mean you were a bad influence, only that some of your songs are too sad and, and too close to what is real for a child.”

“He’ll grow up someday, and better hear it true from me than hurled at him by the Parseek boy, or that Gorgem.”

“She’s harmless,” Roa said, avoiding mention of the Parseek boy. Not even her iron clad pillar of certainty in the goodness of humans would tolerate that load. “And it isn’t true.” Acknowledging her grandson’s presence for the first time, she took Hoar’s hands in hers, squatting down so she was on a level with his thin, solemn face. “It’s just a story, you understand? Some people are frightened by what they don’t understand. Look at your grandfather, is he a monster?” The old man gave a cheery wave, then made a face, his wild, white beard making him look like a snow bear with its long winter coat. The old woman swatted his knee and he desisted. “Is he a monster?” she asked again. The boy looked his grandfather squarely in the face and shook his head. “Azil aren’t monsters, and you aren’t either.” The boy nodded again, so seriously that his grandfather chuckled. “If you keep making that face, it’ll stick that way, you know?”

**Fall**

Dozens of maps, hastily unburied from whatever draws and cabinets the steward’s predecessor had filed them away in to molder, were scattered across the table with enthusiastic despair, as though sheer volume could replace accuracy. The steward, a prematurely balding man and perpetual worrier, shot another glance at his unwanted guess and worried away a few more hairs. She was young, her skin even darker than his, and dangerously built, like an onyx statue of an angel’s herald. She was idly spinning her emptied wine goblet on the tabletop, the supreme embodiment of boredom.

“I’m afraid the maps are out of date, my Lady,” he fussed, sweat beading on his naked scalp. “The last cartographer was commissioned a season before the Unification, and he never returned. The woman before him went out nearly fifty years ago, and I would swear she scribbled in half the rivers and valleys based off hearsay and just made the other half up to fill the space.”

The goblet stopped, mid spin. The sudden absence disquieted the steward who longed desperately to be in his chambers, drawing a hot bath, and soaking in bath salts and perfume. “Surely, your maps of the pass cannot be so,” she lingered on the syllable, letting another bead of sweat roll down the steward’s temple, “Dissatisfactory?” Her voice was calm, and smooth like a sheet of oil.

“No, my Lady!” he all but shouted, then regaining composure for fear that in his eagerness to refute the damnation he’d stumbled into a worse pitfall. “Those maps are quite accurate, and are updated once every three years.” He fumbled to retrieve them, proffering the crisp paper like an offering. She took them from him, languidly scanning their contents. He fidgeted, “It is only that from the direction they were headed, it seems likely that they might try to hide up in the Golemel spine.”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “They will not. There is only one route open to them, and that is through the pass. You will send outriders with messages to the garrisons at Kirch, Vanholm, and all minor towns in between telling them to detain any aged woman covering her face accompanied by a younger man.” For the first time, any emotion other than boredom had entered her voice. At the word “aged,” there had been just a flash, an opening of the furnace door, of a hatred that burned inside her. The steward flinched. “Their quarry is injured. I want patrols off the main roads as well. They will avoid roads if they can. She isn’t stupid.”

“As you command, my Lady. I shall instruct them to interrogate the farms if any grain or livestock go missing,” she nodded her approval and, emboldened, he pressed on, “and I shall send riders up to the villagers in the mountains as well.” He quailed as rapidly as her expression darkened.

“Oh, you will?” she said, in deliberate calm but her Vaicouric accent, so perfect in her composure before, had slipped.

“My Lady, I only meant to be thorough,” he babbled, “and if you were wrong about their route of escape.” Instantly, he knew what he had said was wrong. If the thunderclap of anger that flashed across her features hadn’t been enough the fury in her voice was.

“If I were wrong, steward? If I were wrong?” He closed his eyes. “If I were wrong, and that whore pretending to be a spinster from Arenholm and that besotted fool of a constable decided to flee into the mountains, then they are dead.” The steward nodded frantically, but there must have shown some uncertainty in his features, either that or she mistook his fear for doubt. “You’re from the delta, aren’t you?” This time her voice was amused. He nodded again, daring to open his eyes. She had gotten to her feet, and was leaning forward, her knuckles on the table. “I thought at much. Then you only know the winters of the plains. Tell me, what do you know of winter?”

The steward spoke carefully, like a hunted fox who knew its path was strewn with metal jaws and pit falls. “The winter here is chilly, but nothing harsh?” he hazarded. Displeasure contorted her face. He hadn’t fallen, and that could not be forgiven.

“A delta winter is a toothless kitten compared to the crags, you old woman. They are both fools who’ve never known real winter which drops without warning and without mercy.”

The steward was actually trembling. He tried to hide his hands and bleated out weakly, “What if they take shelter with the villagers? Or steal food?”

“The Golemel are a superstitious and barbaric lot but they know how to treat thieves and strangers. If they are fool enough to challenge the mountains, they will end up frozen or strung up for the birds as vendigore”

“Venda-gore?” he said, his tongue stumbling over the hard syllables.

“Their word for the monsters inside Azil.” If “aged” had cracked the furnace door, then “Azil” tore it from its hinges. The steward froze in his cowardly shoes, watching with horrified fascination as her long, elegant fingers, perfect for playing the harp, curled over the mouth of the goblet crushing the soft metal.

All he could think of saying was “You’ve been there before?”

“I… knew a girl who came from there. Now, convey my orders.” She gave a predatory grin, all white enamel and pink gums as though they were display pieces that had never encountered the taint of food. The steward smiled a sickly smile and all but fled to follow her dictum.

**Winter**

There was a flash and 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. His right ski tore free with a jolt but Hoar’s momentum carried him forward, toppling down the slope. He felt weightless, the craggy, wind scarred planes of his face registering a split second of surprise in a slight deepening of a decades old frown, then gravity reasserted itself and he crashed into the ground, his other boot still trapped in a tangle of wood, leather and metal. The heavy, fur lined boots were new. He’d haggled them out of the Trader up from the Vanholm three years ago, and they’d finally broken into the cozy, supple shape that was just right. Six fox pelts, and the trader had thrown in new steel clasps for his cloak.

The weight of the carcass strapped to his back slammed into him, knocking his breath out as he skidded forward in the snow, his head and shoulders the barb of the anchor that dragged him to a halt. When the world came back into stinging white focus, Hoar heaved the deer off to one side, in a grunting, joint popping effort. Lined doeskin gloves fumbled at the straps of the harness sucking which cut into his chest. When he’d gotten the straps free and could breathe again he flopped onto his back. He lay still, in the warm 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 great bear pelt, white as the whisps of cirrus hair that clung to his head, and held rather more firmly with a steel clasp, forged in a three braided knot. There were only two holes in the fur, neatly sewn closed again. If the bear had been wearing it still, the holes would line up on either side of the shaggy creature’s neck. Last summer, when the passes were open, he’d given the trader the teeth and a jar of the grease for new bow strings and twelve sharp steel heads, thinking the fall would be bountiful. Hoar unslung his bow, grunting slightly as the weight on his back shifted. He had been foolish. He’d only needed six, and he wished he had bought extra rice from Arenholm.

The pain lessened, or maybe that was just the cold distracting him. He needed to move. Heaving himself up, the familiar choir of pain in his back protesting in harmony to the fresh melody of pain he undid the boot still stuck in the ski harness and surveyed the damage. Holes in the snow and half buried equipment that stuck out of the drifts like shipwrecks were everywhere.

Hoar thought about shouting a curse, of thrashing at the snow as if winter was something he could hit, of screaming in frustration and pain. But there was no one to hear him. 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 day’s 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. He took a deep breath, hauled his creaking bones upright, and began to hum the opening bars of 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 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 gathered everything by the scrawny doe, stripped of her organs and strapped tightly to a wooden frame which had miraculously survived the fall unscathed. She hadn’t seen the snow bear with a steel knot holding its skin in place, nor did she hear the song of the bowstring, nor did she have time to feel the piercing arrow. But scrawny or not, 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.

The Trader had called it a lute, but he was an outsider, and didn’t know any better. It was battered, with a slightly crooked neck, like Hoar’s, and two frets needed to be held firm with wire. But Hoar’s grandfather had owned one, had played one 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 leapt. 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. It would have meant he couldn’t afford the important things that year. He’d thought about trading the svelsa away for years, whenever 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, perform alone 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 promise himself that he would sell it 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. Small, discordant notes of desperation were beginning to play within his heart. 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 of it and he were frozen. He quashed the beginning panic, changing tunes from Cannadray to Shinning Soldier, Son and Daughter without thinking. He frowned then, anger replacing all three melodies. 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 cap. 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. 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 rift valleys of creased skin, hazel eyes appraised a snowdrift, nearly thirty paces up slope that 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 now, 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. 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 boy’s face only twenty-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. Perhaps a thumb of salt, or a new needle and skin of brandy. If he could get it off the man, hunched up and stiff as he was. 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. 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 nothing like that a wolf or bear might leave as a parting gift. 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 might have paled at the idea of robbing the dead boy. Vaicour sentiment. Not even the shadow of such a thought darkened Hoar’s mind. 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, and went as still as the deep waters where no sun shone and blind fish hibernated.

A blade, not for flensing, not for chopping vegetables, not for shaving willow bark from a tree trunk but short and triangular and built for piercing through mail hovered around navel height. 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.”

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 word, 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. There was a certain poetry to it, his grandfather had disappeared in these final days of fall when the light fails and winters hammer of snow prepares to drop. Hoar began to shiver, though a moment ago he hadn’t realized he was this cold. The accumulation of snow on his furs fell like the prelude to a blizzard on the woman’s face. They had never found his grandfather’s final resting place, though Hoar kept the vigil anyway, and laid his memory to rest with the others. He was perversely glad that this woman would be there on the night of his dying to hold his vigil. It gave him comfort and he looked at her without malice or fear, and warmth welled within him. A decision had been made, and the hand with the wetted dirk slumped.

“Ule rakratha,” 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.

Under the vigil of sightless, arboreal sentinels, Hoar made the twenty-seven-hour journey from one season to another. His grizzled face was locked in a seeming indifferent scowl to the cold and the weight that dragged on him. The tiredness that couldn’t sleep settled into his aged bones, as it always did, but he kept on. He stopped only twice to rest and to worry a few mouthfuls of smoked venison hard as granite and just as old. He might have made a fire, but that would have taken time to find kindling, deadwood and strike a spark in the frosted forests and the woman was so cold that the first time he put her down, he’d found the clothes on the front of her shirt crack like a sheet of ice a minute later. Her clothes were wet where his warmth had melted the pink tinged hoarfrost of salt and iron and he had no way to dry her. Hoar kept her body pressed to him, like a river stone. At least she was lighter than a deer.

He put her down only to feed her. The woman had no strength to chew, so Hoar had chewed for her, a grotesquery of mother bird and chick. At first, she hadn’t understood, mangled swollen remnants of lips protesting as much as she could but he forced her mouth open anyway and put cracked whiskery lips over hers. He made sure she swallowed, frowning fiercely all the while. She stared back, too tired or uncaring to muster a glare or a thank you or even fear. Then she’d nod, like a branch springing back after dislodging its crown of snow, just a flake too heavy, and he’d hoist her back up, settling the harness more comfortably before continuing the trek. She wasn’t shivering. That was not good.

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 they were a prayer, a benediction or a curse, Hoar didn’t look back.

**Fall**

They were fifteen, and both Hoar and Crater towered over Gili but by the way she strode through the briar and gorse, the two boys dogging her heels, she might have been the titan herself and they her pups. Gili was rounder, her thighs thick and face full of sharp laughter. She carried a hefty pale which sloshed glutinously and popped something into her mouth every few steps. Crater was tallest, and willowy, and couldn’t wipe the grin from his face. A rifle and small satchel was slung over his shoulder sticking to his back with more than sweat. Already, Hoar sported a thick, brown beard which in combination with his muddy pants and tan shirt made him look like a dead tree had uprooted and walk away, throwing nervous glances behind. He carried nothing on him, but the incriminating stickiness on his fingers. Gili was licking the sweetness from her own when she abruptly halted by a moss bearded stone and sat down.

“This is far enough. I want to hear.”

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

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

“It’s not loaded. Obviously.”

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

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

“I said it’s not loaded!

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

“A Vaicour girl?”

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

“When?”

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

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

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

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

“Demons below, it’s on my rifle.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It won’t happen. It can’t.”

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

“Orturiel won’t stand for that.”

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

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

“What monsters?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh dear, you’ve been very naughty.”

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

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

Parseek remains unimpressed, eyes only for the cornered Azil.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Spring**

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

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

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

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

A few sorry bundles of hides were rolled up or stretched out for fleshing, and the tanning barrel, repaired by Hoar’s mother and repaired again by Hoar, stood empty. Along the northern slope, flat stones were placed at regular intervals into a sudden rise amid a few small but determined clusters of white flowers. To the south, were the most light would fall, a few green leaves were sprouting from tilled earth. They would be fat turnips and onions by the fall, if he was fortunate. Enough split log boards lay out on runners to make a good start on a second cabin, and in the heart of the clearing, a growing stack of shingles piled up beside the woman who had been remade, name and all. On a table specked with a different reddish brown, through air that was thick with fumes from alcohol and blue with curses and sometimes thrashing, sometimes pleading cries that Hoar and Lina weathered as best they could, the woman had said her name. She had said much else, Lina translating for Hoar what the woman half mad with pain and fever babbled. In an unspoken pact sealed with blood and catgut and boiled rags bound tight, they chose silence, and a new name for the Azil had survived her pursuers, the snows and Lina’s knife. Svelsa.

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

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

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

“Hold still, child,” Lina said slowly though that didn’t matter. By now, Svelsa knew the routine. Lina sat her down in the midmorning light and began her prodding examination. She took the woman’s mutilated hands and clucked satisfied at her handwork. She’d taken the gut out during the last visit, and smiled in pleasure at a job well stitched. Hoar had given Svelsa a half skin of brandy and then held her wrists while the Thumbdraught sheared the dead flesh away until she found live tissue. In spite of the drink, woman had passed out when Lina’s razor found living nerves. That had been well timed, for Lina drew out a pair of steel pliers Hoar appraised to be worth several high quality skins, and, a millimeter chip at a time, cut out the stub of bone. Hoar had only frowned, though Lina caught him rubbing his own fingers absentmindedly while she was stitching the flaps of skin over. It wasn’t the first time Lina had amputated a limb.

The frosts were bad when the winter fell like a feather down scythe. Children with barely enough fat to thicken a stew caught chill easily. It was a good sign when a girl reached womanhood with all her fingers and toes. When she was the girl Gili she had to deal with a severed handful of sudden accidents; an axeman caught in a splitting second of carelessness or a herder who was unlucky enough to encounter a pair of bear cubs and lucky enough to survive the mother. But it was the woman Lina who had become a master with needle and gut by the end of the Unification. Perhaps a third of the Golemel over forty were missing a hand or a leg. Crater still had both arms, but they weren’t the one’s he’d been born with. He’d donned the Vaicor red and made NCO in the royal army along with Parseek. They had led good Golemel boys and girls to glory and freedom marching down from their mountains singing songs of bravery and heroism. That had been late in the war, but news trickled slowly uphill. Only the recruiting sergeants, beating their drums and decked out in brass and red, had made it so far as Hrult, and they seemed happy to sign on every shinning youth who’d heard the stories of gallant combats and beating the rebels back that the Trader had brought last season. Every shining youth and one aging woman tasked by the elders to make sure their children came home in one piece. She never lost sleep over the job she’d done out there, in the mud and smoke laced rain on the steel and powder shattered plain. Every night since returning with the pieces of men and women she’d managed to hold together, she brewed the foul tasting Valerian leaf into a tea before bed and slept without dreams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Summer**

The store was clean and orderly, almost militarily so. Every box of nails and bolt of cloth was stacked with precision, the brands on the side clearly visible and crisp as fried rice cake. Cans of salted pork, hashed beef and pickled rabbit from the slaughter houses of Kirch made impressive towers beside corked bottles containing every brandy, imported oil, tincture or tonic conceivable. Even the Thumbdraught bought medicines at the store from time to time. The chemists in the delta cities would soon put her and her kind out of business for good. Two aging men, both fatter than they had been twenty years ago, sat, drinking sparingly and attempting to conceal satisfied smiles at the dreams of profit, and neither of succeeding. Before them was a stack of furs that looked big enough to be a hibernating snow bear. Almost as high a neat if not quite perfect stack of boxes. A few were open revealing rice straw, steel hoe heads and dark glass bottles. But now, the two men were haggling over a pair of squat barrels sealed airtight with tar. One man was pressing the lid back down on a tin of rich, white grease and running his tongue over rendered fat coated lips appreciatively.

“You will ruin me, my friend, you will ruin me. How will I trade with the tapper now? I will have hardly any coin left after your highway robbery,” the Trader lamented, pulling a few more coins from an exceedingly fat purse and setting them on barrel top.

“Robbery? You’ll be able to sell those at triple the price, quadruple that if you go to the quartermaster. Premium bear grease, perfect for cooking, or lubricating steel. I should be asking for double that!” said Crater, pocketing the coins and passing the jars over unbegrudgingly. He’d been able to push the price higher than he had last summer by almost a tenth, the demand must have risen. He would make a note to stockpile even more of hunter’s renderings than he usually did, in case the prices reflected a new trend. It was hardly a risk; it burned smokeless as lamp oil in the deep of winter, lacquered knife handles, bows, gun locks, stocks and barrels and a dozen other small necessities.

“You have already cost me dearly on this trip and I cannot afford to lose on another deal,” The Trader’s Vaicouric, dripped like smooth and unctuous summer honey. Crater wished his own was as fluid. He was tall for a Golemel, wearing the same style of conservatively cut coat and pants as the Vaicour trader, with just a splash of color drawing the eye to the neckerchief amid the quiet whites and tans of the ensemble. The trader wore it better, of course. Crater couldn’t hope to match the elegance of a Vaicour merchant or gentleman, but he would at least make the effort. Running contrary to the untamed manes his neighbors wore, his own beard was short and trim and the hands that peeked out of his coat sleeves were thin, delicate and black. They were so beautiful he was almost glad he’d lost them. It had been a glorious war, one the minstrels would play songs of for three thousand year and somewhere, amid the ballads of summer wars in rice patties and tragic arias of martyrs giving their lives for their nation, there would be his song, the battle of Kulrathen where Crater of the Golemel led the charge. It would be a song of victory, and loss, of bravery and sacrifice. There had been sacrifice, but there was always sacrifice. Unthinkingly, the hands, rich and textured, black hands that were now his, clutched at air, as though trying to take the invisible hand of someone long gone. There was a scar along one thumb, a puckered memory made flesh that Crater would never know.

“Can I tempt you? Drown your sorrows?” asked Crater the mouth of the skin wavered over the glass which he’d bought from the Trader five years ago.

“Certainly, my friend,” the Trader said brightly, leaning back in his chair and smiling. “Now perhaps a fellow business man might be interested in something special.” The trader accepted the glass graceful and pulled an elegant case out from the depths of one of his trunks. “A clever business man like you can recognize an opportunity when he sees one, I know. Look.” He opened the case with a flourish. Row upon row of finger vials sparkled like ice in a frozen waterfall. The trader selected one and proffered it to Crater who took it gingerly. “Go ahead my friend, open it.” Crater did, and a scent of sweet amber blessed his nostrils. “Agarwood,” whispered the trader reverentially. “From across the Beryl sea.” Crater breathed again, deeply and the scent rose in his mind to the smell of money. There were plenty of young ladies in the village that one of the trader’s finger draughts would make swoon and with spring in the air and the right words, the young suitors would pay handsomely for the prize.

“I’d have an easier time selling snow,” Crater said dismissively, passing the vial back. “I might be able to push these onto a few old crones pining for their youth, if I’m lucky.” The trader shrugged in calculated carelessness.

“You’re cutting your foot off to escape the root. If I wasn’t leaving tomorrow morning, I’d sell them myself and walk away a rich man. But perhaps you’ll see reason. Thirty a finger, and that’s thievery.”

They haggled, firing offers and insults back and forth like lead shot. When at last they’d agreed on a price, both cursing their misfortune to have met the other quite cheerfully, Crater poured them both another drink. From there, the talk made an about face to gunpowder, of which the Trader had brought several small, iron banded barrels, packed carefully amongst his other wares. He poured out equal charges from each, rolling the gritty powder into paper and following Crater into the warm summer sunshine, expounding on the new techniques out of Arenholm and the eprouvette which he had purchased there last winter. It looked like a hybrid between a one shot pistol and a compass, one arm of which would measure the power of the shot. Gunpowder was a finnicky thing, and Crater was very particular that the powder the Trader sold was of the highest caliber. He’d never been disappointed, but the retort and acrid smell brought him blissfully back to another summer’s day, so many years ago.

The recruiter, a tall Vaicour sergeant with broad shoulders and a noble face, had arched a single, elegant, Vaicour eyebrow at Crater’s heartfelt oath of loyalty made in Vaicouric. He’d been impressed, Crater had hoped he would be. He’d practiced the oath every night for two weeks, his friend frowning each time he caught him at it. The recruiter nodded to the rifle, a Cabratta only three years old, on Crater’s back and asked in Vaicouric, “You can shoot?”

“Yes!” Crater barked. He would have liked to say more, added a bit of flair, but he didn’t trust his Vaicouric enough to risk it. He’d impressed the man, and there was no point in ruining his good impressing by shooting his mouth off. Unslinging the rifle and nesting the stock against his shoulder he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed out, and fired. There was a sharp crack, a blissful, acrid tang of gunpower and bark flew. Crater smiled. The man who had been his hunting partner wouldn’t have. He had always shaken his head in disapproval at the sleek grace of a rifle, preferring his own hunting tool lacquered in bear grease.

The recruiter had made Crater a corporal then and there, as much for his ability with the rifle as his fluency in Vaicouric. There were enough Golemel recruits to make up two squads, and Crater had one, Parseek the other. He’d seen the gleam in Crater’s eye when Saskia had arrived under the elder tree where the recruiters were collecting every brave man and woman Hrult could spare. He’d led the man aside, then, and sworn the first of two promises he’d made that night. Saskia had a chance, in the royal army, away from the taint of Azil and what every Golemel knew her name. Once the insurrection was quelled, she could remain down on the delta where she could make a better future for herself, away from those who knew what she came from, and away from Hoar. The second promise he had made, but Crater navigated that memory hole like a Vaicour river captain passing within arm’s reach of snags but never quite touching them on his way downriver to fair weather, fair profits and a far-off training camp.

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Parseek doesn’t care about Crater’s little feud any more. The war changed him. He hates Azil, and those who protect Azil. Crater included.

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“Ah, Trader, I’d heard you’d arrived.” It was Parseek, summoned no doubt by the shots from the eprouvette. He was smiling, but the greeting was in Golemel, an overt sleight to match his wounded pride over the Trader coming to visit Crater first. He approached them, a case under his arm and limping on Gorgem’s left leg which had replaced his own. Gorgem had been slightly shorter, though that was hardly the concerns of the surgeons at the time. Her left arm had been salvaged too, but the graft had putrified and the limb had rotted, poisoning Elena. She was dying in any case. There were sacrifices to be made in war. But Gorgem’s leg on Parseek had always disquieted Crater. She had never liked their mayor, though he had just been the mayor’s son back then. There were few enough villagers, born before or after the Unification, that liked him, but he was a necessary grievance, like one of Lina’s purgatives that removed the bad blood even if it meant half a week sitting in the outhouse. He made sure the village ran without blockages or shortages, and he did it well.

“Won’t you invite me inside?” Parseek directed at Crater, smile still in place but Crater saw through the deliberately visible cracks in Parseek’s polite manner. In some small way, the mayor would get even for Crater overstepping his bounds.

“Certainly, won’t you join us, Parseek?” he forgot to say “Mayor Parseek,” as was his title, even as he smiled in the way he imagined a Vaicour gentleman might. Whatever the man might try to take out of him, Crater could take it back and more. Their wills had skirmished at the too near boarder separating Hrult’s mayoral house and Crater’s since long before they went off to war, and it would likely continue until one of them released their dying breath in a thinly veiled insult.

Inside, Parseek set his case down on a table, firmly pushing the display of honey and candles from Kirch apiaries to the back. “What, in your professional opinion, could you give me for this?” he asked, flipping the latches with a flourish. The Trader joined him by the mouth of the case, and Parseek moved casually aside, blocking Crater from joining them without toppling the stack of furs. Crater smiled a polite, brittle little smile. The Trader glanced to Crater somewhat apologetically, Crater thought, but bent to examine its contents.

“Hmm, I’m afraid it isn’t in the best condition, my friend. There’s wire holding it together.”

“It is used, but it’s been marvelously maintained, see the repair work on the bowl? No, you can’t. It’s near invisible. I’d put it’s worth around 220.”

Crater was craning his neck as unobtrusively as possible to see the object of contention. “Now that is steep,” the Trader said bluntly, not bothering with complaints or curses of bankruptcy and beggaring. “I’d say a flat 160, maybe 165.”

Parseek’s smile flickered, “I see. Well, the value of owning it for me is certainly worth more than 165, thank you. But I have other items which we may be able to come to an agreement over back at my home. As he closed the case, Crater finally caught a glimpse, but a glimpse was enough. He felt his calm veneer begin to burn away.

“Where did you get that?”

Parseek turned to smile at Crater whose own expression had gone wooden. “I got it, at a very reasonable price.” If Crater had still been the younger man he had been, the man who had gone off to war and killed rebels, he would have broken the mayor’s jaw. But he was older, and wiser, too wise to rise to Parseek’s bait. “Have you heard of any Vaicour women leaving your fertile plain to come north?” The question caught the Trader by surprise, and allowed Crater to take the breath he needed not to strike the man. He forced his fists to uncurl. It did not become Vaicour hands to bloody themselves.

The Trader, clearly uncomfortable, took refuge in his confusion. “I haven’t heard of any Vaicour visiting the Golelem, beside myself.”

“Perhaps traveling at the end of Fall, someone who wouldn’t want to be seen?”

“No,” he said, become more confused but suddenly paying his full attention. Despite himself, Crater’s ears perked up too. This had all the hallmarks of a story that would be being discussed around every hearth by nightfall, and if Parseek was going to let it slip to Crater, then he would make sure every household would get the story from him.

Leaning in conspiratorially, Parseek whispered, “There’s a rumor that an Azil has stolen himself a Vaicour wife. Some people say, he keeps her locked in his cabin and never lets her see the sun. Some people say, he cut off all her fingers and toes so she can’t escape him. Some people say, he burned her face so no other man would desire her.” Crater’s blood had ran cold, like a frozen hart. Some people; That poisonous viper. If Crater were to bet money, the ‘some people,’ was Parseek snooping up by the old meadow. But that would mean there was some kernel of truth to the story, and that a Vaicour woman had appeared mysteriously in Hrullt and was living with the Azil, the only Azil left. Hoar.

Crater would have to tell the story now, before Parseek spread more of this tale. But first, he would have to find out exactly what was happening up by the cabin in the cleft. That meant seeing Hoar, but it also meant he might meet a Vaicour woman. The second that the door had closed behind the Trader and Parseek, no doubt off to discuss business on the delta over more brandy, Crater grabbed the vials of perfume and went to change his clothes.

**Season 2**

**Fall**

Hoar aged like an oak, stacking lines in his face like rings in the trunk. Four more years had passed, three leaving the marks of lean summers and brutal winters His body, already hard and covered in bark like skin, had hardened further. Only in the last year had he started putting on fat again. Only in the last year had he managed to buy back his window which gave him a perfect view of the gently drifting flakes, fat as butter and white as milk. It didn’t look to be a cruel winter coming, but he was trapped inside with this cursed woman. Not a day went by that he didn’t think of how much different things would be if he hadn’t left that half dead body in the freezing mud. It was a wound that never healed, bleeding him again and again.

The pot metal spoon clattered to the floor from tipless finger and thumb shaking so violently Hoar thought Svelsa would spill the stew. He took the bowl from her quickly and retrieved the spoon. Cradling her head, he fed her mouthfuls of the thick broth, tenderly blotting away what spilled over her lips and down her neck. Svelsa had aged like a willow, the years bending her back while others stood still taller and stronger. The seasons had come and gone and she’d grown sicker and sicker, rotting from the inside out.

“I know why you never open your cabinet.” The whisper was so faint that Hoar’s old ears barely caught it. He hushed her, frown hardly present, and tried to feed her another spoonful. She pushed him away.

“I know why you never open your cabinet,” she repeated, a little stronger now. Her Golemel had become good, despite Hoar. She’d learned mostly from Lina and Ulma who sometimes came up to the cabin with a few loaves of bread or a meat pie wrapped up in brown paper that had been like old dry leaves to Svela’s cheek. Hoar would reuse the paper, wrapping scrimshaws or a newly stitched pair of fur mittens. He said he sold them at the general store, but Svelsa could swear she saw the same piece of rough brown paper cycling through again a week later.

Crater, too had helped her with the language, once the spring had come. He’d shown up one day when Hoar was out, speaking so sweetly in Vaicouric that she couldn’t help but smile. He hadn’t seemed to mind the smile, or the burns, or the gloves with half the fingers filled with nothing but stiff chaff. He was kind and told diverting stories like Mikhail had, once, before she’d gotten him killed. He had also brought small gifts, a glass bead on a string, candied sugar, a pressed violet smelling of spring. Then, one day in the fall when Hoar was on a hunting trip, Crater had stopped by again. He’d flattered her outrageously in Vaicouric too elegant for a soldier’s vocabulary, butchering it marvelously as he called her a beauty, a treasure, a sawmill. She had let it pass; his pronunciation was close enough to the intended “inspiration” and she rather enjoyed listening to his mistakes. But Svelsa raised her solitary eyebrow incredulously at the rest, her face a question and an answer. He waved away the scar tissue like an irksome gnat.

“We are not so different, you and I,” he’d said, rolling up his sleeves past the elbow. “Scars are beautiful. They mean you are a fighter. Wear them with pride.” Two rings of puckered skin circled his upper arms like tourniquets, ugly and twisted and beautiful and whole. “I led the Golemel for the Vaicour at Kulrathen and won these for my bravery. I spearheaded the charge through mud and frozen raid. I killed three Mograthi, with a musket ball in my thigh!” He paused, puffing out his chest and face flushed with the memories. “It took an Ursar to stop me.”

“You must have been very brave,” Svelsa said, though the words were automatic and unthinking. Her mind was far away. Crater saw the expression on Svelsa’s face and shrunk to a humbler stance of resigned sorrow.

“Terrible things happened before the Unification. I’m sorry, I did not mean to stir up old memories.” Crater fell silent, and the two sat together, alone in their own memories. But he didn’t let the mood foul for long. Unearthing a charming smile again, Crater had pulled out a pinky vial from his jacket pocket. “There is nothing like smell to bring back a memory, no? Perhaps this will bring back sweeter thoughts. Go on try it.”

Svelsa took the vial with exaggerated delicacy, even her remaining fingers were frozen in perpetual numbness, as though she could never quite warm them up. She was just raising it to the hole in her face when the door opened. It was opened gently, nothing like the earth shattering crash and clamor Crater might have expected. Hoar, without the snowbear pelt for once, filled the frame. Two geese with bloody breasts hung from his right hand. The other was empty, and so were his eyes when he looked at Crater. He wasn’t frowning at all, though years of cultivated sourness had left indelible lines that gave the echo of a frown. He didn’t say anything, only strode into his cabin and began stringing up one of the geese. He’d left the door open, plain enough for anyone to read. Crater stood, rallying his graces to himself like a lieutenant rallying his troops, gave Svelsa what he thought was a stately Vaicour bow, and nodded at Hoar’s back. Hoar was plucking a goose, separating down and potential fletching with thick, hairy knuckled fingers. Svelsa saw shame and what might have been guilt written amid the crow’s feet and laugh lines of Crater’s fresh trimmed face. An expression she never saw again. He opened his mouth as if to say something to Hoar’s back, then shut it and, uncharacteristically at a loss for words, shut it again.

“When I finally could, I asked Lina why you called me Svelsa. It took half a year for her simply to tell me that it was an instrument, and a full year before she told me what you’d done. Why? Why you crazy old man why didn’t you leave me back there? I was practically dead anyway, and you abandoned half a winter’s worth of food for me?

Hoar didn’t say anything, but his frown had returned digging furrows in his face like glacier. His eyes didn’t seem to be focused on Svelsa. They were staring glassily over her shoulder and to someplace far away and long ago.

Hoar’s daughter had been born nameless. After two still births, and a son who had gone quiet in his crèche of rabbit hide ribbed with willow switches and never breathed again, the wailing baby had slipped into this world and the waiting arms of Lina. It was not an easy birth, Lina had almost lost the child and Saskia, Hoar’s wife, laboring right along with Saskia for nine hours. The struggle and effort seemed so pointless now. A malady of the chest had settled into Saskia not seven weeks after the babe’s first eyeful of sunshine and despite all the Thumbdraughts medicines she had passed away. It was summer, so Hoar had dug a pit in the slope of the mountain, laid her body out for the long dream with a crown of iron nails on her head and the a poorly arranged bouquet of alyssum on her chest. Hoar glowered at flowers, alyssum most of all. He filled the soil back in, shovelful by shovelful, finally free of the Saskia’s cursed laughter, always crinkling the corners of his mouth, her affinity with animals, always stinking of dog and sweet violets that smelled like sunshine on his face, and most of all her seemingly tireless need to sleep. She wasted so much time, sprawled in their bed like a snow spirit collapsed in the snow, waiting for the woodsman or the hunter to happen by and, upon waking the sleeping spirit, lock souls and be cast under their spell. Sometimes he would waste hours holed up across the room, playing his Svelsa softly to the rhythm of her rising and falling breaths. Every night, she went where he could not follow and often in the darktimes he wondered what dreams were like. Now, she had gone where he could not go and was not returning to him. But she had left him with a squalling, grasping, thirsty baby. For an old nanny goat, he’d traded two bolts of cloth, ugly he told himself, that Sasika had planned to make into a new dress for the summer dances. He wouldn’t miss the dances. Ulma the goat woman, had also agreed to watch Saskia’s daughter from time to time, and Hoar would dig a new latrine beside the old one before the ground hardened. Shovelful after shovelful, he dug but did not complain.

The crunch of snow pricked Hoar’s ears, who turned to see who had braved the cold to visit them. It couldn’t have been Lina, she was having a hard enough time walking as it was. His frown deepened when he saw who it was, but he opened the door. Wind, snow and the distant howl of wolves entered along with Crater. He had forgone his Vaicour attire for more practical furs, though he still had a cardinal red feather sticking from his otherwise somberly colored layers of clothing, entered the cabin with a muted greeting to Hoar. He went to Svelsa’s bedside, and took her hand in his, kissing each knuckle. She’d never told him she could hardly feel it, but it still made her feel young again. Svelsa managed a weak smile. He was kind, but she had neither the strength nor the inclination to return his affections. AZIL SHOULDN’T LIVE IN THE VILLAGE. SPEAKING IN GOLEMEL RATHER THAN VAICOURIC OUT OF MISPLACED RESPECT FOR HAOR.

“Come back to my shop. The walls are thicker and I have fine wine and beautiful things to while the winter away,” Crater glanced at Hoar who had tactfully turned his back and busied himself in the furthest reaches of the room.

“I’ve told you no before, Crater. Is your memory that far gone already, old man?” It came out as hardly a mouse’s squeak. Crater laughed, a rich and hearty laugh unlike anything Svelsa had ever heard from Hoar.

“Old man I may be, but I have a young man’s heart and it is full with life and sweet words,” his expression was playful, japing, but his eyes were deep wells of worry sorrow over with worry.

“Before I pass on,” she began but Crater cut her off.

“Do not talk of such things, you’re still young, and strong as ever,” lied Crater, his eyes bright. The window rattled as another gust brought the mournful howl of wolves drifting over the cabin.

“Before I pass on, there is one thing you can do for me,”

“I can go and fetch Lina, she’ll come when she hears,”

Svelsa shook her head, reaching up to touch the man’s cheek. “You dear, dear man. She’s already been, twice. There’s nothing that can be done, save one thing.”

“Name it,”

“Give Hoar back his Svelsa, I wish to hear him play again before I die.” Her words struck him like a stone against thin ice. Cracks appeared in his façade fanning out over his composure like the delta through the plains and below the chill waters of sorrow and guilt surfaced.

At long last, he said, “I cannot.” Crater looked away, saw Hoar’s back, rigid and straight as an arrow, and cast his eyes to the heaven as though looking for some angel to save him. All he saw was a split timber roof with a curl of smoke damage from when snow had blocked up half the chimney. “I sold it to the trader two years ago. It’s likely charming a delta city tavern hall right now.”

Crater’s heart bled to see the crestfallen look in the woman’s eye. He didn’t love her like he’d loved his wife, all those years ago. For all his protestations to the contrary, he was growing older and with that, he supposed came perspective and experience if not wisdom. Svelsa was a fine woman though, and he admired her. He talked, and she listened. He almost made the mistake of slipping into war stories, retelling for the thousandth time his valiant charge, the mud slicked hill, his bravery and that of his soldiers but he remembered his audience and told again the tale of his youth when he and his best friend had snuck into the old tapper man’s shed to dip their fingers into the sticky simmering pans of syrup and lick the maple sap from their fingers greedily. Halfway through the sugary larceny, the old tapper entered the shack and took such shock at seeing the boys he’d spat out his false teeth into a nearly complete pan of syrup just taken off the boil. He was three quarters through when he rememberd the name of the companion who had grabbed a fist pale of syrup before running, leaving a trail of syrup a kilometer down the mountain which by the following morning was the cradle and grave of ten thousand insects come to the bounty. There was a hiccup in the story, which Hoar’s methodical scrape of wood against hardened leather filled more than a small sound should. Crater had never been a man to back away and he surged back in, stumbling over his words but finishing strong. Svelsa’s laugh sounded like ripping silk, and ended with a hacking cough.

Hoar tried again to scrub the stories from his ears, like mud from the crevasses of his boot. They came creeping back in, again and again, like fingers of surf snaking through the bulwark of a sandcastle. His defenses would always fail eventually, but when someone like Crater came smashing through like a sudden swell it was all he would do to sandbag the levies and keep the tides of happy memories away. Because the memories of sticky fingers and laughter and hair that smelled of summer were only a dusting of golden bronze leaves over rot. Every word from Crater’s mouth, every corner and street in Hrult was another steel tipper arrow picking his armor of ice to pieces. Svelsa laughed like her lungs were filling with tears and Hoar’s barricades failed. A sick wife, coughing up phlegm speckled with pink, and him, powerless to help save cradle the wailing union of their souls to his bosom and hold her hand as the strength beneath her clammy skin drained away.

She had been six, wearing the little snowshoes he had crafted for her and giggling with glee at how big her footprints suddenly were. “I’m as big as you!” she squealed, comparing the imprint, light as a foxes footfall next to the crater he’d left behind. He had laughed, and swept her up into his big arms, hugging her till she squirmed to be let loose. He hated the memory. She had been eleven, and gangly as a week old fawn. Little Saskia had loved to climb just like her father and had disobeyed his strict command to remain with both feet planted on the ground. He’d caught her leaving a few strips of old cloth in branches of a fir. When asked why, she fixed him with a look so serious that he thought she might be about to say she was a snow spirit, and said, “There’s a nest up there of little bluebirds and it’s too cold.” He’d shouted at her and she’d cried. His heart was racing so fast. She could have fallen, could have ended up a bloody wreck broken by the hard ground. The next day he’d cut up an old rag and climbed with her to just bellow the screeching bluebird’s nest, laying the strips in easy reach. He hated the memory. She had just turned thirteen, and he’d given her a new bow made from Yew carved with leaf patterns. She’d spent all day practicing and by nightfall was hitting the block, hanging from a tree by two fragile seeming lines and swaying gently in the wind. The goat woman had baked him two pies special for the occasion and Crater had thrown in a block of maple candy wrapped in a wax paper when he’d visited the store to pick up a bundle of steel traps made in the forges of the delta. That night he had taken the svelsa his grandfather had left him a the year before out of the cabinet and he played songs for her until she fell asleep and kept playing for her till dawn, watching the gentle rise and fall of her breath. He hated, hated, hated the memory. She was seventeen, strong and fearless as a wolfhound. The drums were reverberating through the valley and Crater was leading her down from the cabin after clapping Hoar on the back and promising, “I’ll bring her back, don’t you worry my friend. The Mograthi are mad to attack, we have them outnumbered and outgunned. We’ll crush them by midsummer day and she’ll be back before the leaves have started to turn, you mark my words.” That memory hurt like his lungs were collapsing and the roots of his teeth were turning to solid ice.

“You look like you’re about to fall over,”

“Not at all, I’m good for hours yet,” he said with the air of a man who was making a show of fighting to the bitter end. But it was almost daybreak, and the shadows beneath his eyes were plain as day.

“You sweet, foolish man,” Svelsa said to him fondly, “why can’t you ever admit defeat?”

Crater bridled at that, indignation buoying him out of hopeless exhaustion for just long enough to stand and make a “A military man never admits defeat. There isn’t a battle that can’t be won.”

There was a snap of wood and both Svelsa and Crater turned to Hoar. The curved wooden handle of the scraper had snapped in two. A shallow red line appeared across the back of one wiry hand where the splintering haft had skated in its explosive release of tension. Hoar’s face was one taught frown and looked like it would follow the scrapper at the slightest additional strain. He took a step toward Crater, blood welling from a meaty fist that was balled up so tightly it was turning white.

“You should go home and rest,” Svelsa said to Crater like a woman gingerly retreating a step from the white web of cracks spreading out from beneath her feet. Guilt and shame struggled with pigheaded stubbornness but before a decisive victor could declare itself with disastrous consequences Svelsa intervened. “You can get Lina tomorrow, she might have thought of something new.

Thankfully, he took the offered escape. “I’ll be back in the morning with Lina, even if I have to carry her here myself,” he declared, donning his feathered hat and draped his overcoat across his shoulders. Svelsa smiled and tried to affect a constitution that was beyond her. Perhaps it worked, because he smiled. Or perhaps it was just gallantry and bravado covering a deep streak of sorrow as though he were already mourning her loss. He was an awfully clever fool.

“Be careful. The wolves,” she implored and as though they heard her, the howl went up once more, no more than six or seven kilometers off.

“Wolves? They’re as dangerous as kittens to a human. Now rest, conserve your strength. Goodnight,” he said and gave one last confident nod to her over his shoulder as he left the cabin. When he was a quarter hour gone, Hoar came over and stacked a few new logs onto the fire that Crater had tended. When the flames were dancing merrily once more, he sat beside her in the place vacated by Crater and reached out to take her hand. He hesitated, fingertips trembling a centimeter away from hers. He was staring straight through the beleaguered skin and scarred stumps. Then, he took it, and did not let go. Svelsa smiled, and closed her eyes as though she could sleep. Perhaps she would go to the long dream before the day was out. They huddled, two Azil bundled in other’s fur. Svelsa shallow, painful breaths kept count. To what, Hoar did not know. He could only sit with her and feel the strength ebb from her grip like melting frost in the anemic light of the first rays of dawn. They were lancing through his window now, lifting the gown of darkness that had sheltered the dying embers and another lupine cry reverberated through the cleft the cabin lodged in. Svelsa’s hand suddenly convulsed, like an animal caught in a trap. Her eyes snapped open, the cooling cinders within flaring with her sudden intake of breath.

“Hoar,” she rasped. “Help me up.” He did, noting that behind the curtain of pain which had lain over her like a sedative energy was kindling. “My debt to you is not yet paid and I will not die without hearing you play.” She rose to her feet, defying his frown and the racking cough that ran up her spine and which should have doubled her over. She spat blood onto the ground and headed for the door. “Gather wood. We’re building a fire.”

They were in the his grandfather’s clearing watched by the faceless, inscriptionless stones that never the less Hoar held the name of each and every one. In the center of the clearing, he threw another log onto the flames which were already hot enough to melt the snow three meters around the bonfire. A bloody pair of hares were strung up by the clearing’s edge above where Svelsa lay. Hoar stood by, feeding an entire cord of wood to the hungering fire and not touching the twine that Svelsa had unraveled over the ground like some enormous tether, binding her to life. It was dyed a deep russet red, like his arrow tips. The bottle of dye remained in his chest at the foot of his bed, unopened.

It took an hour, and another cord of wood before the wolves came, slinking from tree to tree like shadows come alive. Hoar swept up his bow hastily from where it had been lying, along with his bear cloak, away from where the heat and smoke of the fire could damage the wood. He drew an arrow and uneasy frown making its crescent beneath his tangled beard like the moon peeking through clouds. But he kept his promise.

The knot she had positioned, stabbing into the small of her back like a triangular dirk of wood, was a dull continuous wail of agony jarring with the stabs of pain in her chest and the distant throb of her hand. She held onto the pain, the dirk and the twine as though together, they were one of the lines that the villagers of Hrult strung between buildings in blizzards to give anyone forced to brave the blinding white an anchor. The twine she’d bound several times around her hand, the blood from the cut drying to glue her numb fist shut. When she saw the first of the wolves, grey shapes fuzzy around the edges padding through the colorless world, she ground her fingers to her palm, breaking the glove. She had to look down to make sure the blood had begun to seep again, and that she still held the dirk clumsily between thumb and two foreshortened fingers. Her limbs were heavy and seemed far off.

“Hallen dornathi, Vulgath, ostar vell,” she whispered, trying to keep all three wolves in sight. Hoar had helped her mask the human scent, with chicken blood and entrails fresh and hopefully enticing to wolves, hungry for easy prey. Hoar had helped her without question, acting as her hands and legs for what she alone could not do. Would not do. She had chosen her path the day she’d met him.

He’d been a gift from God, a savior, a vessel to carry her from the yawning well of death beneath her. All it would have taken was a quick cut, even only poor Marik as a source, and his life would be hers. Of all the decisions she’d made during her short life, stacked one on top of the other like a cord of frozen corpses in a landscape too cold to bury and too barren to burn with Marik’s cold embrace the crowning glory, that was one choice which she did not regret. She couldn’t let the debt go unrepaid. She’d chosen her path, and it was not the flat, downhill road she’d walked before. Another fork spit before her now like the tongue of a serpent. One tine was easy, and familiar, and very, very short. The wolves had spread out, encircling her. Their growls were sharpening in timber, like knives being drawn from sheathes, like brilliantly white teeth greeting the world from behind curled lips. The other fork was a brink over a well of fire and belching smoke and she could not see if there was another side to land on beyond the soot pregnant air. She wasn’t built for this. She wasn’t prepared. All she could do was jump. The wolf to her left leapt, and so did she.

Across the clearing, Hoar saw seventy kilos of grey wolf launch herself across the gap of clear snow and strike Svelsa. He might have thought the girl was dead, having slipped quietly out of the final mad venture he’d been accomplice too and into the Long Dream, but her hand, the hand that held the dirk which had languished, gathering rust in the cabinet for four years, flicked up. It was the only move she made and then the she wolf’s jaws were around her throat and Hoar closed his eyes. He wished he could close his ears too, as the other wolves joined the kill. All the strife she’d caused him flashed along the inside of his eyelids; the night she’d taught him “Kul kul rin,” a Vaicour ballad he still did not know the Golomel words to but never the less brought a deep, bittersweet happiness to his heart. The three days he had been delirious with fever and she’d stayed by his side day and night giving him water to drink and soothing his waking nightmares of a pink spattered handkerchief and a steel ravaged hill of trampled mud and dying soldiers imagined a thousand times but never seen. The night they’d lain out under the stars, bundled in fur, in the middle of winter when the sky was a crystal dome of stars so beautiful it hurt.

Sudden, surging light flared and a map of the veins and spots that crisscrossed his lids was projected across his vision. There was a yelping of wolves, and he forced his eyes open, streaming tears not entirely from the sudden flash. What had been a crackling, roaring bear of a fire was now a grumbling cub, flames flickering low as though tired. His gaze followed the trail of melted, no, boiled snow. Meadow grass, yellow with winter’s jaundice and giving off faint wisps of vapor, peeked through muddy ground. In the center of the evaporated path the cinders of twine smoked connecting the drowsy fire to two bodies which lay in the mud. “Do not interfere,” she had said, begged, made him swear to. But he could not stop his feet now, even if he had wanted to. He rushed to her side, heaving the body of the wolf that lay atop her aside as he had done four years prior with the dead boy she had been wearing. Her head lolled grotesquely where the wolf had torn out her throat and her chest was a shredded mess. Her face was a twisted mask but beneath the scar tissue, the mutilated features, he thought he saw what might have been a lipless grin of triumph. He felt the movement more than saw it. The she wolf, Svelsa’s blood on its neck was staggering to get her paws beneath her as though stricken with palsy. She collapsed twice, panting and tongue lolling. Hoar saw that a patch of fur on her breast, a handbreadth in diameter, was blackened and smoking. At the heart of the naked skin a short but deep cut oozed. Hoar’s knife was in his hand, and he was backing away from the wolf, salty water running down his beard and irrigating the arroyo of his frown. Stunned or dying, he had all the glassy eyed proof of the power within a wolf’s jaws. The wolf made it to her feet, an odd throaty whining setting the hairs on Hoar’s neck on end. There was something odd in the way it stood, head cocked as if in thought, sniffing at the air. Hoar had stopped several meters back from her, glancing around for the rest of the pack. They were nowhere to be seen, but Hoar did not let his guard down. There was still one dangerous animal before him. He starred between Svelsa’s cooling body and the wolf. The wolf looked up, cocking her head at him and giving the whine again. Kul kul rin, she sang with an unfamiliar throat. Hoar lowered the knife. Bending, the she wolf began to devour what was no longer Svelsa, tearing long strips of meat off and gulping them down ravenously. Hoar couldn’t watch.

**Spring**

Her body was tall and powerfully muscled, though it was lithe power, like a cat’s. She liked the feel of it. Burnt sienna skin, smooth save for a few a few scars, glistened darkly in the sunshine filtering through the netting over the vender’s stall. She could have made the surgeons stitch them so that they were almost invisible, but she liked people to know what they were facing. Or to think they knew; appearance meant nothing to who she was. She grinned a predatory grin at the Vaicour merchant, teeth as white as the polished bear teeth bound with fine wire to a leather thong the trader had been selling to tourists just moments ago. He smiled back at her, a chink in his manufactured manner showing the unease beneath the false geniality.

“Hello, my dear, and aren’t you the very model of an angel. I have handmade boots lined with the finest mink that would look so elegant on you it’s a crime not to have them. They’re worth at least three hundred, but for you, no, it’s madness I swear, but I cannot bear to think of you trapped in inferior boots, I’ll go as low as two hundred and thirty.”

He had pulled a pair of handsome boots from beneath the table and was already bustling around the corner to taker her measurements. Her hand came up and his chest ran right into it, not quite gently. His rambling pitch stopped as abruptly as a bird flying headlong into a glass window.

“Oh dear, how clumsy of me,” she said with all the sincerity of a snake promising not to bite. “This is such fine fur, where did it come from?” she asked sweetly, not bothering to even glance at the boots on the counter. The trader licked his lips, catching his breath and trying once more to affect the air of the friendly merchant.

“Why, from the deepest, wildest parts of the Golemel spine. There’s not a finer pelt of mink or fox in the whole world.”

“I’ve heard interesting things come from around Hrult.”

The trader’s eyes darted nervously around, as though hoping someone might come to his aid. No one did. “I never said,” but she cut him off.

“Oh but you did. You’ve said a good deal. Just yesterday, I heard a story about an Azil and his pet wolf,” she spat the word Azil as if she were saying devil instead

“Ah,” faltered the trader. He floundered, searching desperately through the racks of personas, neatly pressed and ironed for all occasions. He settled for frightened honesty, dressed in a suit of obsequious courtesy and a neckerchief of brevity. “Yes. There are rumors flying around Hrult about an Azil and a demon she wolf. ”

“That’s better,” the woman purred.

“Some stories say she’s stolen his soul, others say he’s bound her too him. Either way, the townsfolk are too afraid to go up to Hoar’s cabin.”

“Say that again,” her voice had gone from purr to claws in an instance. The trader quailed. “I said the townsfolk are too afraid to go near his cabin.”

“The name.”

THE SVELSA IS STILL THERE PRETENDS TO BE A TRADER TOO OBVIOUS LIE

“Hoar” The trader saw the whimpered name hit the woman like sparks over tinder. She rocked for a moment, still as deep water on a windless day, as though she were deep in thought. Then she threw back her head and laughed a mad laugh that sent rivers of ice down the trader’s spine.

“Hoar,” she said, as though tasting an unfamiliar word. The memories clicked into place, opening up like a box of mementos long stored away. The cabin, the svelsa and the old man. “Tell me everything,” she said, “And I will remember you with fondness. Be too hasty or to slow and there will be no one left to remember.” The trader practically fell over himself in the effort to please.

**Fall**

The forum of jostling, shouting, jockeying emotions that usually dominated Crater’s expressions with only a token measure of restraint had, on this aberrant day, packed up their tents and stalls and taken refuge inside. Two nights of little to no sleep and a three long, long days of pursuit had lain waste to his immaculately trimmed and combed beard and gifted him with two sombrous half-moons hanging heavy beneath his crinkled eyes. If he could get the frown right, he would be Hoar’s twin. That, however, would never come to pass. Crater did not have enough decades to train his face into such a death’s mask.

Day was fading, but the bloodlust and righteous vengeance that drove the pursuers burned unabated. With Lina and the richest repository of medical knowledge for a hundred kilometer, not to mention the only level head tough enough to stand up to Parseek, six month’s gone and buried, Parseek was howling murder. Two nights ago, his boy had taken an arrow in the meat of his thigh and he’d gone down squealing like a pig going to slaughter. Dead man walking, they said. Spineless boy limping, Crater said, but only in the privacy of his own head. He had seen dead men who hadn’t realized it was time to keel over and stop breathing during the Unification and the boy was a long shot from dead. It’d been a clear through and through, and Crater’d poured brandy through the ragged edged hole and plugged him up best as he could. The boy would certainly have a limp the rest of his life, or until Parseek sent him down to the delta cities to find a real healer, but that meant nothing to the twenty odd men and women, armed with a motely of axes, rifles and bows. They were out for blood, and so was Crater. So why did he feel so hollow?

Crater spat into a pile of leaves and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His nose wrinkled involuntarily. He’d forgotten. Two days without washing seemed to have tainted his clothing indelibly with the bitter stink of smoke. Crater’s tried scowling but really just wanted to be sick.

He adjusted the rifle, an old Cabratta model beautifully maintained and so notched that the stock looked like the teeth of a saw. There were nineteen in total, and each and everyone of them weighed more heavily than the water skin, rations and pouch of slugs that hung heavy on his hip. He wondered for the hundredth time who or what those little balls of lead would tear through. It was a thought that he’d had many times before. Crater was not, on the whole, a man cut out for introspection. He thought in straight lines. Fair price for lantern oil, charge. Straight line to the hilltop, charge. See the enemy soldiers entrenched and fortified, charge. But in the times when he was still, or when he was blind and whatever path there might had been was entombed by snow, his restless mind charged off in its own direction and one path it knew well was whose names were written on his bullets, his knife, his bare hands.

The recruiter, a tall Vaicour sergeant with broad shoulders and a noble face, had arched a single, elegant, Vaicour eyebrow at Crater’s heartfelt oath of loyalty made in Vaicouric. He’d been impressed, Crater had hoped. He’d practiced the oath every night for two weeks, Hoar frowning each time he caught him at it. The recruiter nodded to the rifle, a Cabratta only three years old, on Crater’s back and asked in Vaicouric, “You can shoot?”

“Yes!” Crater barked. He would have liked to say more, added a bit of flair, but he didn’t trust his Vaicouric enough to risk it. He’d impressed the man, and there was no point in ruining his good impressing by shooting his mouth off. Unslinging the rifle and nesting the stock into his arm, he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed out, and fired. There was a sharp retort, the acrid tang of gunpower and bark flew. Crater smiled. Hoar wouldn’t have. He had always shaken his head in disapproval, favoring the outdated bow over the sleek grace of a rifle. Decades later, in an unsleeping chase, Crater might have conceded a point to him. Bows don’t jam and cease to fire in winter.

The recruiter had made Crater a corporal then and there, as much for his ability with the rifle as his fluency in Vaicouric. There were enough Golemel recruits to make up two squads, and Crater had one, Parseek had the other. Crater made sure Saskia was under his command. Though she wasn’t Azil herself, she was still born of that inferior stock. No man in the village would desire her, though perhaps once the insurrection was quelled, she would remain down on the delta where she could make a better future for herself, away from those who knew what she came from. Crater had suggested this very thing to Hoar, but he wouldn’t hear of it. They had not parted on good terms. It would blow over, Crater was sure. Hoar wasn’t the type to hold a grudge. Crater navigated that memory hole like a Vaicour river captain passing within arm’s reach of snags but never quite touching them on his way downriver to fair weather, fair profits and a far off training camp.

It had been like a story torn straight out of the books his mother used to read him when he was little. They’d been bought from the trader, a different trader older and fatter and long dead, but Crater still remembered the books and the sweets the trader had given him fondly. The pages were soon sticky, but the fantastic images of heroes who always began their tales in small villages, like his, on the flats or the in the poorest, harshest streets of a delta city where no matter the vice and villainy that surrounded them, they remained true and good. There was always the wise wanderer, or the talking bird that guided them along the path, elevating them to their rightful place in high society. There was one picture, of the hero’s strong, noble features accepting her guns and blades from an angel, faceless in the heavenly light that emanated from their shadow less skin were fixed in his mind like a beacon. Then, they would lead the armies of men against the wicked

battles against demonic hosts and

granted their blades and guns by angels

**Winter**

The once thick, tangled beard worthy of a raven’s nest was thinning and any hair Hoar had once had was long since gone. The pouches of his face sagged and liverspots grew like lichen over his skin which had taken on the texture of petrified wood. Hard nodules of bone practically pierced through the skin of his cheeks, and what teeth remained to him were grey and rounded like the markers in his grandfather’s meadow. Last autumn on the harvest festival when all the Golemel songs were played and sung, he had returned to his forefather’s home. While the revelries steadily waxed toward their equinox, he entered the moonlit meadow, two shadows at his heel, and began to dig. The time had been carefully chosen. It was after the latecomers had trickled in but before young couples began to sneak off into the woods to sing music older than even the most ancient Golemel songs. Even yet, Svelsa stood vigil while he dug. With the rusted mattock he had saved, fitted with a new head and still sharp enough, he cut a pit seven feet deep and three feet wide. He had kept a watchful eye out for a suitable marker, but his eyes were weakening and it had been Svelsa who had led him to a stone of the right size and flatness. He had given her an approving frown, and made up his mind to prepare his resting place. Even a wolf as large as Svelsa, for in the five years since she had been reborn her shoulders and haunches had bulked up, bristling with sinew and power, would have trouble digging a grave for a man deep enough. Hoar would not entrust his burial to the townsfolk who were more likely to cut the tendons in his wrists and ankles and burn him in a pit salted with iron. They had certainly be swift in gathering up the nails and fasteners that was all that remained of his cabin beside ashes. Someone had even taken the twisted blob of glass that had been his morning window as a souvenir. Still, he had dug up enough nails to fasten himself a crown for when the time came. Though that day seemed like it never would.

The first winter he’d been sure death would find him deep in the Golemel crags and without stores or shelter. He would have, had it not been for Svelsa who had taken to wolfishness as though she had been born to it. Even after evading their pursuers, Hoar found himself without shelter, tools or his stores of provisions. Within a two weeks, the

There are few scents that both humans and wolves are equally attuned to and the smell of fire is one of them. Smoke rode the wind like the deep, reverberating call of a whale through th eartic depths. Hoar was

Lina’s dead. Hoar’s very old. One pup of the wolf mastiff has come and eaten her forefather. The smell of smoke. Hoar goes down to see what is wrong. Finds Crater’s shop. Remembers Crater’s return. Leaving the son in the mud to die.

Chips of frozen blood shedding like a century of rust from an unused machine, Hoar smiled at the nameless woman and died.

Short Story Outline

Events:

Find/save woman.

Take home

Get healer

Somehow survives

Survive winter by selling Svelsa (to hated townsman, for unification)

Live together (years)

Hoar’s parents dissappeard in the unification

Hoar’s wife died in the snows, his daughter of sickness. Son joined the army.

People whisper about the woman, body’s failing.

Winter’s hard, wolves come scratching at the door

Svelsa opens the door, and lets them in. She is eaten (transfers over to the wolf)

People whisper about the wolf and Hoar (wolf growing bigger. Whelps, dies. Newborn. far too intelligent). Good times for Hoar.

Rumors reach the trader and spread to Orturiel’s court

Orturial’s woman comes to find the truth, brings soldiers. Hoars son is there, no longer human.

Massacres village, orturiel style, searching for the wolf and Areil’s escaped freeform.

Hoar very old by now. Sees friends killed. Home burned down. Treasures despoiled. All he has left goes up in ruins. Wounded just like first dead man by his own son. Wolf drags him away him away. Fights off pursuers. Hoar fights too, but is too weak to draw the bow.

Vendigore takes the body of the son. Makes a coat of the old wolf’s skin. Cooks

Pretends to be son. Hoar plays svelsa in the night, alone. Knows the truth.

Hearstrings pulled. Make them cry.

Themes:

Relatable, active, clever hero.

Svelsa a metaphor for sadness, emptiness, hunger and depression

Hoar is the land (descripe him only as nature and as part of the mountains)

Hoar never speaks

Hatred of love and self-destruction

Pain is pain

Never giving up

Fear of the different and ingrained hatred.

Sorena frightened of what her superior might do if it realized she failed. Hides evidence, gives svelsa a chance to fight back, grow unchecked.

Track down the enemy by wolfish smell, following the perfume. Use burning bear grease as a source of energy in the fight.

Final fight scene/culmination. Crater/Hoar reconcile. Hoar/daughter meet (lie). Fight the enemy of the unification. Things are changing, rising up and casting off the chains? One Azil is a monster, one is a human. There are Azil rising under a new banner (Ariel) the wanderer. The outcast. Hoar dies. Crater dies. Svelsa consumes them both, or parts of them. Sick monster copy like Sorena copied Hoar’s daughter. Azil will be free one day.

Elevator pitch

“An aging woodsman saves a member of his hated caste, but is she a monster or a second chance and does it matter to those who hate his kind?

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Tier 2 Editor

Kelton, Karl, Tasha, Mom & Dad

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