The fire curled up in the cabin’s hearth grumbled and wheezed, like an old, hound with crackling joints settling into bed. Basking in its warmth was an aged man, fretting over the strings of his instrument. He had lived far longer than any in the village had thought, or hoped, he would. In happier day’s he’d return his wife’s greeting of “Aren’t you in the ground yet?” with a cheerful, inconsiderately animate “I’ll outlive you all, just you wait and see,” and a whiskery kiss. Only during those days, with his mother’s soft smiles never scarce and his grandfather’s crooked toothed jests too plentiful, did Hoar, always a solemn child, would come close to laughing. He very nearly did.

Scattered at his grandfather’s feet like a fortune teller’s bones, Hoar’s dearest and only friends dozed. Already several fingers taller, Crater sprawled, half covered by a quilt and so flushed from the halo of heat radiating from the flames that he looked red. Despite the last hour’s increasingly incoherent vows that he was not tired, Crater was fast asleep. Gili had slipped into unconsciousness more gracefully, laid out to listen to the old man’s playing with all the dignity of a duchess. This was undercut slightly by the soft, whistling snores that escaped her petite nose. These, however, were nothing to the rhythmic, thunderous snore that cut through the bedroom door like a pig being sawed. She shivered, despite the fire and blanket. Hoar, the third child, crouched with his knees drawn up to his chest and his grandmother’s solemn, first days of winter expression. He 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, plucking an experimental note on his svelsa’s strings, said sternly, “Let him alone, Hoar.”

Hoar jumped, pulling his hand back as if burned and buried his face between boney knees till only his eyes peeked out. His grandfather 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, gentle, pure notes and 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.

Without warning 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. “You’re growing so fast, so fast,” he mused. Hoar didn’t move, 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 hush, Hoar waited for his grandfather to grin, to make it all a joke again. He didn’t, and Hoar hesitantly nodded, pulling himself a little straighter. 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 turned vendigore.

The last notes of his silver voice melted into thin air and Hoar allowed himself to breathe. He’d closed his eyes, letting the haunting words bear him far up the mountain where he ran with the wolves. Cold swirling over and around pack but never inside, like water breaking stones, and the air was so crisp he could almost smell the color of snow. A disapproving cough severed the smell like an steel muzzle and Hoar’s eyes flicked open. His grandmother Roa perhaps a few years past fifty had opened the bedroom door to glare at the pair. Though the brunt of her withering gaze rested on her husband who met it with the wide eyed innocence of a guilty child, Hoar still felt his insides shrivel.

“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 you’d notice” 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. In panic, Hoar realized he was squarely in the middle of the warpath and could no more discretely slip off to one side than sink through the floor and become one with the mountain. “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 rhythm.

“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. From the shadow that had fallen over him, and the pair of calves shot through with varicose veins, Hoar knew Roa was leaning over him getting right into his grandfather’s face. He stared at his toes. They were small, and pink, and curling as if somehow they could hide beneath themselves.

“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.”

Hoar’s namesake 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 put them to bed 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. His grandson’s nose reappeared from behind his knees and he risked a glance up.

“Didn’t have the heart to wake them? What if Relya barged in right now and saw them just sprawled out like animals?”

“They’re children, what do you expect?”

“Why did you have to write that song?” Roa carried on, oblivious. 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 needs 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 me or his mother.”

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 Relya’s boy, or that Gorgem.”

“She’s harmless,” Roa said, avoiding mention of the younger Parseek. 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?”

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Lieutenant Takken stood a dozen paces from his soldiers and, to any of his sullenly watching command, was attempting to slowly and steadily work his head free from its mooring. First, he would swivel his neck to peer expectantly at the western skyline, fiddling apprehensively with his brightly shined, lieutenant’s bars. Then, as if the moldering hovel was some enormous predator, sagging roof and twisted chimney creeping closer whenever he turned his back he would whip around, pinning it to the earth with his gaze. If anything, the ground was creeping up, over the building slowly but surely turning the one room hut into basement real-estate. Corporal Anya, whose spittle laced instructions were to shoot anyone “Or anything. Even if they- it looks human. They were given clear orders. Just following protocol,” watched her commander’s head make another violent arc. She, very carefully and very deliberately, didn’t look to the pile of helmets, rifles and jackets that lay like the epidermal peel of an animal that had just been skinned. Nor did she look to south, where what everything that had been Lower Ravnasill lay. None of the twenty-four less three company clustered at the base of the predawn hill did. At least up here with the Lt., she couldn’t smell the pyre. With her stomach roiling as it was, she didn’t think she’d be able to eat pork ever again.

A sudden squawk, like a chicken giving itself a concussion, drew her attention away from the smell that still burned in her nostrils long after the fires had banked. Lieutenant. Takken’s vigil was at an end. Several of the soldiers on the trail to Ravnasill noticed as well. A light had appeared in the western sky, like an echo of the sunset. As the light grew in intensity and size, wings of ghostly fire, flickering from rosy purple to blue, appeared. It was mesmerizing, beautiful; if she hadn’t seen it once before, she might have thought Orturiel himself was descending. The TRU (Tactical Response Unit) hit Prime half a kilometer up. Seven seconds after, the sound wave hit like thunderclap making the tops of trees dance. It wasn’t long after the Templars arrived.

In theory, that should have siphoned the tension of the hillside away. When the Templars came, it wasn’t your responsibility anymore. Not your operation, not your command, not your fault. Except it still was. Anya smelled what a day ago she might have mistook for burning pork and tried not to cringe as the Templar commander crested the hill and strode toward them in silver and gold like the judgment she was.

“Lieutenant,” she said. It was a hard voice, and sharp, like a flint broken of any smooth edges.

Lieutenant Takken saluted smartly. He seemed to have gotten ahold of himself, finally, and addressed the Templar. “Lieutenant Takken, Pacification division three.”

“You were the one to report possible buried Ursar in the Ravnasill environs.”

“Not just possible. We found them, two sir, maybe more. My soldier had established an entry point on the southern and eastern-”

“Where is Lower Ravnasill?” The Templar said flatly, cutting through the Lieutenant’s stream of consciousness like a shark.

“Just there, sir,” the Lieutenant said, pointing nervously south, a grin playing about the corners of his mouth like a child gamboling about quarry’s precipice.

“No. Ravnasill is a crossroads town. It has an inn, The Quill and Arms. It has fifty-three people, half farmers and half servicing travelers and it has a memorial to the six sons and daughters who came home in pieces. That,” she pointed south, “is a pile of charcoal, a funeral pyre, and a desecrated stone,” her voice remained level, and steady, but Anya shuddered still.

Takken, on the other hand, was still bent on spilling his tale for the world. “Yes, we got them! Sir, it was an amazing battle. We had established entry points to the south and east when I sent for the Templars. But they must have gotten wind of us, the Ursars, I mean, because not half an hour after I sent for you-”

A villager, in his mid-forties missing his two front teeth and with all the luck of a lightning rod in a storm had stumbled into their position. But Anya did not say any of this. If she opened her mouth, something a bit more might escape.

“A man working for the Ursars attacked out southern foothold,” finished the Lieutenant almost breathlessly. “My soldiers took him down but he’d served his purpose, he’d alerted the Ursars to our presence. We had to spring into action to save the moment.”

He’d practically tripped over Jarred and Jarred hadn’t thought. Then everything in that moment that could go wrong, did go wrong. After, much after, Anya had found Jared, pale as willow bark and shaking. She didn’t know if it was because of shooting that fool man or what had happened after.

“My troops had the village surrounded and I gave the order to advance.”

The second Jarred’s shots rang out, the nervous, trigger ready platoon panicked.

“We had to follow protocol. If a pacification platoon or company encounters Ursar or indications of Ursar within a civilian population-”

-they are to quarantine the area and summon Templars. No living thing is to be allowed to leave the cordon. All potentially exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean. Lieutenant Takken had made sure they were clean. Corporal Anya stood guard before the last standing house of Lower Ravnasill and listened to the story unfold all wrong. Whatever skill Takken lacked for command, he made up for with the ability to tell extravagant, exquisitely crafted lies. Perhaps he even believed them himself, who knew? Anya listened with disgust the story of a bumbling pacification platoon that had never before seen combat pulled together by a heroic lieutenant. There was the tragic and regrettable but entirely necessary pacification of Lower Ravnasill. Pacification, not slaughter, no, never slaughter. Then there were the Ursar. If Takken was to be believed, half of Ravnasill were buried Ursar. If she hadn’t been at the little farmhouse a hundred paces from the crossroads, she would have thought every word was horse shit. But she had, and she’d seen what the Ursar had made out of itself, and what it had done to Sanders, Vivi, Half boots and KT. Then the Lieutenant, reaching the climax of his story, looked the Templar in the face and told her that he had killed the Ursar himself, “run it through with this very bayonet, I did. Vivian had thrown herself in front of me, shielding me from the burns. She sacrificed herself, she did.” Anya had to respect the slight tremor, the careful setting of his jaw as he told the lie. She’d often wondered how Takken had made Lieutenant at twenty two, and now she didn’t have to. Anyone who could go from cowering behind a field stone wall, shrieking orders to anyone who would listen as his sergeant was burned from the inside out to telling a Templar he was a war hero had a certain kind of guts. She supposed she ought to hate him for it, but all she felt were cold, slimy slithers of guilt that came from her part in the story, her silence, what she and all of them had done. “I felt the thing die on my steel. Let me tell you, it’s not something I’ll soon forget. I only wish I had killed it sooner. My soldiers had already been exposed.”

The Templar looked at him impassively. She had listened to every word the man had spoken without comment, her silvered visor betraying nothing of the face within. The Lieutenant could not see her gaze rake his ashy, grimy but definitively not bloody hands as he drew the scene of his triumph in the air, nor could he see the burning anger that reflected the still smoldering cinders of The Quill and Arms.

“I see,” she said with brittle calm. This quieted the Lieutenant, though did not shake his certainty in the story he had woven so expertly.

“I wish to see the exposed troops, to verify their sanctity,” whether by chance or by divine providence, the wind died and her gun metal voice was heard across the hillside by every soldier lost in the pitfalls dug by their own minds. No one said anything for a second, and then the Lieutenant cleared his voice.

“Right this way, though I’d be careful if I were you. I did everything I could think of to pacify them, but Ursar are tricky. We’ve kept them under close guard.”

“Thank you for your warning, Lieutenant. I’ll try to keep it in mind.”

Anya’s eyes strayed to the blade at the woman’s hip. It was short, thick and did not sway with the intermittent wind. Angel steel, she guessed, and shivered. She’d heard stories of Templars wielding those, and the rifle slung across her back looked capable of turning a horse into pink spray. The woman was just as good an actor as Takken, if she could say accept his patronizing caution with a level voice.

With a horror, dulled by the numb blanket of sickness that had fallen over seemingly every member of the platoon except one, Corporal Anya realized the monster killer was approaching her. She straightened into a salute which was met with a nod. A mailed hand landed on her shoulder, as lightly as a ten-ton butterfly graciously choosing not to crush her.

“It will all be over soon, like none of this ever happened,” whispered the Templar. It was only after she had swept past, through the slanted door that Anya realized there had been a note of kindness threaded through the harsh voice. Anya wished the woman would find something else beneath the earth. The hilltop held its breath as the Templar found what lay interred within the cold earth and held it, and held it. A prickle of predawn light was spreading its fingers of light across the east when she reemerged. She was helmetless, and Anya was startled to see that her tightly curling black hair was cropped short. For some reason, she’d imagined her as having long, flowing locks like some knight ridden out of the old tales.

She walked straight up to the Lieutenant, face as cold and unmoving as the helmet had been. “Lieutenant Takken, it occurs to me that you may benefit from a reassignment. Someplace closer to home I think.”

“Sir? Is there something wrong?”

“I was under the impression that you had quarantined three soldiers who had been exposed, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” the Lieutenant snapped off another salute, “Any human exposed to Ursar must be immediately neutralized and placed into quarantine, as per protocol sir!”

“Neutralized,” echoed the Templar.

“Drastic situations call for drastic actions. Anything could have been incubating inside them.”

“So, you emptied a magazine into their skulls?” The way she had said it triggered some, deeply buried and suppressed instinct for self preservation, but the Lieutenant was too deep in his story.

“Protocol is quite clear there. The Ursar might have planted anything inside them before I killed it.”

“It might have.”

“Sir, I would like to request the medal of bravery.”

The Templar raised an eyebrow. “Really for whom?”

“For my late sergeant, dying the line of duty. His actions were heroic and deserving of honors,”

“And I suppose you would request the same for yourself?”

“If you think I merit it,” he said, generously.

The Templar regarded the Lieutenant like a something she’d found adhering to the sole of her boot. “I think, that you should take my offer of reassignment. I think you should be transferred straight away.”

The Lieutenant blanched. “But sir, the award ceremony. I can’t leave my command without seeing them properly honored.”

“It might be dangerous to stay in your current position. Your soldiers may have a different view of last night’s events.”

Takken’s head whipped around, as though now it was his own company creeping up on him. Then he faced the Templar. “There were Ursar everywhere. I’m afraid one or any of them might have been exposed.”

“And all exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean,” the Templar said with finality.

“I’m grateful that you understand,” the Lieutenant said.

“I do understand.” A touch of sorrow had entered the Templars words. Anya felt as though the woman had just cut her throat. Speech, air, breathe they were all suddenly impossible. In numb betrayal, she watched the Templar rest a friendly hand on the Lieutenant’s shoulder. He staggered from the weight.

“You’re a graduate from Arenholm Academy, aren’t you?” Her tone was suddenly friendly, cheerful, almost as if she were greeting an old friend.

“Graduated just a year ago, top five percent of my class and captain of the orator’s team as well.”

“Really? That’s very impressive. I never went to Academy.”

“Oh, you’ve done fine for yourself,” Lieutenant Takken said graciously.

“Nothing like you. You graduated top five percent-”

“Four percent, not that it matters,”

“Oh, silly me. Four percent. You must know an awful lot about fighting then, and tactics,” her voice had taken on a vapid tone, seemingly shedding years off her weathered basalt face.

“I specialized in logistics. In my final quarter I-”

But he never finished his sentence. The hand that had rested in such a friendly manner on his shoulder had clamped around his throat. To her horror, Anya witnessed her commanding officer lifted off his feet by his through, his hands scrabbling uselessly against the Templar’s plate. “I was in the vanguard on Kulrathen. I broke the siege of Ruhiem. I’ve torn Ursar to pieces with my bare hands, stupid child,” she threw him then, like a rag doll. Every eye was on him as he rolled to a bleeding, quivering heap. The Templar descended on him like the wrath of God. “And even blind and broken I could still see that carrying your wounded and dying out of the hell of lead and steel was the right thing to do, no matter the cost.”

On the ground, the Lieutenant choked for air. Above him the Templar drew her angel steel blade. It was matte grey, and ugly. Nothing like the shining weapon of Angels Anya had expected and it was echoed by a cavalcade steel being slid home. Appearing like specters from the brush, fully armored Templar rose, rifles locked and shouldered. Any thoughts of coming to their commander’s aid died. These were Templars. You can’t fight Templars.

She spoke in a ringing, voice, the soldiers who had once been Takken’s hearing with dead ears and seeing with cold eyes. “If a pacification platoon or company encounters Ursar or indications of Ursar within a civilian population they are to quarantine the area and summon Templars. No living thing is to be allowed to leave the cordon. Lieutenant Takken. My Templars have found forty-six bodies in the village. That leaves seven your inescapable cordon let slip through, including the two buried Ursars.”

“Impossible, they’re dead!” Takken managed, his voice going from rasp to panic.

“All potentially exposed soldiers are to be confined until proven clean,”

“I was only following protocol. I had to!” screamed the Lieutenant as he was lifted up again by the jacket.

“You were exposed, Lieutenant, when you ran it through with your bayonet.”

“I didn’t! I wasn’t! I didn’t run it through, per say, I shot it, from a long way away. I wasn’t exposed, I swear.”

“Corporal,” the Templar’s hazel eyes touched Anya’s and the world waited. She saw the tears running down Takken’s face, the spreading wetness of his pants and almost told the truth. Then, she saw Vivi’s bubbled corpse hurled by what the Ursar had made from three men, and set her back.

“He was exposed,” she said, and was pleased that her voice did not waver.

“Just following protocol,” the Templar said baring predatory teeth, all white enamel and pink gums as though they were display pieces that had never encountered the taint of food. The angel steel went through him like hot metal through snow. She dropped him, gasping and clutching at the blood that welled from the wound as though somehow he could stop the red tide.

“When is an Ursar most dangerous?” The blood stained woman bellowed.

“When it has nothing left to lose!” chorused her Templars.

“What are we?”

“The monsters that kill monsters!”

“They have six hours head start and we have seven trails to follow. Move out.”

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There was a crack. Not the greedy crack of ice giving way beneath an unwary boot, but the sullen, capitulation of something too old, and too worn to be of use. An instant later, 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 Vanholm three years ago, and they’d finally broken into the cozy, supple shape that was just right. For six fox pelts, the trader had thrown in new steel clasps for his cloak.

The weight of the carcass strapped to his back slammed into him, knocking his breath out for a second time 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 wolf pelt, white as the wisps of cirrus hair that clung to his head, and held rather more firmly by a steel clasp, forged in a three braided knot. It was not a pretty fur. Old, ragged and riddled with holes. Hoar had stitched every wound he’d made in the pelt closed as if to let them heal but three scorched punctures lingered. The making of those three still burned in his memory as if decades were days. They had not killed the wolf. No mark of Hoar’s killing steel head remained on the pelt, only a hollow where the right eye had glared at him with hate and hunger and desperation. Last summer, when the passes were open, he’d given the Trader a necklace of bear teeth and a jar of its grease for new bow strings and twelve sharp steel heads, thinking the fall would be bountiful. 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 the ribs of storm wrecked ships.

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

Last season, the blacksmith had told him the metal was aging, had said the entire boot lock would have had to be replaced, but the price he had asked of Hoar, would only have asked of the old Azil, was too much to bear. He’d thought 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, he’d play for an audience of none for hours on end, lost in the melodies and memories he hated to his core. When spring came, he’d put the svelsa away, and swear to uphold his oath. He’d sell 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 hood. He waited, the stab in his neck reminding him helpfully of its presence. When the metal was too hot to touch, he snatched up the icy rod and rammed it into hole, pinning the strap back in place He wiggled it forward until the temperatures equalized and it jammed. It wasn’t pretty, but it would do the job. 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, 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 of her words, vol. It meant to eat. He stood, uncomprehending, hunched over like a mother snow bear over a kill and felt his heat drain through the prick in his skin. Perhaps he would die here, as a blanket for a woman soon to follow and a sheath for her blade on the eve of winter. 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 it was a prayer, a benediction or a curse, Hoar didn’t look back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A Vaicour girl?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Really?” Crater’s voice broke and broke again even as he tried a more manful tone, “Why’s she coming here?” Gili laughed, rocking slightly on her perch. It was a hyena’s laugh.

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

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

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

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

Spluttering as if he’d just come out of the pond and blushing scarlet as a the syrup, Crater turned to face the table. Gili laughed again, musical and light and nothing like the songs woven from Hoar’s svelsa.

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

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

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

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

“It won’t happen. It can’t.”

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

“Orturiel won’t stand for that.”

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

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

“What monsters?”

“Monsters.” Gili rolled her eyes, annunciating slowly as though Crater was being stupid. “Sleepless things that can snap swords in half and eat babies. You’d better watch out.” Hoar was trying not to listen, humming to himself silently to drown them out. It have been a stupid, stupid thing to say.

Crater slipped his rifle off his shoulder, “They’d never get close to me. I’d shoot their eyes out at fifty meters.”

“They’d eat your powder before it burned and break you in half.” Hoar wished he hadn’t left his svelsa on the stump. He’d brought, thinking his friends only wanted to wander aimlessly through the woods, shooting at squirrels and joking.

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

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

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

“It can’t happen, I’ve told you. Azil’s can’t change. Hoar,” she said. His name ripped through the song in his head and he focused on her. “Be a lamb and get me another,” she was holding the drawstring bag, empty of sweet drops, out. He took it, numbly, as though he’d been out for hours in the driving snow with nothing but summer weight garb.

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you told your mother?” asked Hoar plucking a new bag of sweets from their box. He was thinking of how proud the woman had been of her baby last autumn, and the tears that froze the winter. It had been a reaping baby, there one month and gone in the next.

“No.” Crater’s pride seems to deflate. He was thinking of his nameless brother too. “She thinks I’m just going down to learn the trade.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crater sprung to his feet, hands balling into fists. Parseek raised a single eyebrow at the bravado, ignoring the rifle over Crater’s back entirely. He only cared about the cornered Azil. Hoar could only think of the disappointed look on his grandparent’s faces, how his grandfather would pretend to laugh it off and scold him, how his grandmother would slap him and shout, after her husband has gone out. And he will go out, immediately, to make apologies, or just to redouble his efforts to catch their supper and blankets. He’ll have to. A high ringing of the pump and flow of blood filled his ears. He couldn’t remember a single one of his grandfather’s songs.

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

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

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

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

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Hoar glowered at the richly adorned facade as if machine behind his eyes could bubble the paint, scorch the word and turn the brass lettering above the door to molten rain. He’d been standing there full four minutes, muscles stubbornly refusing to reach out and knock. It was a forty minute hike back to where the frostbitten girl might already be dead; would be dead if he wasted another second. Hoar didn’t move. Then a trill of laughter broke out on the mountainward road and a pair of girls strolled round a corner. The giggling choked off when they saw him, turning to expressions of fear and disgust, as if a white haired wolf spider had crept up on them unannounced. They were too young. Old enough to remember a time when a missing limb had been rare but too young to be properly afraid. Hoar turned his glare on them and they retreated, back the way they’d come, back toward the Mayor’s home. He didn’t have time to waste. Hoar reached out and took the knocker as though it was a baby viper. It was an ornate thing, wrought in the shape of a fox head from brass, just like the lettering above it which spelled “Ms. Lina Ague, Linctus, Apothecist, Veever.” Hoar gave a solid, wood denting knock.

“I’ve been up since dawn slaving away so unless this is an emergency, come back tomorrow,” came a woman’s annoyed voice from somewhere deep within the house. It was a voice that Hoar knew well, and still made his stomach suddenly hollow and cold. Wondering if he would spit venom if he spoke, he knocked again, louder this time and more insistently. There was splashing, a few bumps and bangs that sounded as though a kettle had been dropped. The door was flung open. Gili stood there, ample bosom supporting the fluffiest towel Hoar had ever seen. She did not look her age, and hadn’t for twenty years if the tidbits Ulma fed him were to be believed. Smooth skin, full lips and breasts, a face free from the ravages of time; the perks of being a Veever. “Oh,” she said, surprise, anger, embarrassment and something else warring for control of her face. Anger won. It usually did. “Come to apologize, have you?” Hoar almost stuck her. He could feel his hands curling as though they were grasping her fat neck. With an effort, he changed the strangle hold to a major chord, the opening to Ritatin-tin-tin.

“No,”

“Well then? Are you just going to stand there and stare? Say what you want,” she said petulantly. For her, it was almost a regular speaking voice.

“Your gear, medicine,” Hoar said, remembering why he had come. The look of resentment was replaced by what Hoar might have thought was concern for him, if he didn’t know better. She looked him up and down, noting the blood stain where the woman’s dagger had pricked his belly. She reached out to touch him, the expanse of thick white towel slipping from where she’d held it revealing another finger’s breadth of skin. He drew away from her touch.

“I’m fine,” he said, pulling his wolf’s skin and frown tighter around him like armor. “It’s not for me.”

“Who then,” she said, that odd look which had been there before returning and winking out just as quickly.

“I don’t know.”

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“Idiot. If you can’t hold it in, go and find me someone who can.” Gili’s voice cut like her knife, through Hoar’s flesh piercing his pride. He choked back his bile and in the privacy of his own head sang the tune of Violet Tears, weaving a world away from the cabin in the snowy crags of the Golemel mountain range on the verge of the Vaicour empire. The knife didn’t make much sound as it slid through the swollen black skin, but the woman did. She screamed, and Hoar’s Violet Tears broke.

“God dammit. Why is she still conscious? Ketamine. Now.” Hoar looked at her outstretched hand blankly. “The tinted bottle that says Ketamine on it. Hurry.” He found it swiftly and passed it to her. She drew another cc, quickly and expertly from the vial tested the flow from her syringe and readied the needle. The thick bore pressed against the skin of the prone woman’s for an instant and then slid in. Hoar felt his stomach churn. “I said if you can’t hold it in,” began Gili but Hoar cut her off.

“I’m fine,”

Gili rolled her eyes, “If you say so.” She pulled the needle free and pressed a boiled rag down so the blood could clot. Then she turned on Hoar. “So, Mr. avoid-me-for-sixteen-years, who is she and why am I cutting off what’s left of her fingers on your God damn living room table?” Hoar frowned, organizing his thoughts one by one, like a man with an axe lopping off the branches to a fallen tree. The important thing, when alone in the woods and wielding a wedge of sharpened steel was not to let something slip.

“I found her on the mountain, dressed for a delta night and half frozen.”

“You found her, did you? And I suppose she’s just really bad at lighting fires,” Gili said sarcastically, nodding on the burn that lanced across the woman’s face. Hoar didn’t answer. “God dammit Hoar what the hell happened.”

“I don’t know.”

Gili’s eyes flashed. “Interrupt my bath after a long, long day, bloody as a gutted pig, drag me out in the middle of the night to some half dead girl and then don’t tell me anything. Is this some childish game to you?”

“No,” Hoar’s voice almost came out a growl, and Gili suddenly remembered the night he’d earned his cloak. She looked down at her patient, pinching the meat of her arm again savagely. The woman gave a weak cry. “God dammit!” Gili shouted to nothing and no one, “She should be out cold for a week,” Gili turned on Hoar, reading his frown like Grimor’s Introduction to the Vivisectionist’s Art. “You have to tell me everything. Is she some delta tart looking for adventure? Is she on anything? Stimulants? Amphetamines?”

“I’d never let someone go up the mountain dressed like that,” Hoar said, offended and entirely avoiding the question.

“Is she on anything?”

“She is Azil,” Hoar said through clenched teeth, as though every word were being dragged from by a train of draft horses. Gili’s eyes went wide as saucers, and Hoar thought he saw a flash of fear within them before grimaced and hissed,

“Idiot. Idiot. Idiot, idiot idiot!” Her voice rose with each, punctuated syllable until Hoar thought the villagers kilometers down the mountain might hear her and she hurled the rag at him. The bloody cloth hit him in the chest. “Ketamine doesn’t work on your kind.”

“Why?” Hoar said, his forehead wrinkling.

“I don’t know, do I look like an Angel to you? You’re the one it doesn’t work on.” Gili lifted her scrubbed clean hand to run it through her hair then caught herself. “I might have something. Check my bag for a vial labeled Veercyclidine. Hoar obeyed, rummaging through the neatly arranged bottles, tins and wickedly sharp tools of a Veever’s craft. His hands were passing over a bone saw when Gili interrupted, “Never mind. I’ve got it.” He turned to see her drawing a scruple of clear liquid from another vial. It disappeared into one of the many pockets sewn into her coat in a flash and then she was drugging the woman once more. This time, Hoar didn’t wretch, though he still grimaced as the needle plunged.

“VCD has some side effects,” she said to Hoar, waiting for the analgesic to take effect.

“Like what?” said Hoar. He didn’t like what he’d heard in Gili’s voice.

“Mania. Excited delirium. Phyrexia,” recognizing Hoar’s confused frown, she rolled her eyes. “She’s going to get feverish and think she’s very strong. She might turn violent.”

“Why,” Hoar said, appalled.

“Because,” Gili said with a knowing grin. “It has its uses. It can make a human go for twenty four hours without sleep. It keeps you fresh and feeling no pain. And funnily enough, it’s the only drug I know that numbs Azil too.”

“It won’t knock her out?”

Gili laughed. “With that much VCD in her system? It’s likely to make her more lively. Twice that and she’ll perform the surgery herself. Five times that and she’ll dance the harvest jig all the way down the mountain on bleeding feet. At least, until her heart bursts.” Hoar blinked. He didn’t ask why the Veevers in Kirch had developed something so dangerous. Those had been different times, a world and a war away. “I’ll need your help holding her down while I fix her up. Think you can do that without being sick?” Hoar nodded, and remembered the fox.

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The same hands that played the svelsa so beautifully that Hoar wished his heart might stop just to hear it better brought the scarless mallet down with a crack. That’s what they called it, down in the village, the velvet touch. Ladies down on the delta paid more for perfect pelts, so the trappers and woodsman in the Golemel learned to kill without them. A scared, scarlet fox fur scarf didn’t sell. Hoar’s grandfather lifted the little creature into the air, still anchored to the ground by the trap. In a movement so natural he might simply have been playing a chord he cut its throat. In the woods, on the mountain side, a living thing died.

“They can’t feel it if they’re stunned. Nice and quick, that’s the way. Put them out nice and quick. Can you do that?”

Hoar nodded, though his stomach lurched and there was a hunted look in his eyes contrary to their business that night. He was almost eight years old, too old to be afraid, Hoar told himself. But then, he never had been a very good liar.

They heard its scream over a kilometer away, and the gnarled old tree of a woodsman quickened his pace. “Best be quick. It wouldn’t do to leave the poor thing there a second longer than we need to.” He needn’t have said anything. Hoar practically ran to the creak where they’d laid their trap a fortnight ago. A fox has a very human like scream, almost like a child. It was all too easy for Hoar to imagine it was Crater up ahead, or Gili.

One paw locked in the steel jaws of the trap, the fox tried to rise to its feet when it saw him. The leg was torn and a stained a deeper red than the foxes almost orange pelt which was not sleek but shot through with flecks of dirt and pine needles. Last year, Hoar had cleaned the pelts for his grandfather. It had been fun, almost like a game. His grandfather pressed the scarless into Hoar’s limp fingers. “Don’t hesitate, and don’t be shy. Right between the eyes.”

Hoar approached the fox. Its mouth was open, a red tongue lolling on a bed of spittle. Golden eyes looked at him flecked with a vital defiance. It barked a raw throated bark at him and pulled back as far as the chain allowed. Hoar halted. “Don’t hesitate,” his grandfather urged him, standing reassuringly at his back, confidence and trust resonating in his bass voice. Hoar clutched the scarless tightly and swung. Just before it hit, he closed his eyes.

“Well done, well done. That’s the hardest part. Now finish it, nice and quick,” the mallet was tugged from his unresisting hands and the flensing knife proffered. Hoar took it numbly, the stunned fox lying before him as though it already dead. It’s just an animal, he told himself. And picked it up gingerly by the scruff of its neck, like it was a kitten and he its mother. Nice and quick, he thought and touched flensing knife to throat. The fox came to life, thrashing wildly within his grasp. It clawed, and bit, and screamed and screamed. His grandfather darted forward, strong, deft fingers driving the hammer blow down but the scream continued and Hoar realized he was screaming.

“Did it get you? Are you hurt?” His grandfather was shaking him and Hoar stopped screaming, more for lack of air than anything else.

“No,” he blubbered, once he’d regained his breath.

His grandfather hugged Hoar tightly to his chest, “Don’t scare me like that. I thought it’d taken a finger off you, you damn silly fool.” After a breathe, the old man seemed to calm himself, and spoke in the same, velvet tone he used to speak to the dogs whenever thunder or lightning sent them cowering beneath the bed. “Hush, hush. It’s all right. I should have waited another year, for you to be stronger. It’s harder to stun that it looks. Next year, next year you’ll get it.” Next year, Hoar did. But he never forgot the scream of the fox and the dead thing come back to terrified half-life within his two hands.

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When the Trader’s cart rolled over the final rise and Kirch spread out before her in ivory and blue Gili thought her heart might sing. Crater, squashed into the third of the driver’s seat that remained after the trader’s bulk rolled over, was speechless. The Trader just smiled and shook his head, taking in their reactions rather than the majesty of the delta’s city. For one, shining, ivory and blue hour Gili imagined that Kirch had been her one and only dream, and it was a dream come true. She would learn the Vivisectionist’s art from the hands of the masters in Hallowed Tower and become the greatest Veever that ever lived. Then, she’d met Master Illutan, and her dream had become a far-off pinprick of light so out of reach it might have been a comet, burning to cinders and hot gas before it could every reach her.

“Three cc’s of Calantris. Three, idiot child.”

“I did use three,” Gili lied. She’d only used two but two should be more than enough.

“I’ll strangle Aleth next time he pokes his fat neck in here, bringing me a child like you.”

“Not if I get the corpulent bastard first,” Gili bit back. It had been nothing but shear abuse since the day she’d come to this third rate- this fourth rate Veever. He didn’t even work with people. Dogs. He worked with hairy, filthy, stinking dogs day in and day out. No other Veever in the city would take her, the Trader had explained, not some backwater girl from the Golemel without so much as a letter of recommendation from an Apothacist. She’d been lucky to get a position with a Veever, any Veever, at all, he’d said. After a year, with Illutan’s letter of introduction, she’d be able to enter one of the lesser universities, he’d said. He’d been ever so pleased with the arrangement when he’d made it, passing Gili over to the hack Veever like unsuspecting spare parts. Corpulent bastard.

They were in what her master laughably called a surgery. A single, dog sized slab and cold room barely suitable for storing onions and leeks through a hot summer. The equipment was a mongrel collection of spare parts, much like Illutan’s ancient, foul smelling dog Sixart which dribbled and dozed on the far side of the room. The very first surgery Gili had witnessed had been on that dog. Her last functioning kidney had wavered and shut down, the first link in a chain of organs slowly and steadily being lowered into the ground for their final resting. Fortunately for Sixart, there’d been a brutal fight at one of the Omasta rings in the lower quarter, and Master Illutan’s Augmentation Emporium had received a good number of spare parts. Last night they’d reaped the Omasta hound pit’s crop of fresh parts. One, which had been named Kallith, reposed on the slab now, heart beat its last tattoo within the walls of Kallith’s chest as Calantris did its work. She’d live on in other, Gili told herself, so long as she didn’t botch the vitrification.

“Foolish child,” Illutan barked. Gili’s trembling hands had almost knocked the tray of instruments to the immaculately scrubbed floor as she replaced the syringe. She’d scrubbed it, working on her knees like some serving girl. That was not what an apprentice did. An apprentice was supposed to learning the craft. “Do I need to send you back to shelving’s salves and scrubbing floors.”

“No, sir,” Gili said with clipped politeness.

“If you can’t do it then say so, child. I won’t have you ruin perfectly good parts.”

“I’m fine.” She snapped. Illutan’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t comment. That was just like the man. He’d give her just enough rope to hang herself then watch her swing. Well, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Gili forced her hands to stillness, and picked up the scalpel. It was angel steel, almost three times as heavy, and at three centimeters long, just under the legal limit. She found the jugular and prepared to cut. Just a quick, centimeter cut and then attach the pump. The vitrification fluids were waiting nearby, ready to flood veins and arteries with glass once emptied. It would be easy. “I’m fine,” she repeated within her head even as her stomach churned. From the corner, Sixart whined and Gili plunged the knife blade. Kallith writhed to life, arcing blood and thrashing in her bonds. Gili leapt back, shrieking.

Illutan snatched the syringe up and slamming the thrashing creature down. This was no meager feat, the fighting hounds of Kirch having been bred and augmented for strength, speed and ferocity in the fighting pits. It was over in a flash, and Illutan’s strong hands were dragging her to her feet.

“Did it bite you.” Gili’s mouth mumbled something unintelligible “Did it bite you!” he was shaking her, wide eyed boring into hers searchingly.

“N-no,” she managed. He dropped her and, surprisingly, her legs took her own weight.

“Stupid, foolish child. I said three cc’s. Three! You’re back to shelving and scrubbing till you’ve learned how to listen to simple instructions. Can you manage even that?”

Anger cut through her shock, but before it could take hold of her tongue and ruin everything she’d worked so hard for these past months, a black wave of shame smothered it. “Yes, Master Illutan.”

“Get out.”

Gili rose and left the surgery leaving Illutan to clean up her mess. She’d earn her way back into surgery, complete this abominable apprenticeship and become a full fledged Veever. Eventually did. But she never forgot the snap of the razor teeth a fingers breadth from her hands and the dead thing come back to terrified half-life beneath her knife.

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A ruddy glow crept beneath the woman’s skin, as though her face was the door to a freshly stoked furnace coming to life. The tatter of lips that were left peeled back, revealing white teeth, white as the snow she’d been plucked from and Gili realized she was smiling. A gurgle of sound clawed its way out of her throat, but once the dam had burst a clear flow of laughter sprung forth.

“That would be the delirium,” she said to Hoar who was wearing his frightened frown. There was a slight widening of the eyes forcing through the oppression of his brows. His hair had gone almost pure silver, since she’d last seen him. It suited him. There were some men in the village with hardly a hair left on their heads and more fingers than teeth but not him. He’d aged well, like fine wine, like her.

Gili casually pricked her patient’s palm. There wasn’t even a flinch. “We could butcher her and she wouldn’t feel a thing,” Gili declared. Hoar put on his disapproving frown, a pursing lips and a straightening of his shoulders, as if he was looking down on her. Contrary to the purely physical difference in size, she’d never felt looked down on by him. With the smoothness of a natural born con artist, her memory passed over the one exception to this without a rollick in the waves. “Spike me. Just relax, I’m a Veever. Now hold her down so she doesn’t kill herself while I save her life.”

Frostbite wasn’t rare in the Golemel. Mostly the villagers learned the signs, but how many fingers and toes it took for them to learn was another question. Sometimes, if a group were caught away from their snug homes in an early snow or some damn fool thought he could navigate the twenty steps from his front door to the woodpile in a blizzard things got bad. They didn’t half realize what was happening until the feeling had been gone. If they were lucky, a friend would come dig them out and Gili was called to do what she could. If they were very lucky, she could save the fingers, though some preferred the amputation. Nerve damage, like red hot needles being forced through pad, core and nail wasn’t uncommon. This case, however, was one of the worst she’d seen. Whoever this Vaicour voyeur was, she’d be lucky if she could count to five and that was including her toes. With an almost depressing experience, she stripped back the swollen black flesh, Hoar nailing the arm to the table with his weight. Even still, the woman tried to twist that girlish, giggle erupting in disquieting outbursts. Gili hated working on Azil.

“Bone Pliers,” she ordered. Hoar frowned confusedly at her and she rolled her eyes. “Bone Pliers. There, right there. Look where I’m pointing.”

“Why are they called that?” Hoar asked, as he handed the steel, snub nosed cutters to her. She rolled them in her grip, finding the right length for leverage. They didn’t look particularly thick, but still. “Look and see.” Hoar did for half a second, before turning his gaze fixedly skywards. Gili smirked, and squeezed.

One of the serious drawbacks of using VCP on patients, Gili mused, was that it tricked their heart into thinking a mountain bear was bare stride away and gaining. Not only did this tax the heart to the point of collapse, it sent her patient’s blood pressure sky high. It was threatening to burst the flaps of skin pulled tight over the stubs of bone and stitched down firmly.

“Can you replace them?”

“What?”

“Give her new fingers. New hands.”

“Of course I can. If I had an extra set lying about. So unless you’re willing to donate your pretty svelsa hands I think I’ll just try to stitch her up. Now stop asking stupid questions and hold her still. I know I make this look easy,” her last three words were grunts as she sheared off another millimeter chip of bone. She felt little right now, in the heat of the moment, but come morning her hands would be aching fiercely. And there were still all the toes. Another shock of metal shears shutting ran up her own finger bones and the woman giggled. “That tickles.”

Hoar looked up to Gili. He’d been able to watch her repair of the last two fingers on this hand. She’d left her a thumb and middle finger. They were the thickest digits, and least damaged, but she was an Azil if they’d heal without burning nerves. “What did she say?”

“Don’t distract me.” The woman spoke in Vaicour, but not a delta dialect. Gili was still trying to place where she’d heard that accent before when the woman spoke again. “Are you giving me new hands mother?”

“You could call it that,” Gili grunted. Her regular steel scalpel ringed the pinkey, slicing black and blue necrosis away like when Parseek had killed the sapling maples by cutting into the heartwood of the tree and severing the veins all the way around.

“What did she say?” Hoar asked again. Gili ignored him.

“I’ll be better this time. I promise. I promise, mother,”

“I am not your mother,” Gili said, tugging the flesh back. It resisted. She must not have cut all the way through.

“No,” the woman sounded confused, and hurt, like a child realizing she had been lied too. Gili glanced up to discover that she was the focus of an intense, penetrating gaze. The ruined face was, like the smoldering cloth of a tent just before the flames reached the powder kegs, but her eyes were crystal orbs of hatred piqued by VCD.

Gili’s knife edge intake of breath was all the warning the old woodsman got before her patient flipped from docile Azil to thrashing, screaming devil. There was a second of coiling muscle and then Hoar was crashing backwards and the mad woman was reaching for Gili. Through the Veever’s art, Gili had kept her body curvaceous in the face of time’s passage, but beneath the fat, powerful muscles that had carried her through the bracken and sucking mud of the \_\_\_\_ Campaigns. She caught the clawing hands and wrestled them onto the table, pinning them down with her weight where they couldn’t do any more harm, to her or themselves. But the Azil curled like a viper, a wild kick aimed at her skull. She dodged, partially, and the bony shin struck the meat of her shoulder. Gili grunted in pain.

Then, Hoar appeared like a revenant rising to seek vengeance and slammed the VCD crazed woman down onto the table, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped for air, but Hoar, frown gone, a snarl in its place, was up on the table, his knee pressing into her thin chest. She kicked at air, and Gili let go; Hoar had nailed her hands to the table with his own. Anger and pain twisted his face. He only looked up when she struck him across the cheek.

“I said ease up! You’re choking her you fool!” Her hand smarted, it was like slapping a rock. But it had the desired effect. Hoar’s face went from anger to horror in a second, his eyes wide and frown sickened not angry and he removed his knee from her diaphragm. “Stay there,” Gili cautioned. “God dammit, I’m used to working with an experienced crew.” She saw the look on his face and relented, “No, that’s not what I mean. You’ve never done this before is all. She’s flying high as heaven right now, no telling what might set her off. I just never expected her to have that much strength. I should have restrained her first, but it’s been a long time since I’ve done this.”

This didn’t seem to help. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have- that wasn’t- it wasn’t something a human would have done.”

Gili felt like shouting. Instead, she rolled her eyes and said, “hold her down. We can determine who’s a monster after we save her life.”

Surprisingly, none of the stitches she’d put in had burst, but it was still almost dawn before they were done. It would have been sooner, but Gili had to keep feeding the fire which had died from neglect, she noticed, sometime before the Azil’s explosive mania. As the fire wood dwindled, energy evaporated from Gili’s bones, leaving her more drained than she had been in years. It did not help that when the Azil wasn’t crying, she was intermittently begging or cursing Hoar. Gili refused to translate, but from the set of his frown, she guessed he didn’t need her to.

“Please, you’re an Azil too. Don’t you understand? Why can’t you understand?

“There’s a special place in hell for traitors and cowards monster!”

“Please. Please! You can stop this. We can find mother, she’ll save us both.”

“It’ll take you apart next. Pick you apart, piece by piece and you’ll deserve it.”

“Please. Please?”

Just as she was finishing packing the last bandage on the woman’s melted face with enough antibiotics to kill a sheep, she spoke. “Vaicour flesh witch.” Her tone was neither pleading, or furious. It was plain, flat, as if she were commenting upon the weather. “I’m going to eat you.”

“What did she say?” Hoar asked.

“I’m going to bind her hands down, so she doesn’t hurt herself. Or do anything stupid.”

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Outside the hut Hoar and Gili sat on the stoop, overlooking the village. Neither of them said anything, which was not the same as neither of them saying anything. A growing bubble of silence was manufactured, traded and taxed until Hoar unearthed a safe, unimportant topic, collapsing the silence economy.

“What do you usually do with the bones?”

“Hmm?”

“The bones,” Hoar said again, running forefinger over palm.

“Bury them somewhere no one’ll find them. Burn the flesh and scatter the ashes. Just get rid of it. When I was a girl, one of father’s apprentices lost his finger to a carless slip of the knife. Idiot. He kept the bones in a vial on his mantle.

Down in the village a few people were stirring, those whose days began when the sun’s first rays peeked over the curtain of mountains and ended when it’s last sank beneath the horizon. There were rooves to clear, paths to cut and fires to rekindle for the morning breakfast. Winter has fallen, and Hrult was ready for it.

“What’re you going to do about the Azil?”

Hoar shrugged, watching with hawk like eyes a three dots that were children made almost spherical beneath layer upon layer of coats in the village bellow. One child was plowing a path to the village square, the other two chasing in their wake.

“Hoar, she’s an Azil.”

“I know.”

Hoar’s frown was inscrutable. Gili tried again, “Hoar. She’s- she might be dangerous. Did you ever consider you saved a v- an Azil not worth saving?”

“I did.”

“Then why did you bring her back?”

Hoar shrugged. The children had reached the elder tree in the village center. One, the tallest, was hoisting their fellows into the lower branches.

“What are you going to do when the drugs wear off and she’s some sort of monster?”

The last, earthbound child raised their arms and was pulled up by their friends, leaving the mundane ground for loftier goals. The old man remembered climbing the tree so many decades ago and felt very old indeed.

“Hoar. Hoar! Look at me!” Gili was glaring at him. “God dammit Hoar, we have to be sensible about this.”

“What? If she is a monster what do you want me to do?”

“Take care of it.” Hoar frowned at her, strands of silver beard tickling his face in the high altitude wind. “I’m not saying she’s going to come down a blood thirsty beast ready to slit our throats but she wasn’t exactly acting sane.”

“You said that drug makes people do things,” Hoar said with the air of a man adrift finding a piece of flotsam to hold tight to.

“It can,” said Gili, carefully, “but sometime people do violent things because they’re violent people,” Hoar shifted his gaze back to the village. The children were halfway up the tree. The one who had helped the others up had halted, but the leader was climbing further and further up daring the wind to rattle the branches.

“Maybe she’s a perfectly normal Azil, who decided it would be a great idea to go up into the mountains just before the first snow fell and is very bad at lighting fires. Or maybe there’s a reason someone was trying to kill her.”

“I’m not going to try and hurt her just because someone else did.”

Gili fought back the urge to shake him.

“Will you at least promise me that you’ll watch her? For any signs that something’s going wrong or that you made a mistake.”

The child had almost made it to the top, climbing thinner and thinner branches. They’d either OTHER CHILD IS CHASING REWRITE THINGY BOB IF SVELSA SURVIVES?

“How much do I owe you for the medicine,”

“What?” said Gili, caught off guard.

“For the medicine. Erythromysin.”

“Nothing. That stuff’s dirt cheap,” Hoar winced, as if bitten by an insect.

“For your labor then. The VCP, working late.”

“Nothing! Hoar, I know you can’t afford this.”

He glowered at her. “Not at the Azil price.”

Gili tossed her head angrily. “Not at any price. I saw what you called living, you barely have enough for one person to make it through the winter. It wasn’t like that when we were kids.”

“We’re not kids anymore.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know why either? Go to Crater, talk to him. You know he’ll buy your furs at twice the price you’ve been getting and you can live like a human being again.” Hoar stood with an avalanche of cracks moving up his spine as he straightened. “Or let me take the Azil. You can’t support her and yourself if you continue to be this pig headed,” Gili said. Far, far below, the climber was resting on branches so thin they were hardly thicker than a hair at this distance. Below, their pursuer waited, confident that the child would come down, either in their own time or at a time of the wind’s choosing. MOVE THIS TO END. RESPACE CHILDREN DOWN BELOW.

“No.” He turned to cabin.

“God dammit Hoar, can’t you see I’m trying to do you a favor?” Gili scrambled to her feet to follow after him but she was sluggish. Tired and the felt onset of chills like birds can sense the coming change to the dark season.

“Will this favor end with her strung up by her feet, throat open for the flies?”

“Spike me, what is wrong with you?” Hoar heard the hurt and anger in her voice and told himself he didn’t care. He

“I have some purchases to make.”

“Who’ll you sell to if you won’t go to Crater. Who?”

“The only honest human in Hrult.”

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The hounds were barking, whining, almost crying with anticipation as they strained against their owner’s whiplike hempen cords. If they weren’t released soon, they’d strangle themselves, drunk on the smell of desperation; Hoar imaged he could smell it too.

“There she is. There she is!” Crater was craning to see over the crowds, hand fluttering against Hoar’s chest to get his attention like a sparrow with its leg caught in a briar. If Crater had to bounce on the balls of his feet to see the Vaicour girl, then there was not point in Hoar trying. Crater’s eyes flicked to his friend. For once, he’d eschewed his rifle. Hoar suspected his mother may have had to tie him down and pry it off him with a shim and a tub of bear grease, some of which was used to slick his hair down later.

Hoar only had eyes for the wolf chained to the pole driven a meter into the bare earth of the town square. It was an iron chain, of course, that cut into the neck of the beast which was shifting from bloody foot to bloody foot. They’d cut its hamstrings last night, and bound its muzzle inside a wire cage. No one wanted the hunting dogs to be injured. That wouldn’t be fair.

“Well go say something to her. Go on,” Gili prodded Crater in the back.

He turned, uncharacteristically uncertain. “Do you really think I should?”

“Yes, you fool, before someone else beats you too it.” Crater still wavered so Gili rolled her eyes and prodded, “I heard Parseek likes black skin.”

In a second, Crater’s spine was as straight as a rifle barrel and he waded into the gaily colored crowd with determination.

“That was easy,” smirked Gili as she slid into the gap left by Crater. Hoar glanced at her, then returned his attention to the wolf. The troupers moved onto their second to last song. It wouldn’t be long now. “What’s wrong with you? You look like someone died. I mean you always look like that, but this time it looks like it was really horrible.”

“I’m fine,” he muttered. Little red faced Anker, struck the first chords of “Fair Frost Bridesmaid” Gorgem lifted her steel over whetstone husky voice.

If Hoar had been watching, he would have witnessed the effort it took Gili to catch and wrestle into submission her automatic, sarcastic retort. “The Trader’s leaving for the delta tomorrow. Crater’s going with him.” Hoar nodded. Crater had said his goodbyes already. “Obviously,” continued Gili. “The Trader said he knows a veever looking for apprentices.”

“That’s a big opportunity,” Hoar said, noncommittally.

“Obviously. Yes. I was thinking I might go too. I still haven’t decided.”

“What’s holding you back?” Hoar asked. The pink flecks about the wolf’s muzzle where they’d torn out its teeth was the same color as Roa’s handkerchief on bad days.

“Nothing. Just…” Gili took a deep breath, and said quietly “I never thanked you, by the way. For what you did last week.”

Hoar nodded distractedly still not taking his eyes off the wolf, “It was nothing,”

Irritation tugged at the corners of her mouth but she tried again, still keeping her tone soft,“I mean I know you got in trouble and Parseek’s can be a real bastard and you didn’t have to and I appreciate what you did for me.”

“I shouldn’t have hit him,” Hoar said and felt the void that had been frozen inside him flex. He looked away, and tried to lose himself in Gorgem’s song.

“Hey, look at me.” Hoar glanced in her direction, then slid back down to the ground. “Look at me. Parseek’s a big, bullying bastard and you laid him out like he deserved.”

“He knew the truth about me,”

“Parseek doesn’t know the truth of his own asshole,” barked Gili, her unusually patient tone wearing thin.

“He was right about what I am,” Hoar mumbled to his feet.

“And what exactly is that?” Gili said, planting herself in front of Hoar so close that they were almost touching. Hoar suddenly realized that Gili was wearing a new dress with an exceptionally low cut bodice and began to color. His propriety warred with his aversion to eye contact and his propriety won. Gili’s green eyes flashed. “What? A vendigore? Was that what you were so brilliantly failing to say? Are you out of your mind?” Hoar tried to step back but Gili followed along sticking to him like wasps after a bear. “You think Parseek’s right and your some kind of monster? You are the thickest man I know and that’s including Crater. I come with you to the harvest festival, spend all day cheering your gloomy ass up, can’t you see that I’m trying to tell you thank you?” Hoar didn’t catch her last second, hummingbird’s heartbeat transition to “thank you.”

“I’m sorry,” Hoar stuttered, taking another step back. This time, Gili allowed him to but some distance between them. She was looking up at him, the last chorus of “Fair Frost Bridesmaid leaping from person to person in the drunken crowd. Her face was flushed and her eyes searching his for something. Whatever it was, she didn’t find it. “A human wouldn’t have hit him,” Hoar said, and the hollow inside him groaned under the strain.

This was not the answer she was looking for. “Then thank God you’re an Azil because someone needed to hit him and if lying about saying your sorry is what humans do then I’m glad you’re a monster.”

The crowd roared their approval as the song died away and the kennel masters led their hounds into the field, toward the waiting wolf. Whatever structure inside him held back the black floodwaters broke, the tide punching through the hollowed out wall where Gili’s words had struck like hammer blows. He turned his back and against the surge of people crowding toward the post plunged into the earth at the heart of the village, he did not feel her hand grab for his, nor over the drunken revelry an the mad, joyous, baying of the hounds did he hear her shout, “I didn’t mean it like that. Hoar, Hoar! I’m sorry!”

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He found Gili leaning against the temporary fence as if she could force it into the ground, suffocating it in barren, stony earth. Given the black mood that hung about her, it was not a surprise that she was an island amid the swell of people. Those around her instinctively headed for safer, preferably beerier waters, despite her provocative dress and the seemingly inviting empty spaces to either side. Crater slammed into one heavily, rocking the fencing angrily with his weight. Gili didn’t bother to look up, her bloody attention was fixed on the fight. One of the three hounds, a big, grey mastiff that looked to weigh almost as much as the wolf, had its bloody jaws interlocked with the wolves. A smaller hound hung off the wolf’s leg, dragging it inexorably down to the red flecked ground where it would die.

“Girls,” snarled Crater. “She looked like she wanted to puke the entire time I was talking, pleasant as you like- I even asked her if she wanted to see the wolf baiting up close and do you know what she did?” Gili grunted something which might have been a question and Crater barreled on. “She ran off! Just like that!” Gili’s lip curled in sympathy. The third and smallest dog hit the ground in a spray of red. Whimpering it tried to get to its three good legs and collapsed in the dust. Its owner ran forward bellowing oaths to scoop it up, away from the wolf which was snapping at the warry grey mastiff. Another hound, Parseek’s great shaggy white creature half as tall as Gili, bounded forward to cheers from the onlookers.

“Just like that,” echoed Gili, savagely. Crater grunted something which might have been affirmation. Parseek’s beast hit the wolf in the side, bowling it over. The other dogs leapt in, and the wolf wailed a long, terrible, howl. The kennel masters released the remaining dogs which charged in tripping over one another in their eagerness. They couldn’t see the wolf now, only the shunting, thrusting backs of the dogs bearing over it like piglets at a sows teats. They could hear it however. It didn’t sound remotely like the wolf it had been, giving its last, terrified breaths in a high keening scream that was suddenly cut off. The white hound’s nose came up red and the crowd roared. Revulsion hit Gili, coming out of nowhere, like a red fletching feathering her chest. “Goddamn it, I’m going to find him,” she said, and turned away from the sport.

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Behind the store Crater’s family ran, Hoar cradled the svelsa. He’d closed his eyes as if by doing so he could shut out all sound and be alone with his grandfather’s tune winding through his head and hands echoing back from the hearth so many years ago. He wished he’d listened to his grandmother and stayed away. His frown deepened at his stupidity. The chance to be part of the crowd, to be just one cell in the living, breathing mass of people had been to enticing. And Gili had almost begged him to come, so she wouldn’t have to be alone with Crater. So that was what she thought of him. He should have known, he thought. The signs were all there. If that was what Gili, one of his closest friends thought, then the rest of the villagers must think even worse of him. He should never have come. Like an old soldier putting down his musket for the last time, Hoar stopped playing.

“Please don’t stop.” He almost jumped out of his skin. There was a girl standing a bare three paces away from him and he hadn’t heard her approach which itself was a wonder. She was slim, almost waifish, with the darkest skin Hoar had ever seen. It was almost the color of Rand’s syrup, the kind made just after a thaw when the sap is rushing and all the world is melting. She was tall, willowy and lovely as an aurora. “You’re beautiful,” she said in a thick Vaicouric accent, a small smile emerging like a tentative sunrise. Hoar found to his horror that he was blushing, and so was the girl. She raised her hand to her lips, as if she could take back the words. “Lithag,” she swore in a decidedly unlady like manner, “Playing. Your playing is beautiful.” Hoar wondered how long she’d been speaking Golemel.

“It’s all right,” Hoar said, feeling something unfamiliar tugging at the corners of his lips. No wonder she thought the song was beautiful, she couldn’t understand the words. He’d thought it was beautiful once too. “Who are you?”

“Saskia. Who are you?”

“Hoar,” he said, wishing he wasn’t. Then he wished he knew what to say. Crater was always better in situations like these, he was quick and witty and people liked him. “What are you doing back here?” Hoar asked, and cringed when Saskia’s face darkened.

“I don’t like lots of people,” she said, waving halfheartedly behind her. A long, terrible howl split the cool evening air and both Hoar and Saskai flinched as if it were their throats being torn. Hoar could only nod, not trusting himself to speak. He thought that if he opened his mouth, he might cough up blood rather than intelligent conversation. To his surprise, the girl looked on the verge of tears, or of being sick. Her delicate hands clenched so tightly on the folds of her clothing every time the wolf cried he was afraid the bones might burst free from their tendons and break through their jacket of skin. Hoar could think of only one thing to do. He played the opening notes of “Fair Frost Bridesmaid,” and sang. He did not play it as Gorgem had, bright and loud enough for every man and woman in Hrult to hear and sing along, but slowly, hauntingly; the requiem of a life’s line he could hold onto even in the storm tossed sea of uncaring sound that buffeted and battered him. Saskia crossed the three steps that separated them and sat with him, holding the vigil with him clinging tight to the melody that could not be drowned out, no matter how the village roared.

There was a man from across the sea,

come to keep the vow he’d made

“The muse of ice will be mine,” swore he,

“I’ll catch me a frost bridesmaid”

He scoured the crags but o’re every hill

Heard naught but the wind’s sad tune.

Till at last he rested beside a rill

Beneath the harvest moon.

He sat and brewed for a very long time,

Till heaven let loose with snow

And on the wind rode a song like rime

Heralding a lovely doe

She shed to the bank her snow white skin,

Laid her hart by the mountain stream,

And revealed the beautiful girl within

Beyond his wildest dream

She sang, as she bathed, a lilting tune

That near tore his soul apart

So the hunter leapt forth, ‘neath a waning moon

And stole the silken hart

She wept, she raged, she beat at his breast

But the man had iron will

“To tame a frost bride is my test”

“I’m the master of your soul.”

FINISH SONG

The boy who hoarded words as if each cost the Azil price and the girl who knew precious few words in this foreign, violent tongue and shared even fewer sat together as night sky filled up with stars and Hoar’s voice carried them far away. He was glad she didn’t understand the words. They were awful words, and lies. But Hoar’s grandfather had once told him If you get your head right, you can see the truth the lies were cut and crafted from, and Hoar always listened to people’s lies. This was a lie of love and life, over the truth of power and death. A creature so fragile all it took was the heat of a man’s breath to melt her away. He let his strings fall silent and looked with solemn hazel at the Vaircour girl so far from home. She was looking back at him, the pained expression thawed away revealing stunning, brown eyes flecked with copper, like starlight. Wordlessly, she reached out and touched his chest with three fingers and thumb. “Beautiful,” she said.

“Hoar? Is that you? I thought I’d heard your playing.” Gili rounded the corner of the storefront and saw the two standing side by side. Saskia whipped her hand away to cover her mouth. Hoar drew the svelsa close and made to push himself to his feet. “Oh, don’t let me interrupt you,” Gili said, color rising.

“You’re not interrupting anything,” Hoar said, fervently wishing that Gili had waited just a minute longer before interjecting herself into his life once more.

“Crater and I are leaving at first light with the Trader tomorrow. I just thought you’d like to know. Crater will want to say goodbye.”

“That’s good. You’ve always wanted to become a veever,” he said, stonily. He rose, and gave half nods to Gili and Saskia. Then, he left. Gili turned to Saskia, switching to Vaicouic and raising a smile like brigands hoisting the Angel’s flag as they crept just close enough to a merchant vessel.

“You’re new to Hrult, I hear. Why don’t I guide you, show you how things are done around here?”

“Thank you,” Saskia said, palpably relieved at the sound of her own language.

“Maybe you don’t have Vendigore down on the delta, but the boy you just met, he was one. It’s best to avoid them.”

“What is a Vendigoe?” asked Saskia, looking politely confused.

“Azil? Ursar? It’s called a Sleepless in Vaicouric, obviously.”

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Two aging men, both fatter than they had been twenty years ago, sat in the middle of the store, drinking and attempted to conceal satisfied smiles at the dreams of profit. Neither succeeded, but they were gracious enough not to let on to the other that they both knew. One was the store keep, who longed to be a warrior in an era that was no longer, if it had ever existed, and the other was a traveling Trader, who, at the age of forty four, longed to be a sessile Trader. But the Trader still walked his arthritic bones up and down the Golemel and the store keep was content to dream. Not that his dreams didn’t wend their way into the waking world.

His store was clean, orderly, eager to dash the malicious hopes of a drill sergeant on the prowl for dirt or dust. 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 the shop owner’s license could purchase and a few that, strictly, it couldn’t. Those weren’t on display. The shop keeper would have had to possess a Veever’s license, or at least an alchemist’s, to purchase those compounds. He knew that Lina did buy those very same items from the Trader, once they were done haggling, but her drugs were for medicinal purposes and those that he pedaled to those townsfolk who liked their comforts, weren’t. It wasn’t as if anyone got hurt, the boys and girls down in the chemical plants knew what they were doing, and a few coins passing from purse to purse in an immaculately kept storefront was surely clean and wholesome.

But that was for closing negotiations. Now was far more mundane and profitable exchanges. On the store keep’s side, “The finest products the Golemel have to offer, surpassed by none,” and unloaded from the Trader’s carts, “Only the highest quality items from the mills and plants of the delta, hand crafted just for you.” Both were lying, but only a little. That was commerce. A drift of furs, big enough to be a hibernating snow bear would be making the ride down the mountain with the Trader while the crates stamped with the seal of Kirch, Arenholm and \_\_\_\_\_\_ would be remaining in the shop. A few were open, revealing rice straw, steel hoe heads and dark glass bottles.

The shop keep rolled the second, squat barrel sealed airtight with tar into prominent view. The Trader pressed the lid back down on a tin of rich, white grease, still running his tongue over rendered fat coated lips appreciatively.

“You will ruin me, Crater my friend, you will ruin me. How will I buy Hrullt gold now? I’ll 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 barrels 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 made a note to let the hunters know that bear would fetch a good price this year, 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 unctuous summer syrup. 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. 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,” he whispered reverentially and the Trader nodded with the self satisfied expression of one who had already made the sale.

“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 snap. 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 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 back to another summer’s day, so many years ago.

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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, 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 against his shoulder he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed, 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. Hoar had always pointedly ignored his rifle. Perhaps it was jealously, or perhaps he preferred his bow 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 little Irina had arrived under the elder tree where the recruiters were collecting every brave man and woman Hrullt could spare and many they couldn’t. Before the man could intervene, Crater had taken the mayor’s son by the arm and led him far from the tree planted by his ancestor. He made the first of that night’s promises then, “You do not interfere with Irina. Do you hear me? If you so much whisper to the sergeants, I’ll make you regret it the rest of your life.”

“I’d never dream of getting between you and your little vendigores. Cross my heart.”

Not knowing what else to do, Crater had stomped off. By all account, he’d won that encounter, but throughout, Parseek’s infuriating smirk never flickered. But he’d gotten what he wanted, what was best for everyone, hadn’t he? Irina had a chance, in the royal army, away from the taint of Azil and where 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 her father. The first promise had been easy to make, and easier to keep. The second- 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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“Ah, Trader, I’d heard you’d arrived.” It was Parseek, summoned no doubt by the eprouvette’s shots. He was smiling, but it was strained and 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. Only parts of that poor woman had made it back from the war. 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?” Somehow, his Mayor’s title had escaped him, but Hoar was sure to smile as he imagined a Vaicour gentleman might smile when his rival entered the ballroom. 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 Hrullt’s mayoral house and the shop 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 ignored Crater as though he were a somewhat ugly piece of furniture that, as a guest, he was too polite to mention. He addressed the Trader. “When will you be done, here?

The Trader, sweating despite the cool, took refuge in Vaicour manners. “Mayor Parseek, my business here is almost done. I trust you will still be available to discuss the price of gold?”

“I may be available. I am a busy man,” the mayor said, as chilly as a mountain stream that had been cheeked by an uppity fish.

Parseek,” Crater growled at the same pitch a dog growled just before it leapt.

“Friends, if you need to discuss things-”

Parseek silenced him with a glance and turned back to face his host. He noted the rising color and the vein pulsing in Crater’s forehead with apparent detachment. “I am speaking with this fine gentleman right now. Go back to whatever dreadfully important things you were doing.”

“You will tell me where you got that.”

“Corporal, do not order a superior officer. I will deal with you later,” Parseek snapped. Crater recoiled, as though his rifle had unexpectedly gone off. Parseek ignored this, focusing his attention on the Trader, “You will tell me your news as well, I am very interested in the affairs of the delta.”

News in a town like Hrullt was like the honey comb gum the Trader, and vicariously Crater, pedaled. It was chewed over and over until it was nothing but tasteless white wax clogging the gaps where teeth had been. Crater imagined his sergeant’s teeth scattering across his store’s floor like carnivorous hail. He turned scooped up a box of papers and went back to the dreadfully important things he had been doing.

“I was hoping you would have news for me. Has your Link received any far cry messages about Ravnasill?”

“We do not permit a Link here,” Parseek said icily, “Why.”

“Oh, nothing really,” the Trader said. He remembered the small, two story brick building he’d seen in Arenholm last season with the “For Lease,” sign, hanging in the window. He might have been there now, if not for the lure of rising fur prices in the delta and the dream of one last payoff and buying outright. “Nothing at all. It was fine when I passed through a week ago, but a day’s journey up the mountain something woke me and the poor donkeys. I couldn’t get a clear view, but there was a red glow bellow. I’d wondered if there’d been a fire. It’s all thatch and fieldstone down there.”

“You’re the only outsider we’ve had in a month. If there had been a fire, I’m sure the military is already there, setting things straight.”

Parseek was likely right, though Crater would never have admitted it. The Peace Core had garrisons in every major city, and roaming patrols for the protection of the people. After the reconstruction, most patrols had skilled builders as well as soldiers. He might have gone back down there, but he would have been homesick for his mountains sitting around on his helmet, doing nothing more exciting that clearing rubble and overseeing the laying of roads. If there was another war, things would be different. He longed for the thrill of it, the challenge, the fight. Here, at peace, he’d have to make do.

“I’m sure you’ll make a tidy little profit off them the next time you come through,” Parseek said but was cut off when a blast like a small cannon went off. The result was instantaneous, Parseek dropped into a half crouch, heavy cane whistling up, poised to bayonet the threat. His head swung about wildly, neck so tense a muscle might have snapped, eyes searching. And found Crater, calmly loading another carefully measured shot into the eprouvette.

“What in the seven angel’s names are you doing.”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry, just checking the quality of the gun powder. It’s my dreadfully important business see, can’t have shoddy powder. I would have warned you, but didn’t want to disturb whatever dreadfully important business you were up to in my shop. Please carry on.”

He pointed the eprouvette at the ceiling and fired again, watching in satisfaction the mayor jump. Parseek forced himself to lower the cane. He gave Crater a look that should have boiled him inside his skin.

“We will continue this conversation in a quieter local,” he said to the Trader, and made for the door, limping along stiffly as though her were crude, windup soldier.

“Going so soon? Please, stay,” Crater said, firing the eprouvette again.

When the smoke cleared, Parseek was gone. Crater managed to hold it together for three full seconds and then burst out with hacking coughs from the inhalation.

“Fine gun powder you have,” he said to the Trader, carefully placing the testing device back into its case. He stopped, running his fingers over the mole skin interior.

“Spike me,” he cursed, the spoke to the Trader who was wistfully thinking of lath and plaster and bricks he could call his own. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have to close up the shop. You’ll be back to finish up our business?”

The Trader seemed surprised, “I thought we would be finishing things up now? Something amiss?”

“I hope not. I have to pay a visit to an old friend.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad?” the Trader said bemusedly, trying to get his samples together.

“If I come back with an arrow between my eyes, the store is yours my friend.” The Trader laughed an ingratiating, merchandise moving laugh. Then he saw the expression on Crater’s face.

“You’re serious?” He looked about the store, imagining for the first time settling down here.

But Crater wasn’t done. “And when you sell to Parseek, make sure to spike the bastard.”

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The cabin was just as it had been when he’d last seen it. Every month or so, his constitutional happened to take him up the winding path that ran parallel to the house he had called home, even if it was only for a short while. Hoar didn’t know, of course. On clear days, he could see the whole valley stretched out beneath him, what was now Hoar’s cabin included. No smoke rose from the chimney. That wasn’t a good sign. He remembered wriggling up the chimney as a dare. Roa had nearly skinned him for that, there had been little soot prints everywhere. Hoar had helped him scrub them off. If Parseek had done anything to him neither his rank, nor station, not even God, would save him. Crater shifted the rifle for easier draw and descended to his old friend’s home dreading finding an empty house, or a full one.

“Hoar! Are you there? It’s me.” Crater stopped, one foot on the stoop. The stomach churning stench of chemical disinfectant covering charnel like a body bag hiding the pieces they could find. The edge was taken off, but it was still, horrifyingly recognizable. If that wasn’t enough to send him back down the road to Hrullt, the sound that had stopped him again, a sickening organic intake of air. Images of little Anker’s final, gurgling breaths, his chest riddled with hot metal that could have hit any one of them came down like a hammer blow. Crater’s sweaty hand slowly released his rifle, letting it slide back into its resting position. He didn’t remember reaching for it. The horrible sound came again, bubbling. Should he run for Lina? No. What if she didn’t come. What if she did and it was too late and he had left his comrade to die alone. Crater straightened his clothing and, trying to block out the wet breath, opened the door.

Inside there was no Hoar, crumpled and broken on the floor, but there was a figure, too thin to be the woodsman and half mummified in bandages and bound down with crude leather straps. Veever’s work, Crater didn’t doubt. But then, the straps, the surgery the woman, nothing made sense. He stood stupidly, knob in hand, until she, and it was definitely a she, made the sucking, gurgle again. He shivered, feeling the sound crawl over him like worms delighting in a new feast, but stepped in regardless. The problem was obvious. Without her hands, she couldn’t wipe the spittle and pus soaked bandage that had slipped half over her mouth and nose away.

Crater took another step toward the prone woman, and his brain finally processed the narrow patch of face that was visible beneath the bandages. She was Vaicour, she was staring at him, and she was very, very beautiful. He laid a hand against her brow, she was burning up in blatant defiance of the chilly room.

“Let me help,” Crater said to her softly, in a language she would understand. Carefully, he pulled the drenched gauze away and she breathed in gratefully.

“Help. Me.” She begged with her uncovered eye. “They’re coming, they’re coming to take me away.”

Medical knowledge that people should be free to breath exhausted, Crater didn’t know what to do. He looked about for orders, but was faced with the empty room of a man who lived life cut to the bone. Crater didn’t know what to say so he blurted out the first thing he could think of. “You’ll be fine. Everything will be fine.” Should he run and get Lina? She would know what to do. But she must have been here already. Why had she left?

“Arden ath venduri shiana.”

“Slowly, my Vaicouric is not good,” Crater said, trying to parse the sudden barrage of words.

“You don’t look Vaicouric,”

“You’re in the Golemel. The,” he paused, trying to remember the word for mountain. He settled on emphatically pointed hand gestures. “Not the delta?” Crater immediately regretted his words. Why did they always look like they were about to cry when he talked to them.

“Not the delta?” the woman croaked.

Crater heard the click and snap of the cabin door shutting. He hadn’t heard anyone approach. He’d only ever met two men from Hrullt who could move that quietly and one was decades dead, his only ghost his teachings stalking prey through the static winter woods. A hundred choices ran before Crater’s eyes, branching off into infinite, inscrutable futures. “I couldn’t reach her- I didn’t mean to hurt- It was Lina’s plan, I swear,” All jumbled in his tongue.

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Tall, gangling, impeccably dressed; Crater was just as he had been when Hoar had last spied him, casually walking the old logging trail to the east. He came by every month or so, always keeping to what he thought were concealing shadows and brush, but even as children, Crater had been miserable at subtlety. Hoar had never had the heart to tell his perfumes would be scented by game a kilometer away, let alone the racket he raised by simply walking.

Contrary to what the villagers might believe, Azil could still get tired. Hoar’s bones ached, his hands were raw from the handle of shovel and axe, and it felt as though he had eaten a heavy stone. Seeing Crater, uninvited and unwelcome should have been a knife slashing his heart’s strings, but now that he was here looking so nervous that he might drop his rifle, Hoar just couldn’t muster the energy. He carried his load of firewood to the hearth and began. Through the fog of exhaustion, he dumbly took in the cold coals.

“I’m sorry.” Crater was standing there his face red and fists balled as though he were ready to hit something. Hoar didn’t get up from where he was kneeling, coaxing the tinder to life.

“It’s the past,” he said, frowning at the tinder.

“But I- we…”

“Can’t do anything to change the past,”

Behind him, Crater was silent. Hoar considered throwing the man from his house, slamming the door and retreating into his isolation.

“Get the kettle down, I’ll put on some tea.”

As Crater was rummaging through the lone cabinet for the kettle, the Azil on the bed let out a sound like wet canvas caught in a gust of wind. By the time the kettle hit the ground, Hoar was already on his feet and moving towards the Azil.

As he was pinning the offending bandage out of the way, he heard Crater step up behind him. “Hoar. I know it’s not my business but, who is she?”

“I don’t know,”

“You don’t know?”

“Going deaf?”

“Hoar, I’m serious. It looks like she was dragged out of hell.”

“Frostbite. Found her four days ago.”

“You found her? What, lying on the side of the road?”

“She was a day’s travel from any road, and only a fool would be out that close to the first snowfall.”

“What were you doing out there then?” Hoar grunted but didn’t reply. After a moment, Crater asked, “Why?”

“They keep her from scratching. She was on powerful drugs, no telling what they’d make her do.”

“Right, good idea. I meant why did you bring her back, here?”

“She can’t stay in the village.”

“Why?”

“She is Azil,”

Crater let out a long, slow whistle.

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