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. The first chords of “Fair Frost Bridesmaid” were struck and 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!”

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 with 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.

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 tongue.

“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, clearly.”

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e music was

, but steady, like a

the cloth of her dress so violently it was a wonder it hadn’t torn.

“I don’t like them either,” Hoar said softly, retreating into his frown. Saskia took three steps forward and sat down next to him, folding her skirts beneath her. Hoar froze, unsure of what to do or say. The girl stared hard at the ground, looking as if she were about to be sick.

So he did what he always did. He played the svelsa. He played “Fair Frost Bridesmaid,”

Saskia seemed equally at a loss. After a few painful moments looking desperately around for something to talk about, she said “The night here is beautiful,” Hoar nodded. “How do you say sathvari? The little lights,” she gestured skyward, trailing off.

“Stars. They’re called stars.”

“Stars,” Saskia said. She rolled the guttural sounds around her mouth and Hoar thought fleetingly how ugly his own language was, and how beautiful hers. “I have never seen many stars. We do not have them at home.”

This shock rattled Hoar out of his customary scowl. “You don’t have stars?”

“Not so many.”

“Once when I was… when my family went from the city I saw stars. Our nights are black.”

Set on harvest festival day. The crowds have all come out to sing, and drink and feast. A wolf is tied up in the square, its paws and nose bloody from the tooth pulling and claw. Large, lean wolf like dogs are waiting nearby. Crater goes to try and court Saskia, makes an ass of himself, gets too interested in the wolf fight. Hoar leaves, he doesn’t want to see the wolf fight. Saskia leaves too. He’s the only one who doesn’t want to watch the wolf fight and he’s playing his Svelsa to drown out the yelping. Start talking, becomes obvious she likes him. Before the scene climaxes with a kiss, Gili intervenes. She talks about how Hoar is an Azil, Backfires. Hoar and Saskia go off together.