There was a flash and a crack. Not the greedy crack of ice giving way beneath a 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 Sten’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, 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 bought them from the Trader up from Vanholm three years ago. For six fox pelts, the trader had thrown in new steel clasps for his cloak.

The weight of the carcass strapped to his back followed an instant later, forcing his remaining breath out as he skidded forward in the snow, his head and shoulders the barb of the anchor that dragged him to a halt. When the world came back into stinging white focus, Sten heaved the deer off to one side with a gasping, joint popping effort. Lined doeskin gloves fumbled at the straps of the harness that cut into his chest. After what seemed like an eternity the buckle to give, six for two winter hares at the azil price, and the weight slid off. Sten sucked in a long breath and flopped onto his back. He lay still, in the warm embrace of his cloak, waiting for the terrible ache in his neck and the throb in the bones of the arm to lessen

The cloak was a wolf pelt, white as the wisps of cirrus hair that clung to Sten’s 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. Sten had stitched every wound he’d made in the pelt closed as if to let them heal. Three scorched sutures stuck out, the hair seared away around the pucker of cord. The day of their making was still burned in his memory as if decades were days. The brands had not killed the wolf, but they had driven it to snap with bloody gums. Sten’s killing steel head had left no mark, only a hollow where the right eye had glared at him with hate and desperation and hunger.

Sten’s stomach growled. 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. He had been foolish. He’d only needed six, and he wished he had bought extra rice from Arenholm.

The pain lessened, or maybe it was just the cold numbing 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.

Sten 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.

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. It had been a good shot, and she’d crumpled where the arrow pierced her, too little flesh to armor her chest. 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 five 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. Like Sten it was battered, with a slightly crooked neck and two frets needed to be held firm with wire. Still, it was a svelsa and it was beautiful. Not as beautiful as the one his grandfather had played ten 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 Stens frown from a rut to a chasm that could not be crossed. That instrument had been lain to rest with its master, as it should with its master. Sten had washed his hands of it and sworn a wordless oath never to play again. But when he’d seen the little svelsa 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 Sten, 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 thing dragging around his neck. More often than not, crossing the threshold with a new string or a pinky vial of linseed oil and amber resin to be 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 sung for him and the thousand his grandfather had. He’d play them all, as he had for his wife and daughter and countless Azil births and deaths, celebrations and mornings. 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 sell it at the next opportunity. It’d be gone, and Sten would be free. What he would have given to have it with him now.

With a steady speed emblematic of his life, he dug around in his bags for the spindle of twine. Two hung on the chest of the harness with another two flaring to the sides to distribute the weight. 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 if 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 it cooled and the pin jammed. It wasn’t pretty, but it would hold. A feeling of triumph in his heart, Sten 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.

Sten 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. Sten 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. Sten 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. Sten 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. Sten 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. Sten’s frown deepened and he took a measured scan of the surrounding trees.

Satisfied that no one lurked in the trees above him, Sten 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 Sten’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. Sten 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 Sten’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 Sten with a hunger he did not know. Her hand, too cold to shake, pricked through the fur and cloth and found his stomach. Sten 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. Sten 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. Sten 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 Sten 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 Sten 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. Sten 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, Sten 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 Stenfrost of salt and iron and he had no way to dry her. Sten 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 Sten 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 Sten 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. Sten undid his harness, and let her slide to the ground along with the bearskin. Sten 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. Sten wondered what the goat woman would think if she knew what he’d done and what he was going to do.

The woman watched Sten 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. Sten’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 Sten’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 Sten 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, Sten didn’t look back.