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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Name it,”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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