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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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