The carpenter stopped in the lane, swaying off beat to the rustling of trees. His companion, the man who everyone knew as that lad from over Gerschwin way, paused to look back, the drink and the cold combining to make a nose so brightly red it might well attract insect.

“S’matter?” he slurred. The carpenter peered with drunken intensity at a split tree off the side of the road.

“I thought I saw something.”

“Ha. Probably Parseek’s syrup Azil, creeping about. Always, creeping they are.”

“You there, you some creeping Azil?” exploded the carpenter. He brandished his staff at the tree. As if in answer there was a crack and a branch as thick as the Gerschwin lad’s arm landed on the lane. The carpenter leapt back, swearing and landed on his rump. His drinking mate burst out laughing. When he could finally draw breath, the carpenter thrashing in the dirt like a beetle flipped on its back, he said “Spike me, you’re drunk.”

“You’re drunk,” shot back the carpenter, finally managing to lever himself upright with the help of his cane. The two went off together back towards town arguing over which had imbibed more and which could hold it better. When they were gone, a shadow slipped down from the tree with a popping of joints. If there had been anyone around, they might have caught a moonlit face that was almost smiling. They certainly would have heard the soft, melodious humming of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Hoar patted his pocket and heard the reassuring crinkle of the butcher paper wrapped gift. It was turning out to be a good night indeed, and would only get better.

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Ulma’s home was on the outskirts of Hrult, a rifle shot’s gap between her one story house and the