**Summer**

Metaphor for hunger and emptiness of the soul

When the wolves and the winter winds howl as one

And night has eclipsed the sun,

When snows bury hovels and the tops of the trees

And the blood of lost men freeze,

The story lives on the tongues of the Golemell, passing down the generations with hazel eyes, square faces and stocky limbs. It is a story for the heart of winter, when winter has stretched her gown of snow and ice across the world as far as can be see from the peaks on a blue, broken crystal day. It is a story not for clear days, but howling nights when the fire’s breath and the bulwark of fur wedded companions is the only thing keeping the whispering winds sucking mouth at bay. For on nights like that, somewhere in the Golemell Spine, an old trapper or widow, without friend or family, is watching their fire die. When the driving snow has pummeled the earth for days with velvet fists and the drifts are taller than a man’s chest, when their bellies are so empty that they chew woodchips just to stave off the emptiness for one more minute, when the wolves are scratching on the doors and window, too

when the snow’s drifting higher than a tall man’s chest,

Vendigore.

ick, short limbs. , vendigore

**Fall**

“Our best guess, they’ve fled into the Golemel spine. The last cartographer out of there died 50 years ago and I’d swear he made half the rivers and valley up just to fill space.”

“Then they’re dead,” his voice was matter of calm, and smooth like a sheet of oil.

“Oh?”

“She was pretending to be some spinster in the delta and he was what, the local constable? Delta winters are toothless and slow.”

“There are villages up north. Perhaps they will find aid, or steal.”

“They will avoid people, Azil have few friends and the Golemel are a supertitous, brutish lot. and winter drops swiftly. . Though his Vaicour was almost perfect, it still retained a hint of some foreign, elusive accent.

“You’ve been there before?”

“I… knew a man who came from there,” He gave a predatory grin, all white and with pink gums as though they were display pieces that had never encountered the taint of food.

Hoar stopped. Tectonic muscles pushed an earthquake of lines across his face which subducted his brow, forcing wrinkles up like the steep mountain range he was climbing. Like the mountains, his face was wind scarred and peaked with a snow top of wispy hair. Buried in his snowy beard, his frown deepened. Hoar’s lips didn’t remember any other shape. He pivoted on the bone oblongs strung with gut that kept his heavy, fur lined boots from sinking into the rising snow. His boots were new. He’d haggled them out of a trader up from the big city three years ago, and they’d finally broken into the cozy, supple shape that was just right. Six fox pelts, and the trader had thrown in new steel clasps for his cloak. He surveyed the snowdrift, nearly thirty paces cross slope and formed on the leeward side of the tree. The cloak was a great, white bear pelt, with a steel clasp, forged in a three braided knot. There were only two holes in the fur, neatly sewn closed again. If the bear had been wearing it still, the holes would line up on either side of the shaggy creature’s neck.

Last summer, when the passes were open, he’d given the trader the teeth and a jar of the grease for new bow strings and twelve sharp steel heads. He unslung his bow, grunting slightly as the weight on his back shifted. He had been foolish. He’d only needed six, and he’d thought the fall would be plentiful.

But seven out of ten traps were barren this season and hunting hadn’t fared much better. He’d been out three day’s longer than he’d meant, and the deer in the herd had been skinny on the lack of autumn bounty. Not as skinny as the wolves, which by midwinter would be little more than hunger held together by bones and skin. He knocked an arrow, thick doeskin gloves black against the red arrow fletching. The pot of dye, and a skin of summer brandy from the big city, was had for a scrimshaw elk, 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. Hoar undid the strap that held the doe’s carcass to the harness on his back and she thudded to the ground. She hadn’t seen the false snow bear rise, nor did she hear the song of the bowstring, nor did she have time to feel the piercing arrow. But scrawny or not, she’d get him through the winter, if the wolves didn’t get him.

Velvet footsteps carried Hoar toward the drift. Snow drifts didn’t mound downwind of trees. Snow drifts didn’t have rime frosted legs with skin the color of the stained wood svelsa that haunted his home. The trader had called it a lute, but he was an outsider, and didn’t know any better. It was battered, with a slightly crooked neck like Hoar’s back, and two frets needed to be held firm with twine. But Hoar’s grandfather had owned one, and he’d passed it to his daughter, Hoar’s mother. It had disappeared with his father during Unification. It must have been madness to hand over a set of antlers, hardly mouse nibbled, eight pelts, six rabbit, two ermine, and a whole buck skin he’d tanned himself. He’d thought about trading it away for years, whenever things became thin. Every time the trader was in town, he brought the svelsa 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. But each time, he returned home with the cursed thing, more often than not with a new string or a pinky vial of linseed oil or amber resin and placed it in the solitary cupboard. He wouldn’t even look at the cupboard, 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 it out, reverently, and play the songs his mother and father and grandfather had taught him.

He stopped, a few paces 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 of the way, freezing just a little more. The calf that showed beneath the ragged, ripped pantleg was mottled brown and tinted blue. It was cracking with little hairs sticking out and accumulating frost like reeds poking through the surface of black ice out on the lake on the night of the first major freeze. Hoar lowered the bow. The pants didn’t look to be frozen but that didn’t lessen his frown. 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 young face, unseeing. 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. He could get something for it when the trader came back. Perhaps 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. Hoar paused in his efforts to clear away the snow. The torn pantleg, filleted like a deer carcass and bound tightly to his back was crusted with something blacker than the man’s skin. Hoar slipped a knife from his belt as fluidly as he breathed 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 has sapped everything of its warmth. The cut was neat, and nothing like that a wolf or bear might leave as a parting gift. Hoar’s frown deepened and he took a long minute to scan the surrounding trees. Nothing.

Hoar bent down again, and brushed more vigorously at the body dislodging small avalanches of snow. If the trader had been there, he might have paled at the idea of robbing the dead boy. Not even the shadow of such a thought darkened Hoar’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. Hoar bent down, and went as still as lake water the night that winter comes to call.

A knife, not for skinning, 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 with fingers 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, her face might be as cragged and lined as Hoar’s, what remained of it. The cold, and someone who wished her nothing good had taken more than half of it. She was as ill suitably dressed, and just as dark as the boy though many years his senior and she was desperately, despairingly cold. Her hand shook with chills, and Hoar knew she’d 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 stared into each other’s eyes for the time it takes a foot print to half disappear in the driving snow. Then, lips cracking she said.

“Ludranon ort ter vanethel?”

Hoar didn’t reply. He didn’t speak Vaicour. He just stood, hunched over like some a mother snow bear over a kill and waited. By the time a thin layer off snow had accumulated on the back of her hand, a decision passed behind the woman’s light brown eyes. Her arms and eyelids drooped.

“Ule rakratha,” she mumbled, and relinquished Hoar his life and hers in one precipitous decent into the deep snow unconsciousness.

Hoar looked at the dead boy with a frown, then at the dying woman, then back toward where he’d left the doe. 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 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.

**Winter**

Hoar made the journey in twenty seven hours, grizzled face locked in defiance of the cold and the frigid 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 to rest and to worry a few mouthfuls of smoked venison hard as granite and twice 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 he’d found the clothes on the front of her shirt crack like a sheet of ice after he put her down the first time. Her clothes were wet where his warmth had melted the pink tinged hoarfrost of salt and iron and he had no way to dry her. So he 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 Hoar had chewed for her. At first, she hadn’t understood, mangled swollen lips protesting as much as she could but he forced her mouth open anyway and sheathed his frown long enough to put cracked whiskery lips against hers. He made sure she swallowed, frowning fiercly at her. 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 snow crown just a flake too heavy and he’d hoist her back up, settling the harness more comfortably and continuing the trek watched only by the sightless sentinel trees. She didn’t shiver. 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 in the fresh snow left behind by the flurry. He’d frowned intensely, and the crags of wrinkles on his forehead had collided, then moved on, reseating the load on his harness with a grunt and a push. Occasionally, the woman would murmur into his ear in her vexing language which he ignored until she went silent, and let him walk in peace again. Every time he looked over his shoulder to see if she was dead and he could throw 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 Hoar, and frowned.

She was conscious when he got the woman back to his cabin, wedged between two outcroppings of rock like a piece of gristle between rotted molars. Inside, it the howls of the wind were muted and its teeth had been pulled. Hoar undid his harness, and let her slide to the ground along with the bearskin and he went to light a fire. Hoar returned shortly, a fire sputtering to 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 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 the first of several promised cords of wood. Ulma had even offered him a bowl of her millet gruel, which he’d been too proud to sensibly refuse. Hoar wondered what Ulma would think of what he’d done and what he was going to do and he frowned.

The woman watched Hoar 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 a patchwork of light skin, and dead, black skin. Every toe was black. He pinched one, and she didn’t cry out. Soon, they would poison her blood. Hoar’s frown went as dark as Glassnine valley, rimmed and shielded on all sides from the sun. But there were more immediate needs.

When Hoar’s rough hands began to undo the thick cloth band that held her summer weight pants she fought. Like a snake rearing to strike, her hand went to her hip but her fingers, black, almost talon like things where fingers had once been were clumsy as worms and she couldn’t grasp the knife that wasn’t a tool. He gripped her wrist with one powerful hand and undid her belt with his other. She clubbed him, feebly, across the face with a claw of a hand and went for the dagger. She was weak, and he easily snared both wrists in one large hand veined like old oak roots slithering across a stone. She tried to twist from under him but he drew her triangle of steel free and she stopped, like a doe hearing the creak of the hunter’s bow. There was fear in her eyes and Hoar’s reflection looking back at him. It was ugly, and frowning with the furry of a blizzard. He threw the dagger away for all the good it did and frowned deeper. She’d closed her eyes, her ruined face going blank and black and more broken then ever. He stripped her the rest of the way, out of her sodden clothes and hoisted her like a child. He carried her to the wolfskin rug by the fire and 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 dog. She had opened her eyes again, watching 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 Hoar didn’t even look at her. He opened the door, left her alone. Outside, the wind and the wolves howled as one.

CLASPS HOAR THE FIRE GOES OUT, CONSIDERS POSESSING HIM FOR A SECOND. THE FIRE GOES DEAD. DECIDES NOT TOO.

**Spring**

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 scowl at Lina Thumbdraught and her stick making their squelching way up the muddy path. Lina’s first worry lines were appearing by the time 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 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 Svelsa,” Lina said by way of greeting. Hoar nodded, face set in its usual frown and put his battered mallet down. He went inside and got her a chair that looked like it had been fashioned by a blind man with a pant seat of solid timber, by the number of splinters

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 gracefully 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 flowers. Enough split log boards lay out on runners to make a good start on a second cabin, and a growing stack of shingles piled up beside the woman who was called Svelsa. She didn’t seem surprised to see him, though it was hard to tell what was going through her mind as it so rarely showed up on what could kindly be called a face. The frost had taken its due. A nose, an ear, seven toes, four fingers and the tips of four more. A smile, 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 which she was carefully doing, from her seat on a stump. Eyes looking out from above cheeks that were more ragged edged craters than cheek watched him approach. She didn’t smile, though this didn’t mean anything as she had hardly more lip than a snake. Hoar knew she had trouble eating. He frowned, and beckoned for her to make her hobbling way back to the cabin.

The seat was empty, but Lina’s out bag perched innocently next to it on the narrow porch. Hoar scowled, and opened his door. The old woman was closing the cupboard 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 it didn’t matter. By now, Svelsa knew the routine. Lina sat her down and began her prodding examination. She took the woman’s mutilated hands and clucked satisfied at her handwork. She’d taken the gut out the last time she’d visited, and smiled in pleasure at how a job well stitched. Hoar had given Svelsa a half skin of brandy and then held her wrists while the Thumbdraught had cut the dead flesh back until she found live tissue. In spite of the drink, the once nameless woman had passed out when Lina’s razor found live nerves and with a pair of steel pliers to cut the bone, millimeter chips at a time. Hoar had only frowned, though Lina caught him rubbing his fingers absentmindedly when she was stitching the flaps of skin over. It wasn’t the first time Lina had amputated a limb. The frosts were bad up 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 woman caught by a bear and her cubs on the way home. 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 five were missing a hand or a leg. Crater had both arms, but they weren’t the one’s he’d been born with. He’d been made an officer on the spot in the royal army, and had led good Golemel boys and girls to glory and freedom marching down from their mountains singing songs of bravery and heorism. That had been early in the war, news trickled uphill and no one had heard that the enemy had deployed Ursars. Not one of the recruiters, beating their drums and decked out in brass and red remembered to tell the shining youths either. They weren’t accepting Azil then, or Hoar might had joined up right along with the others. Some might call him lucky, but only if they didn’t know him.

Now a woman showed 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 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 crawl back up the switchbacks, packaged up neatly by the army surgeons and sent home 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 cupboard. Hoar still heard exactly what she wasn’t saying. No one said anything 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. I heard tell Crater bought every kilo of grain the trader had, down to the last thumb. 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.” There was no reply, only the roil and hiss of the pot. Which in a way was good. It meant he might actually be thinking about it rather than.

Hoar got to his feet with a salvo of cracks like distant cannon fire and glowered in the direction of the two women. Lina looked back without balking. His eyes, buried in the tangle of wiry white brows flicked past Lina to the sacks of grain and to where a fifty-five kilo doe wasn’t hanging and then to something else behind the Thumbdraught. 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 and as though they heard the hunger to come, away in the steppes the wolves and the wind howled as one.

**Summer**

“No?”

“Perhaps next season, my friend. You have already cost me dearly on this trip and I cannot afford to lose on another deal,” The trader’s Vaicouric, dripped like smooth and unctuous summer honey. Crater wished his out Vaicouric was as fluid. The trader put the item back into its case and closed the lid. More likely there was a better market in the delta cities for furs and ivory and the man was keeping his steel and coin for better investments. For once, Crater didn’t mind. He liked owning it. It was the next best thing to Hoar being in his debt, and Crater’s fingers always tingled painfully when he saw those hazel glaring spitefully at him. Crater sighed.

Crater was tall for a Golemel, with long, lean arms that were so much more beautiful than the hairy things he’d used to have. He was almost glad he’d lost them in the war. It had been a good fight, and nobody could say he hadn’t been brave. He’d practically led the first charge during the battle of the Kulrathen, everyone knew it. They’d won. He’d won. Sure, there had been a price but he’d paid it gladly and would do it again in a heartbeat. He still kept his hair short and beard trim, in a military cut. He wore the same style of conservatively cut coat and pants as the Vaicour trader, with just a splash of color drawing the eye to the neckerchief amid the quiet whites and tans of the ensemble. The trader wore it better, of course. Crater couldn’t hope to match the elegance of a Vaicour merchant or gentleman, but he would at least make the effort.

“Well, perhaps I can tempt you with another glass?” the mouth of the skin wavered over the glass which he’d bought from the trader five years ago.

“Certainly, my friend,” he said brightly, leaning back in his chair and smiling. “Now perhaps a fellow business man might be interested in something special.” The trader accepted the glass graceful and pulled an elegant case out from the depths of one of his trunks. “A clever business man like you can recognize an opportunity when he sees one, I know. Look.” He opened the case with a flourish. Row upon row of finger vials sparkled like ice in a frozen waterfall. The trader selected one and proffered it to Crater who took it gingerly. “Go ahead my friend, open it.” Crater opened it and a scent of sweet amber blessed his nostrils. “Agarwood,” whispered the trader reverentially. “From across the Beryl sea.” Crater breathed again, deeply and the scent rose in his mind to the smell of money. There were plenty of young ladies in the village that one of the trader’s fingerdraught would make swoon and with spring in the air and the right words, the young suitors would pay handsomely for the prize. The smell tickled another thought. There’d been a rumor spreading door to door in Hrullt that a woodsman had found himself a Vaicour wife. The village was seemingly split on whether he hid her away because of her ugliness or her beauty. Some say he’d burned her face, and chopped off her fingers so she couldn’t strangle him at night. Some say she’d placed a spell on the old Azil to do her bidding. Crater hadn’t believe either of these fanciful tales, not from superstitious, backwards hill people clothed in furs and animal musk at first. Then, he’d heard the woodsman’s name and the memories of the night, a week after Crater and the rest of his squad’s return from triumphant and drunk on the Unification’s success, welled up in his mind like bile.

“I might be able to push these onto a few old crones pining for their youth, if I’m lucky. I’d have an easier time selling snow.” Crater said dismissively, passing the vial back. The trader shrugged in calculated carelessness. “You’re cutting your foot off to escape the root. If I wasn’t leaving tomorrow morning, I’d sell them myself and walk away a rich man. But perhaps you’ll see reason. Thirty a finger, and that’s thievery.”

They haggled, firing offers and insults back and forth like lead shot. When at last they’d agreed on a price, both cursing their misfortune to have met the other quite cheerfully, Crater poured them both another drink.

“So, my thieving trader, what news have you brought me from the delta?”

“So my clever Crater, what news of these icy forests have you?” The trader countered. Crater smiled, and held his breath for just a moment as he decided which version of the tale to tell.

“There is a story on the tongues of the Golemel. A beautiful, Vaicour maid appeared in the winter, stolen and disfigured by a trapper jealous that another man might see her.”

Perhaps in time, he would go to Hoar’s hut, while the man was away of course, and see if the rumors were true. Then, a finger of agarwood and a few sweet words might coax the maiden free.

**Fall**

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 winters and pitiful summers. 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 hard 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. He cradled her head and fed her thick mouthfuls of the 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. She’d soon by joining the Thumbdraught.

“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 said again, 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 round. He hadn’t seemed to mind the burns, or the gloves stuffed with husks to mimic lost fingers. He was sweet, bringing 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 butchered Vaicouric calling her a beauty, a treasure, an inspiration. When Svelsa raised her solitary eyebrow incredulously, 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.

**Spring**

Her body was tall and powerfully muscled, though it was lithe power, like a cat’s. She liked the feel of it. Burnt sienna skin, smooth save for a few a few scars, glistened darkly in the sunshine filtering through the netting over the vender’s stall. She could have made the surgeons stitch them so that they were almost invisible, but she liked people to know what they were facing. Or to think they knew; appearance meant nothing to who she was. She grinned a predatory grin at the Vaicour merchant, teeth as white as the polished bear teeth bound with fine wire to a leather thong the trader had been selling to tourists just moments ago. He smiled back at her, a chink in his manufactured manner showing the unease beneath the false geniality.

“Hello, my dear, and aren’t you the very model of an angel. I have handmade boots lined with the finest mink that would look so elegant on you it’s a crime not to have them. They’re worth at least three hundred, but for you, no, it’s madness I swear, but I cannot bear to think of you trapped in inferior boots, I’ll go as low as two hundred and thirty.”

He had pulled a pair of handsome boots from beneath the table and was already bustling around the corner to taker her measurements. Her hand came up and his chest ran right into it, not quite gently. His rambling pitch stopped as abruptly as a bird flying headlong into a glass window.

“Oh dear, how clumsy of me,” she said with all the sincerity of a snake promising not to bite. “This is such fine fur, where did it come from?” she asked sweetly, not bothering to even glance at the boots on the counter. The trader licked his lips, catching his breath and trying once more to affect the air of the friendly merchant.

“Why, from the deepest, wildest parts of the Golemel spine. There’s not a finer pelt of mink or fox in the whole world.”

“I’ve heard interesting things come from around Hrult.”

The trader’s eyes darted nervously around, as though hoping someone might come to his aid. No one did. “I never said,” but she cut him off.

“Oh but you did. You’ve said a good deal. Just yesterday, I heard a story about an Azil and his pet wolf,” she spat the word Azil as if she were saying devil instead

“Ah,” faltered the trader. He floundered, searching desperately through the racks of personas, neatly pressed and ironed for all occasions. He settled for frightened honesty, dressed in a suit of obsequious courtesy and a neckerchief of brevity. “Yes. There are rumors flying around Hrult about an Azil and a demon she wolf. ”

“That’s better,” the woman purred.

“Some stories say she’s stolen his soul, others say he’s bound her too him. Either way, the townsfolk are too afraid to go up to Hoar’s cabin.”

“Say that again,” her voice had gone from purr to claws in an instance. The trader quailed. “I said the townsfolk are too afraid to go near his cabin.”

“The name.”

THE SVELSA IS STILL THERE PRETENDS TO BE A TRADER TOO OBVIOUS LIE

“Hoar” The trader saw the whimpered name hit the woman like sparks over tinder. She rocked for a moment, still as deep water on a windless day, as though she were deep in thought. Then she threw back her head and laughed a mad laugh that sent rivers of ice down the trader’s spine.

“Hoar,” she said, as though tasting an unfamiliar word. The memories clicked into place, opening up like a box of mementos long stored away. The cabin, the svelsa and the old man. “Tell me everything,” she said, “And I will remember you with fondness. Be too hasty or to slow and there will be no one left to remember.” The trader practically fell over himself in the effort to please.

**Fall**

The open-air forum of jostling, shouting, jockeying emotions that usually dominated Crater’s expressions with only a token measure of restraint had, on this aberrant day, packed up their tents and stalls and taken refuge inside. Two nights of little to no sleep and a three long, long days of pursuit had lain waste to his immaculately trimmed and combed beard and gifted him with two sombrous half-moons hanging heavy beneath his crinkled eyes. If he could get the frown right, he would be Hoar’s twin. That, however, would never come to pass. Crater did not have enough decades to train his face into such a death’s mask.

Day was fading, but the bloodlust and righteous vengeance that drove the pursuers burned unabated. With Lina and the richest repository of medical knowledge for a hundred kilometer, not to mention the only level head tough enough to stand up to Parseek, six month’s gone and buried, Parseek was howling murder. Two nights ago, his boy had taken an arrow in the meat of his thigh and he’d gone down squealing like a pig going to slaughter. Dead man walking, they said. Spineless boy limping, Crater said, but only in the privacy of his own head. He had seen dead men who hadn’t realized it was time to keel over and stop breathing during the Unification and the boy was a long shot from dead. It’d been a clear through and through, and Crater’d poured brandy through the ragged edged hole and plugged him up best as he could. The boy would certainly have a limp the rest of his life, or until Parseek sent him down to the delta cities to find a real healer, but that meant nothing to the twenty odd men and women, armed with a motely of axes, rifles and bows. They were out for blood, and so was Crater. So why did he feel so hollow?

Crater spat into a pile of leaves and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His nose wrinkled involuntarily. He’d forgotten. Two days without washing seemed to have tainted his clothing indelibly with the bitter stink of smoke. Crater’s tried scowling but really just wanted to be sick.

He adjusted the rifle, an old Cabratta model beautifully maintained and so notched that the stock looked like the teeth of a saw. There were nineteen in total, and each and everyone of them weighed more heavily than the water skin, rations and pouch of slugs that hung heavy on his hip. He wondered for the hundredth time who or what those little balls of lead would tear through. It was a thought that he’d had many times before. Crater was not, on the whole, a man cut out for introspection. He thought in straight lines. Fair price for lantern oil, charge. Straight line to the hilltop, charge. See the enemy soldiers entrenched and fortified, charge. But in the times when he was still, or when he was blind and whatever path there might had been was entombed by snow, his restless mind charged off in its own direction and one path it knew well was whose names were written on his bullets, his knife, his bare hands.

The recruiter, a tall Vaicour sergeant with broad shoulders and a noble face, had arched a single, elegant, Vaicour eyebrow at Crater’s heartfelt oath of loyalty made in Vaicouric. He’d been impressed, Crater had hoped. He’d practiced the oath every night for two weeks, Hoar frowning each time he caught him at it. The recruiter nodded to the rifle, a Cabratta only three years old, on Crater’s back and asked in Vaicouric, “You can shoot?”

“Yes!” Crater barked. He would have liked to say more, added a bit of flair, but he didn’t trust his Vaicouric enough to risk it. He’d impressed the man, and there was no point in ruining his good impressing by shooting his mouth off. Unslinging the rifle and nesting the stock into his arm, he sighted down the irons at a tree trunk, thirty meters downwind of them. He breathed out, and fired. There was a sharp retort, the acrid tang of gunpower and bark flew. Crater smiled. Hoar wouldn’t have. He had always shaken his head in disapproval, favoring the outdated bow over the sleek grace of a rifle. Decades later, in an unsleeping chase, Crater might have conceded a point to him. Bows don’t jam and cease to fire in winter.

The recruiter had made Crater a corporal then and there, as much for his ability with the rifle as his fluency in Vaicouric. There were enough Golemel recruits to make up two squads, and Crater had one, Parseek had the other. Crater made sure Saskia was under his command. Though she wasn’t Azil herself, she was still born of that inferior stock. No man in the village would desire her, though perhaps once the insurrection was quelled, she would remain down on the delta where she could make a better future for herself, away from those who knew what she came from. Crater had suggested this very thing to Hoar, but he wouldn’t hear of it. They had not parted on good terms. It would blow over, Crater was sure. Hoar wasn’t the type to hold a grudge. Crater navigated that memory hole like a Vaicour river captain passing within arm’s reach of snags but never quite touching them on his way downriver to fair weather, fair profits and a far off training camp.

It had been like a story torn straight out of the books his mother used to read him when he was little and had

**Winter**

The once thick, tangled beard worthy of a raven’s nest was thinning and any hair Hoar had once had was long since gone. The pouches of his face sagged and liverspots grew like lichen over his skin which had taken on the texture of petrified wood. Hard nodules of bone practically pierced through the skin of his cheeks, and what teeth remained to him were grey and rounded like the markers in his grandfather’s meadow. Last autumn on the harvest festival when all the Golemel songs were played and sung, he had returned to his forefather’s home. While the revelries steadily waxed toward their equinox, he entered the moonlit meadow, two shadows at his heel, and began to dig. The time had been carefully chosen. It was after the latecomers had trickled in but before young couples began to sneak off into the woods to sing music older than even the most ancient Golemel songs. Even yet, Svelsa stood vigil while he dug. With the rusted mattock he had saved, fitted with a new head and still sharp enough, he cut a pit seven feet deep and three feet wide. He had kept a watchful eye out for a suitable marker, but his eyes were weakening and it had been Svelsa who had led him to a stone of the right size and flatness. He had given her an approving frown, and made up his mind to prepare his resting place. Even a wolf as large as Svelsa, for in the five years since she had been reborn her shoulders and haunches had bulked up, bristling with sinew and power, would have trouble digging a grave for a man deep enough. Hoar would not entrust his burial to the townsfolk who were more likely to cut the tendons in his wrists and ankles and burn him in a pit salted with iron. They had certainly be swift in gathering up the nails and fasteners that was all that remained of his cabin beside ashes. Someone had even taken the twisted blob of glass that had been his morning window as a souvenir. Still, he had dug up enough nails to fasten himself a crown for when the time came. Though that day seemed like it never would.

The first winter he’d been sure death would find him deep in the Golemel crags and without stores or shelter. He would have, had it not been for Svelsa who had taken to wolfishness as though she had been born to it. Even after evading their pursuers, Hoar found himself without shelter, tools or his stores of provisions. Within a two weeks, the

There are few scents that both humans and wolves are equally attuned to and the smell of fire is one of them. Smoke rode the wind like the deep, reverberating call of a whale through th eartic depths. Hoar was

Lina’s dead. Hoar’s very old. One pup of the wolf mastiff has come and eaten her forefather. The smell of smoke. Hoar goes down to see what is wrong. Finds Crater’s shop. Remembers Crater’s return. Leaving the son in the mud to die.

Chips of frozen blood shedding like a century of rust from an unused machine, Hoar smiled at the nameless woman and died.

Short Story Outline

Events:

Find/save woman.

Take home

Get healer

Somehow survives

Survive winter by selling Svelsa (to hated townsman, for unification)

Live together (years)

Hoar’s parents dissappeard in the unification

Hoar’s wife died in the snows, his daughter of sickness. Son joined the army.

People whisper about the woman, body’s failing.

Winter’s hard, wolves come scratching at the door

Svelsa opens the door, and lets them in. She is eaten (transfers over to the wolf)

People whisper about the wolf and Hoar (wolf growing bigger. Whelps, dies. Newborn. far too intelligent). Good times for Hoar.

Rumors reach the trader and spread to Orturiel’s court

Orturial’s woman comes to find the truth, brings soldiers. Hoars son is there, no longer human.

Massacres village, orturiel style, searching for the wolf and Areil’s escaped freeform.

Hoar very old by now. Sees friends killed. Home burned down. Treasures despoiled. All he has left goes up in ruins. Wounded just like first dead man by his own son. Wolf drags him away him away. Fights off pursuers. Hoar fights too, but is too weak to draw the bow.

Vendigore takes the body of the son. Makes a coat of the old wolf’s skin. Cooks

Pretends to be son. Hoar plays svelsa in the night, alone. Knows the truth.

Hearstrings pulled. Make them cry.