Let my toes turn blue and my fingers blacken

Let my name die and, by kin be forgotten,

That

abomination

found the two on the steps of the mountain

Lips tinted blue,

And the wind and the wolves howled as one.

And the wind and the wolves howled as one.

And the wind and the wolves howled as one.

And the wind and the wolves howled as one.

And the wind and the wendigo howled to none.

Run sun dun gun ton shun won done son spun

blacken bitten

famine

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. 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 or the Golmhell mountains, the wind and the wolves howled as one.

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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. His other, veined like an oak tree’s roots flicked the belt open. 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, hairy hand. 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 reflected back at Hoar his own face. It was ugly, and frowning like the furry of a blizzard. He threw the dagger away but this only made her more fearful. He frowned more, thought this didn’t help. She’d closed her eyes, wreck of a face going blank and black and broken. He stripped her the rest of the way, out of her sodden clothes and carried her to the wolfskin rug by the fire and began piling more furs on top of her. Wolf, doe, 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, not looking at her, she finally spoke

“Vanahale, koldrin.” It came out a croak, and Hoad didn’t reply. He opened the door, left her alone. Outside, the wind and the wolves howled as one.

outside.

scowling at his scowl and at her heightened fear. the wind and the wolves howled as one.

stripped her pants away. She went limp, and closed her eyes as

her hands back and went and pulled it free. His frown was hidden beneath white pillows of beard but he saw the fear in her eyes. He threw it away,

it away, his frown more irritation than

in her eyes which this time

he swatted them away. She hit him

A wedge of black where the dead boy’s last gift of body heat hadn’t shielded her ran up one side of her summer weight pants. When Hoar tried to remove those, she did resist. Like a \_\_\_\_\_\_, Her other hand tried to push his gloved hands, loosing the her belt, away but the black, almost talon like things where and he pushed them away, irritably. He ignored her accusing Vaicour lilting and swatted her hands away more vigorously. He removed her shirt as well, revealing breasts bitten by winter teeth. Hoar frowned deeply.