

Chapter 1: Alive Again

His fever broke in the night. Isk had been dreaming the same dream he'd had these last four months; teeth and tusks digging into him as far away a voice laughed softly. He could feel each bite, each gouge of his skin as though it were real. The curse of the Bow, perhaps. He'd woken from that dream in the hour of the wolf, cold sweat on his skin and the fever gone.

Silently, so as not to wake Khazad, Isk offered prayers to Howl for his Vestige. It had been the Vestige of the Bow which had saved his life. Another man gored by a boar would have died within the week. The Bow made Isk stronger than ordinary, and instead of dying he lingered in pain for four months.

The wound had been slow to heal, running from his right knee to his ribcage. Isk lived in a delirium in the earliest days. Great pain and a lack of blood, coupled with the healing herbs which Khazad managed to find in the woods meant he understood little of what happened around him. Had Isk been in his right mind, he would have told the dwarf which ones to pick, knowing the mountains of his home well. Khazad, for all his worldly knowledge, knew little of herbs. Dwarves rarely got sick, he had told Isk long ago, and when they did there was no need for plants when dwarven magic could cure ailments. Isk had asked if that could cure the dysentery running through the camp, to which the dwarf replied that their magic only worked on dwarves.

As the wound began to close it got infected, and with it came the fever. It lasted months and sank Isk deeper into delirium. Often times he didn't recognize his own bed, or the walls of his home. Isk came to love the haze which descended on his mind, because the alternative was so much worse. He would lie in bed, aware of everything happening in his world. The Bow had given him a great many things which made him deadly in war and a hunter without compare, but there were nights when he wished he could just die.

Confined to bed for so long, he had counted each plank of wood in his home, and when that had wearied him, he began counting every grain in the wood. He could see them in fine detail, the running fibers of the wood. He counted each one in the beams and planks, until he knew exactly how many fibers of wood it took to build his shack, and how many spiders hd in the rafters. Isk could see those as well as the wood grains. He knew how many hairs they had and when they were watching them. That was the curse of the Bow. His eyes caught every detail they could see, nothing escaped his notice.

For that reason, he had begun closing his eyes when Khazad was around. Isk knew every crevasse of that face, every split hair. He could even see the red hair growing. Isk found himself hating that face. So he closed his eyes and tried to forget that he knew every detail of his friend's face. Khazad had been the only one to take care of him; Isk had not seen any of the townsfolk after the first few days of his injury. He understood why. Disease was said to be a tool of the Darkness which still lingered in the world. His people were nervous around illness.

Khazad slept in the corner of Isk's little shack, in the spot which was the dog's. Holm was a large Howl's Shepard, uniformly grey, a quiet and reserved dog well suited to hunting alongside Isk. She hadn't been with him on the boar hunt. If she had, then Isk would not have

been hurt. The dog slept on top of the dwarf, providing him with a blanket. Already the nights were growing colder as the Rising approached. Hearing Isk mumble his prayers, Holm raised her head and watched him carefully. They locked eyes and the dog gave a couple eager wags of her tail before returning to sleep. Tomorrow she would be more excited.

Khazad would be too. There would be much shouting and patting on the back. Howl forbid, but there would be drinking too if the dwarf got his way. Isk didn't feel well enough for drinking, but perhaps a cup of weak rye would do him good.

His thanks given, Isk laid back in his bed. He was wet from the sweat, his bones ached still, his muscles were weak, but he was alive again. He closed his eyes and drifted off to a restful sleep.

It was his nose which woke him. Under the door, he could see sunlight, small flecks of dust dancing in the light. Isk felt fine, and the wafting smell of soup being made outside only made him feel better. Holm was watching him quietly from the corner. Upon seeing him rise out of bed, she leapt at him and began showering him in slobber, all the while whining pathetically.

It was more emotion out of her than he had ever seen. Even as a puppy she had been serious to the point of stoicism. The only time she had ever showed emotion was when they returned from a successful hunt. When she had come with him to the war, the clash of swords and sounds of men dying had been of no interest to her. After the excitement of seeing him well again wore off, Holm lay down on top of him and licked his face lazily.

Isk lay there, laughing. Yes, it was good to be alive again. He scratched her behind the ears and showered her with all the kind words which men had made. Isk had expected Khazad to come in upon hearing the noise, but he didn't. Holm pulled back and contented herself with watching him. Those great blue eyes were locked on his brown ones. There was something knowing hiding in those eyes, almost human. Isk gave her a hug and then shoed her off so that he could rise.

Outside he could hear Khazad singing softly to himself. The tune seemed familiar, something he'd heard in a dream, but he couldn't make out the words. It was the flowing guttural sounds of the dwarfish language. Isk had no facility for language, and dwarves did not like to teach theirs, so all he could do was appreciate the beauty.

Standing up proved to be more difficult than he anticipated. His legs shook violently under his diminished weight, and within a couple moments he was exhausted. Collapsing on the bed, Isk gave a short prayer to Howl, begging him for strength. It didn't come. Instead, Holm jumped off the bed and fetched his walking stick from where it stood next to his two bows, Howl's great war bow, still strung though it had not been loosed in over a year, and his own bow which had been unstrung. It was said that only Howl had the strength to string his bow, and by the magic given to him by his father, made it so that it would never need to be unstrung. In all his life, Isk had never known the bow to need maintenance.

Holm laid the walking stick across his lap. This time Isk managed to steady himself. His legs were still weak and his knees were knocking together, but he was not going to spend another moment in this shack.

It was slow going and agonizing to do, but he made it to the door. He was wearing only his blanket, but clothes didn't matter at the moment. He had spent the better part of summer and fall dying in his home. It smelled like death. Isk was going to get some fresh air, and if it killed him, then so be it.

Isk opened the door and was almost blinded. He had spent so long in the dark cabin, the only light came from the sliver underneath the door, that the light of the overcast sky overwhelmed him. Isk leaned against the door frame to catch himself. At the firepit, Khazad began making a fuss.

"No, no, is not good." Came the heavy dwarf accent. That voice had been his only companion these long months, and though at times he had hated the voice as either the only one available to him during his pain or a sound which cut across his wild dreams, hearing it now was as joyful as standing in sunlight once again.

Squinting would have been too much, so Isk kept his eyes closed and reached out a hand for the dwarf to take. "It's alright, it's alright," Isk said, his voice weak even to his own ears. "The fever broke, I'm fine now. It's over." The weight of those words was almost enough to knock him over.

The musk of autumn washed over him. The crisp breeze carried the smells of the turning leaves to him, with notes of mushrooms just underneath. Isk could smell the elk in the woods, and something wild watching them. The slow scent of soup tied all of this together. His sense of smell had been enhanced by the Vestige as well as his sight, though in battle all it served was to bring him the smells of men dying. It was far more useful when hunting or leading an ambush. It had been a long time since he had smelled anything other than his own death. He leaned against the door frame and took deep breaths.

"Be the judge of that," the heavy voice said tersely. Isk had not met many dwarves. Those he had met got along well enough, but they all spoke exactly as Khazad did, without reference to people. He had never met anyone with knowledge of their language, so he was uncertain whether they spoke that way because their own tongue had no concept of personage, or if learning the common tongue was simply difficult for them. There was the soft tinkling of bells as the dwarf approached.

Isk waited at the door until rough hands began checking him over. "Can't reach forehead, sit," the dwarf said. The hands began pushing him back inside, but Isk would not go there. He needed the world again.

"I'll sit, but on the bench out here. I can't take the smell of that place anymore." The light was not hurting as badly, so Isk risked a squint. The light stung his eyes, but he bore it. There was more to life than wood grain and spiders. At his waist, a hairy red mass was looking at him shrewdly.

“Fine, bench. But if say no, then bed.” The hands took him roughly and guided him to the log which Isk had set in front of the fire pit when he first made his cabin. Seats were cut into the wood. There wasn’t much of a view from there, the woods encroached on his small home, but it was a place of peace. His own piece of promised paradise.

The hands set him down and the dwarf set about checking him. Khazad poked and prodded, none to gently. It was different from how his mother had checked him for fevers, or the village wisewoman for that manner. But the dwarf had been good enough at keeping him alive, even with his people’s limited knowledge of healing without magic, so Isk happily submitted to his care and enjoyed the smell of a living world.

“Fever is gone,” the dwarf muttered after some time. Isk slumped in his seat and began weeping as the dwarf began to laugh. It was over, the pain would go. Khazad was babbling about finding drink to celebrate with, or else their time together at the Battle of the Mander River. He talked about all those nights in camp, and of the men who were no longer with them. Soon, Isk found himself laughing alongside the dwarf, adding his own memories to the reminisces. The sounds of their laughter carried deep into the forest. Isk laughed until his sides hurt, which did not take too long. He’d had little to laugh about.

Still laughing, Khazad ladled out a bowl of soup for him. The clanging of the ladle against the pot was as the ringing bell on the day of Rising, offering renewal to all who heard it. Isk ate the soup greedily, his eyes still narrowed. It was a good dwarven soup, weak for lack of spices which the dwarves swore by. Isk had had the strong kind in the camps, he couldn’t taste anything for three days after. He could feel it inside him, spreading out through his limbs. Strength of a kind returned to him; not enough to draw Howl’s Bow or even to walk unaided, but enough to drive off the weariness he felt. Strength enough to open his eyes all the way.

The clearing where he had made his home looked much the same as it always did in fall. He was not high up enough in the mountains that only the pines grew, and so was greeted to the sight of massive oaks and stands of birch preparing for the winter. Red, orange, yellow, they stretched out around him, like a wildfire surrounding his home. Not far from there was a promontory rock which gave him the view of the entirety of Howl’s Valley, where that great warrior fell against the Dark, and the village which kept his grave.

Isk looked away from the trees he knew well and into the small fire which Khazad had made for their soup. The day was cloudy, but Isk saw the flames as clearly as though it were night. The flames danced, and in their depths he could see those smallest changes of hue. The momentary flashes of blue.

Holm walked out of the cabin and sat down beside the fire. Isk had known the dogs of the valley to run scared of the fire, but Holm feared nothing, not beast nor flame. He held out his bowl for seconds, which Khazad happily poured out.

The dwarf was smiling more than Isk had ever seen before, managing to push apart the well comb fiery beard which was nearly reached his feet. It was the first time Isk had ever seen the dwarf’s teeth. Khazad was tall for his kind, nearly four and a half feet. Some of that was the

wild hair of his head, which no comb had ever passed through. Isk had asked about that once, why his beard was so cleanly kept but the head was not. Khazad had only laughed, which lead Isk to believe it had to do with their secretive religion, of which no man knew.

Like his hair, his eyes were a lively red, though flakes of gold lived there. It had been unsettling to see the first time, and had the dwarf not returned to Howl's Valley in the company of heroes, he certainly would have been burned as a remnant of evil. Those eyes were careful, cunning, and prone to mirth, as were most of his kind. A large forking scar took up his left cheek, though much of it was concealed by the beard. He had received that at the Mander after offering his helmet to an under-prepared archer he had been escorting. Other than that scar, his face was well lined, each line deeply familiar to Isk. Khazad had told him that he was still young for a dwarf. Still, the only faces better lined belonged to the grey-beards in the village.

He was dressed in his traditional clothing, an orange cassock laced with complex patters of lines. On each arm he wore dark red bands into which were sewn small bells. In battle it was mattocks and chainmail, but outside war the robe was all he wore. He wore heavy leather boots no matter the weather.

"...and then the Bold refused both king's treasures, and the boon from the High Highest, asking only recognition of marriage." Khazad laughed at the end of his story. It was one Isk knew well, he had been there after all. The dwarf had told that story each night as they gathered round the fire, even after Edred the Bold had asked him to stop telling it. Even so, he found a way to bring it up. Every dwarf who heard the story laughed until they couldn't walk.

"Those were fine days," Isk said between mouthfuls of soup. He had once joined the High Highest at a feast and eaten her food, food prepared for the closest to the Sword Hand which had delivered them. That was a pale shadow compared to the weak soup in his bowl. It was like eating fire.

Khazad paused at the comment. "Those days are not far gone," he said. That was true. It had been nearly a year since the Mander. The celebrations had taken up the entire winter. Edred had been proclaimed a hero second only to Isk. Of course, both of them were below the heroes of old, the three sons of the Sword Hand and the savior himself. After those days of feasting, the spring journey home had taken three months, so that their small party had arrived home in Howl's Valley in high summer. It was in a hunt meant to celebrate their return that Isk had been gored.

"But they are gone," Isk said with finality. Khazad nodded sadly in reply. The Mander had been decisive. The heretics were destroyed as a force and they melted away into their country. There would not be another war with them. Not unless the Darkness that still lingered gave them a second false prophet.

"Wondered," the dwarf said, "never got to ask before injury. Why return to these sad mountains?" He took a large slurp of soup to give him the air of innocence.

It may have been an innocent question, had the dwarf not already questioned the choice to return a dozen times. Khazad had come dangerously close to heresy himself when he spoke of

the Highest of Howl's Valley. Had any word reached her, then he could face harsh measures. Not that Isk didn't have those thoughts from time to time. The Highest had always been shrewd, but her favor was never as impartial as the Sword Hand is said to have demanded of his followers. Isk pushed those thoughts from his mind.

Isk had often wondered why he was returning. He had no family any more, and though he knew many of the people in the valley well, he could only count three of them friends. In the great city Bredar where the palace of the High Highest stood, he had been given promises of gold and jewels, homes and brides. One merchant had offered him all that plus an estate with five hundred souls to work it. Isk had refused it all same as Edred, and he knew why.

"The Vestige, Khazad. The Bow that lives in me was once a part of Howl, third son of the Sword Hand, the Deliverer. He died in these woods, in a great battle which gave his father time to slay the Darkness. The part of me that is him desires these quiet woods above all other things, and would not have rested until I returned here." Edred probably felt the same way. There was a feeling inside of him, a bowl of water which was never calm unless it was resting here. Each step away from the valley caused ripples then waves then storms of desire to see himself back in the place of his birth. Each step on the return journey had been a balm on his soul.

Khazad ran his fingers through his tangled hair, lost in thought. After a spell he nodded. "Feel the same now," he said. "The Mountains of Fathers calls. Only wanted to see home of great heroes. Will leave, after watching Rising."

It was Isk's turn to nod solemnly. Khazad had wanted to see Howl's tomb, the place where that great hero fought to the last. In the summer months there were pilgrims, not many but enough to swell the village, who came to offer gifts to the Son that Died. The village had grown from the few survivors of his retinue. There was nothing else in these mountains but grazing pasture for sheep. Those would be herded out of the mountains shortly before the first snows fell. Khazad leaving would take that little bit of color out of the quiet valley, but considering the continued hostility of the villagers to his presence, it was probably for the best.

Holm got up from her place by the fire and settled down at the dwarf's side. They fell into a comfortable silence. These were common with dwarves. Isk helped himself to thirds and took to watching the movements of the forest. Through the trees, half a mile distant, he watched as a woodpecker pulled grubs out of the bark. He could see the color on the grub and count the hairs on it, or the feathers on the bird's head. Not far distant, animal fur, dog-like, floated in the wind.

Isk began laughing again, and he was joined by Khazad, who didn't need to know why they were laughing.

"Do you remember the promontory rock not far from here?" Isk asked when the laughter subsided. Khazad grunted in affirmation. "Can you take me there? These legs won't make it on their own."

Khazad began long winded refusals, most of which centered on how much weight Isk had lost in his illness. It was a fair concern. Isk was starting to get tired just sitting there.

“...These are good points, no?” the dwarf finished.

“No. Look, I have never been wounded on a hunt before. For four months I lay dying in bed. I was certain I was going to die. You were certain I was going to die. And yet I didn’t. Please, help me go and see the valley.”

Khazad went silent, watching him intently with those red eyes. The woodpecker moved on to a different tree. All the forest was quiet, awaiting the arrival of winter. The dwarf nodded his head and stood up, Holm following after him. With a grunt, Isk stood up, supported on one side by the stick and on the other by Khazad’s strong hands.

It was a short walk to the rock, but that was when he was healthy. The going was slow, but that gave Isk more time to enjoy the woods. Holm trailed after them, her usual stoic self. There was a tension in the woods, Isk noticed, deeper than usual. The birds were silent and the elk jumped at the breeze. Something new was in the mountains, and all the forest knew it. Isk took to watching the forest carefully, ruing his wound. If whatever entered the forest started looking for sheep, or children, he would be too weak to hunt it down. The Darkness might have been defeated, but some of its works remained.

Not noticing the tension in the woods, Khazad began singing a dwarven drinking song. Isk only knew it was a drinking song because it was what they sang when they got the first cup of the day. Otherwise it was the same as any other song they sang, deep and guttural, its rhythm perfect for banging a mug on a table. After a few hundred feet of this, Isk noticed that he had begun marching in time with the song. He looked to the dwarf and found Khazad grinning with the words.

When that song died, Isk filled the silence with his own drinking song, one which Khazad knew well. He joined in and together they drove the silence away. Whatever it was that was terrifying the forest could probably hear them, but as a rule predators were cautious. Besides, the woods were wide and the mountains stretched on for miles. Their words were likely heard only by the trees..

The fall forest suddenly gave way to a large stone on which only moss grew. It slanted upward slightly, such that climbing up it would be challenging in his condition. Isk was already sweating heavily from a walk which should have taken him five minutes. Tired though he was, this day would not be a victory if he couldn’t sit on the edge and watch the valley.

Khazad began tittering as soon as he placed a foot on the stone, but Isk did not give him the chance to pull him back. The walk was difficult. The stone was worn away in places, making the footing treacherous. Isk knew the stone well, but in his weakened state, missing a step caused took all the air from his lngs. The walking stick and Khazad’s reproving but steady hands were all that saved him from the ledge.

In his youth, the village boys would race from the village to the sit at it edge on the day before the Rising, so that they could beg the Highest to lift them one or two places above where she decided they would go. As far as they could work out, she never had. Still, it was something which the boys looked forward too every year. Isk had won a number of times. Since the Highest

would not raise them from the run, the reward became being the first to see the valley from above. Later, after he had buried his mother, he built his cabin high in the mountains, that the view might be his whenever he desired it.

Isk stumbled, caught in his own thoughts. Khazad must have been wrapped up in thought to, because he could not catch him in time. Isk's knees hit the ground hard, sending a painful jolt through his body. He almost wished to be back in bed, counting spiders and breathing in his own rot. Almost.

"Careful, careful," Khazad said, picking him back up to his feet. "No shame in coming tomorrow, or in a week." Concern was writ plain on his face. He was probably regretting agreeing to this.

Despite the pain and exhaustion, they were halfway to the edge. He could make it; he just needed the Bow to help him get there. Isk had been a skinny kid, and had earned his living by hunting and watching the sheep when they were high in the mountains. That skinny kid grew into a skinny man, known as the best hunter in the woods, but not much else. It had been the Bow, given to him in last year's Rising, that gave him the strength he now had. Gaining the Vestige had been ecstasy, joy in every fiber of his being. With it, he was strong enough to wield Howl's Bow. He would set on the edge of the rock that day.

He took a couple moments for rest, and to search himself for the Vestige and strength which he knew lay inside him. When he found it, he pushed on, ignoring Khazad's protests. He was shaking now, and the moments when he had to stand on his own sent a wave of dread through him. At least until the walking stick was down again. One, two, terror, one, two, terror. Khazad was behind him, his bells tinkling as he gave whatever excuse he could talk Isk off the stone.

Usually the wind was strong here, as it came roaring down the mountain, over the cliff face and onward to freeze the villagers. Today it was calm, as though watching with some amusement one who had so often conquered this stone. Perhaps the wind too was afraid of whatever had come to claim these woods. Whatever the reason, Isk was glad for the quiet. He could not make it otherwise.

Despite the weariness and the throbbing pain in his knees, he made it. At the edge of the rock, where legend said Howl looked out at the vast army which the Darkness threw against him, Isk sat down and marveled at the beauty of his home. The part of him which was Howl lay contented, this was where he belonged. Holm came up beside him and lay down, and the dwarf, now that Isk was at the edge, sat down beside him.

Below them, Howl's Valley stretched out for miles. Nestled in between two long arms of the Broken Peak, a towering white-capped mountain which was broken when Hoowl had killed the Traitor, was a bright forest of many trees. They drank deeply from the river which was born of that snow, deep and wide. The arms of the mountain were four miles apart and ran until they met the River of Tears, too far for most men to see anything more than a vague blue strip, but from this vantage point Isk could see fishing boats on the great river.

About three miles from where he sat was the village known by the name of the tomb which lay there. Howl was small, containing fewer than four hundred souls, and many of them would leave for the winter. Only about half were permanent residents, descendants of Howl's guard. Isk was one of these. It was said that a thousand years ago, his ancestor held Howl's banner and caught him when he fell. Of course, that the same families all lived in the same valley for a thousand years meant that all the residents could claim that prestige, though only Isk could claim the name.

From his high vantage point, he could see the villagers going about their day. Ammardain and his apprentice were working the bellows of his smithy. A good man, prone to a kind word. He was beginning to get up there in years, and his previous apprentices had all left for the war and had not come back. Who would, after seeing the big cities and their temptations. The Vestige of the Bow swam contently through his soul, watching over the land which was its grave.

Isk looked there, to the right of the river. He could see through the trees to a few slivers of marble. The third most sacred place in all the world. As a boy, he had dreamed of holding a third of what had made Howl. He was grateful he had been given the chance.

Across the river was the village inn, owned by Edred the Bold and his wife. She ran the place; the inn was hers by birthright. Shrewish would be an unkind description of Masa, but not far off the mark. It was a busy job with lots to keep track of. Even when she had been a girl she could boss around anyone in the village except the Highest. A shrew, perhaps, but not incapable of warmth. Indeed, a kind word from that woman could keep a man warm through winter. When Isk and Edred had been chosen for a Vestige and marked for war, along with one other, Masa had given them each a kiss on the cheek before pulling her chosen man aside and filling his ears with sweet words. On that long journey to war, it had been Isk and the other making conversation round the evening fire, dreaming of what war would be like. Edred had been silent and stared into the fire, dreaming dreams of Masa. Now he sat round the fire in the common room of his wife's inn and told the same war stories. The whole village had often heard her complain about her lazy husband, but every so often, when Isk walked down the mountain to share a meal and a story with his old friend, Isk would catch her watching her husband as he warmed himself by the fire with a look of pure contentedness.

Isk would have to go there soon, and warm his weary bones by the fire. It would make for a good place to send Khazad off. Despite not wanting to hear the dwarf laugh at his refusal of all boons that kings could offer him, Edred was fond of the dwarf.

The rest of the right bank was of no note. It was full of homes, and in some of those homes were people which Isk cared little for. He watched the villagers walk around on their daily chores for a time before looking over to the right bank.

Most prominent among the buildings there was the stately home of the Highest. She had been the only Highest he had ever known, apart from the High Highest in Bredar, and she had lived in that home the entire time. He had learned from his father that the previous Highest, an old man which no one in the village had liked much, had chosen the most beautiful girl in the valley to serve him in his home, and when he died he had named her the next Highest. All the

children of the village had served the current Highest in her home at one time or another. They all came away with welts and bruises, none seemed able to serve her properly. Isk had lasted a single day, and had been strapped in the village square when the Highest claimed he had read her letters. Isk had seen the letters open on a desk, but he had not read them. He couldn't. No one had ever taught him how. The humiliation still stung.

Highest's home was higher than any other in the valley, though Isk had seen greater in Bredar. When they had been children, they had talked about how it was the tallest building ever made, and how from the roof top one could see the whole world. That was simply the foolishness of children. Isk had a better view of the world from the promontory rock, and even with his sharpened eyes he could only see a piece of a piece.

In the square outside the Highest's home, Kesh Algren and his son Meles were sawing wood for her. Kesh had always been a favorite of hers. From this vantage point, Isk couldn't see his worn face, set in its casual arrogance, despite the heavy pustules which oozed still. He was walking with a limp. That was new. In all his life, Isk had never known the man to go on a hunt or make a mistake with his tools. He would ask Edred for the details later.

Meles now did the work which the father had done. Isk knew the son poorly. The boy was ten years younger, and though his father had begged for his son to be Invested, Highest had not wanted to put such power in one so young, and particularly not one who found pleasure throwing rocks at passersby. For some unknown reason, his face was always twisted in a proud sneer. No one in the valley knew what he could be so proud of, perhaps it was his prowess at bullying the younger children.

Isk and Khazad sat there a while. The dwarf wouldn't be able to see who was in town. His eyes were sharp, but without the ability to see far. He seemed to be enjoying the view of the forest below. It was beautiful. Isk contented himself with watching the people of Howl's Valley go about their business. They were setting up tables, and Isk could see the women rushing to and from the Highest's home, no doubt relaying instructions as to the proper setting up of the Rising feast. It was quiet, peaceful. It was his home.

"Getting back?" the dwarf asked after an hour or so. Isk nodded. There would be plenty of time to meet with friends at the coming feast.

The food in the valley was generally of a bland sort, or so he thought after seeing the greatest city in the world, but the thought of the Rising meal pushed all the puddings which the High Highest had at her table. Khazad pulled him back from the edge and then helped him to his feet. The walk back would be challenging, but Isk's mind was on other things, so he didn't notice the tremors which wracked him. He could already see the hearty meat pies and rye whiskey. The next few weeks would be full of days of joy, and it was about time.

As he turned from the forest below, he thought he saw a flitting black shadow move beneath the trees of the valley, large and hairy as a bear, but swift. As he turned back to look, it was gone.