

Chapter 10: The Wolf's Den

As they took the first step into the forest, Lowest wanted to turn and run. There was an empty cold in the trees, like steel waiting for blood. It did not feel like it had just four days prior. That had been fear, the fear of the last living beasts of the forest. There was nothing still living in the forest but the wolves, and it was their hatred which Lowest felt as he crossed into the forest. He vomited into the snow as quietly as he could.

Lowest carried Lang over his shoulders, freeing up Khazad to swing his mattock. The boy muttered nonsense in a delirium. Immediately after stepping over the threshold of the wild, Lowest was confronted with wolf tracks. The Tyrant's were easy to spot, so large that a child could sleep in them and not touch the edges. But the Tyrant was not alone. Though he had not seen them when the beast had risen, Lowest now saw that there had been a pack with him, so many that he could not track all of them. It was upwards of fifteen, each circling restlessly around where the Tyrant had sat and watched them. Khazad looked at the tracks and nodded grimly. There was an ambush waiting for them, Lowest was certain of it now.

The more experienced tracker between the two, Lowest led, following the great tracks the Tyrant left in its wake. The pack split off and went towards the path. Feeling relieved that they were not where their enemy thought they were, Lowest walked deeper into the empty forest. Their going was as silently as they could, though Lang babbled over his shoulder. They had to go further into the forest before they could cut across it and out. Cut too soon and they would run into the ambushing wolves. If they could manage to get deep enough, they would only come across the odd patrol, and that they could handle.

What evil lay upon the forest never loosened its grip, but though Lowest endless wolf tracks, he did not spot the beasts. Their passage through the forest went unmarked.

It was a mile before he felt that they had gone far enough. The Tyrant's pawprints went on, toward the mountain's arm and down the valley. Lowest had no desire to see where that beast made its den. Taking a moment before the fateful step, Lowest breathed deeply of the mountain air. Somehow, following in the wake of that dread evil felt safer than setting his own path.

The first step crunched into the snow, sounding like a peal of thunder to his ears. He froze, watching the woods, but no wolves came. Lowest took a moment to control his nerves before continuing. Slowly, they made their way north towards the village.

Lowest checked ever shadow, watched every tree before taking another step. The snow still thundered as they walked, crunching under their weight. But as wolves failed to materialize from the shadow, Lowest began to breathe easier. Behind him, he could hear as Khazad did the same.

They had made most of the mile to the clearing, and Lowest was beginning to think they would escape unnoticed, though they had reached the place where the wolves maintained their siege, when their failure to walk into the ambush was noted. As Lowest took extra care to spot the patrols, a sudden cry was raised off to his right. It was a solitary howl, angry, and it filled the woods. A moment later the call was lifted in the forest by a chorus. Lowest froze and Khazad

behind them. The hunt was on. Slowly, the howl was echoed through the forest, as more and more voices lifted the warning. The prey had escaped.

Lowest saw a nook between the twisted roots of a great mountain oak whose boughs were creaking from the snow. Quickly, he rested Lang in its darkest part and crawled in, crouched low in the roots. He would be hidden from most eyes, unless the wolf came straight on. Then there would be no escape. Khazad crawled in after him and made himself small against the ground. Together, the three mice waited in fear.

Just as the dwarf was settled into the nook, the howling was lifted nearby. Lowest cocked his head to listen. It sounded like the beast was two hundred yards away, close enough to smell them. With a twinge of panic, Lowest checked the wind. It was blowing northward, carrying their scent towards the clearing. That meant that whatever wolves were on the mountain's arm would have a hard time smelling them, but any between them and the village would have their scent. There was nothing left to do but pray that they would be unmarked.

Lowest had no idea if wolves could follow footprints. If they could, there would be no hiding. If they couldn't then there was still the Tyrant. A few moments face to face with the beast had shone him that it was intelligent. It would be able to follow their footprints without issue.

As if it had been reading his thoughts, a great bellowing howl began somewhere to the down the mountain. It filled the world, a hateful blast which promised death to all who heard it. Behind Lowest, Lang spasmed, sputtering nonsense before falling silent. The howl was so loud that Lowest checked the woods for the Tyrant, half-expecting to find it standing over them. As the Tyrant bellowed, the other wolves fell silent, until its howl was the only noise in the world. It carried clear across the forest.

Lowest had no doubt that the villagers could hear it. What terror would be going through their minds, Lowest could only imagine. He whispered another prayer, asking Howl to ensure that Edred heard it. If it did, the noise should be enough to awaken the Vestige's memory. It would warn him of the danger, and he would be ready when it came for them.

The howl continued for a full minute, and Lang seemed to come out of the stupor as it continued to shake the snow from the treetops. Lowest felt him squirming behind him, and then falling still. He looked back, and found the boy staring at him, his eyes wide with fear.

"Where are we?" he shouted, his voice covered by the howl.

Lowest turned over the roots, pinning Lang against the tree. "Be quiet, we are in the forest."

"Why?" The Tyrant's howl died as Lang shouted, his voice carrying through the still forest.

Lowest put his hand over Lang's mouth. "Listen, the wolves are after us. That howling, that was their king. The Darkness has returned to Howl's Valley, and if you shout you are going to get us killed." Lowest spoke in a frantic whisper, speaking as quickly as he could before the

boy could remember that he was higher, and now that he held the Bow, he was most certainly stronger.

Lang didn't fight back. His eyes were wide, but he understood and fell limp against the tree. Slowly, the weariness crept back over his face and he struggled to keep his eyes open. Lowest turned back to the woods. It was silent. The dead hush had returned, the hunt was on.

Carefully, Lowest raised his head over the gnarled roots. There was a scout nearby, he had heard it. He tested the air, but no smell came back to him. The forest was dead.

"What now?" Khazad asked in a rumbling whisper. His knuckles were white on the mattock's haft.

Uncertain, Lowest considered their options. They could wait and hope that the wolves nearby were pulled to assist in the hunt, but that was a delicate game. If they waited too long, or if the wolves did not go to assist the hunt, they would be found waiting in the dell. There would be no games this time, they would be eaten. On the other hand, running for the village would give away their position almost immediately, but if they could get past the guard and into bow range, they would be safe. Lowest bit his lip, thinking. Risk it with a run or wait for their foe to make a mistake?

Fear or terror?

Lowest looked inside himself for the answer, but there was no voice to give him advice, no guiding hand. All he found was himself, battered and bruised and too tired to make a decision. He looked back towards a now dreamy Lang, jealous of the voice that was undoubtedly consoling him even as their death approached. He wanted that voice, the reassurance. Instead all he had was himself.

"We run for it." The answer came to him as he mulled over their options. He would rather die in the chase than let the wolves kill them at their leisure. Better to die quickly than slow. Khazad nodded, trusting the choice on its face. Lowest doubted he cared when he lived or died. Lang was too out of it to know the choice.

Kneeling down, Lowest lifted Lang onto his back and then looked to Khazad. The dwarf's face was set in grim determination. Taking one last deep breath, Lowest crept out of the dell.

The forest seemed as it always did, hiding the fact that behind any tree could be a waiting wolf. He set off in a sort of quick shuffle, saving what reserves of strength he had for when they had been discovered. By his best guess, they were only a few hundred yards from the village. A long way to go still.

There was a sharp crack somewhere behind them and Lowest stumbled, catching himself before he fell. He whirled round to spot the cause of the noise, but the same empty forest greeted him, not giving away its secrets. Khazad too was scanning the forest for the source of the sound and was equally refused.

“It was just a branch breaking under the weight of the snow,” Lowest said, hoping in his heart that he was correct. The stillness in the forest seemed to sharpen. Lowest waited for a sound, a howl or the feet in the snow. As neither came, he gestured to Khazad and continued on, his steps breaking the silence of the forest.

As gentle as they walked, each step sent his heart racing. His ears strained for the sound of another footfall, until he jumped on the slightest breath of wind. He was so focused on what his ears could tell him that he failed to see where he was stepping. The snow had slid off a high root and Lowest caught it, sending him tumbling down the gentle slope of the mountain. Lang rolled alongside him and Khazad running after them, maintaining his silence as he huffed down the hill. Lowest managed to turn the roll into a slide, slowing himself somewhat. They had gone a few yards when the gentle hill ended abruptly in a small cliff.

Together, Lowest and Lang fell to the ground below, hard. It was nearly ten feet to the ground. The snow cushioned their fall and Lowest did not feel hurt, but the wind had been knocked out of him. Lowest sat up, shaking the snow off of him. Beside him, Lang was breathing heavily.

Panic began to rise in him. Lowest looked to their surroundings. They were in what seemed like a long bowl, with high walls cut from the mountainside. The bowl sloped down gently until it grew level with the mountain. No trees grew in the bowl, but it was shaded by great trees on the ridge above, their boughs bending dangerously. About twenty feet from him, the bowl dipped, and a great tangle of roots dug into the side of the bowl.

With a loud thud, Khazad landed in the snow beside him, snowflakes clinging to his beard, white against the red. The mattock was in his hands. The dwarf looked to Lowest, a hard look in his eyes. “The chase in on.”

“What?” Lowest had assumed their fall would be heard throughout the forest, but to know that they had been found was to be gripped by terror.

“There was barking up there.” Khazad looked toward the lip of the bowl.

The hunt had become a chase. Lowest looked to where the bowl met the natural decline of the mountain. That way to home. He rose to his feet and scrambled toward Lang, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“Run...or hide?” Khazad asked behind him.

Lowest passed for a moment, Lang in his arms. Run or hide. The bowl they were in was hidden from above, unless someone was standing at the lip. They might be able to hide in its shadow, but even a cursory look would reveal them. Besides, Lowest did not want to wait for his death. He threw the muttering Lang over his shoulder and started toward the entrance to the bowl. He was halfway across when he felt the ground shake beneath his feet.

It was soft, not a powerful quaking, but rhythmic pounding which he could feel in his feet. Lowest turned to the high lip of the bowl. Five wolves were watching him from there, and as he looked, more gathered. Khazad began to growl. Lowest looked back at the entrance, their

way out. Two wolves were standing there, watching them from behind the trees that stood there. Surrounded, all for a tree root. The thudding in the earth grew louder.

“What now?” Khazad asked. Lowest felt him against his back, watching the wolves on the other side of the bowl. Lowest knew all about last stands, Howl had made his a mile from where Lowest had grown up. All the stories of the Light were about desperate last stands against the darkness. It was time to make his, though no one would remember it. There would be no songs, no glory, no memory. They simply walked into the woods one day and never returned. That itself would be lost if the village fell to the wolves.

“Nothing comes next,” Lowest said. He dropped Lang from his shoulders, the bow falling from his shoulder. The few arrows remaining in the quiver, the rest having fallen out somewhere on the hill, spilled out onto the snow. “I can’t see a way out of this. So I’m going to provoke them so that they kill us.”

Khazad grunted, which carried no disappointment, no anger. Their death was on the ridge above them, and he faced that the same as a sunrise. Together they watched as more and more wolves came to circle the bowl. Within a minute they were surrounded, and still the ground shook. The Tyrant was coming.

Lowest bent over Lang, his hand hovering over the bow. The laws of the Light forbade him from holding a weapon, being the Lowest of his village. That law was inviolable, set down by the Sword Hand himself. But that was for life. This was his death, he could see in the hundreds of teeth that were flashed at him from the ridge above them. Could it truly harm the Light for him to take as many beasts of the Darkness as he went? The many laws which governed men, to chain them ever to right things, all to keep him from an evil defeated so long ago, could they still govern them? Lowest’s outstretched hand began to shake, the bow, which he recognized as the gift the High Highest had given to him this Rising, the one she had taken away for being a trick by the Darkness. Rage, fear, twin emotions looking in opposite directions, both surging through him. If this was to be his end, he would rather it be worthy of song, though no one would ever sing it, and if the Light judged him and gave him to the Darkness, then he would know that the Light was as harsh as Highest made it out to be.

Even as he reached his decision, Lowest’s hand could not grasp the bow. It was his by right, the High Highest of the Light had given it to him. It should be an heirloom of his line, such as it was, and a relic of the village for all the Order to see. Yet his fingers did not close over the Light-Blessed bow. They would not obey him, or perhaps they obeyed that small corner of his mind which remained afraid, which would not risk the wrath of the Light for a bow.

He stayed there, crouched over a muttering Lang, hand outstretched, struggling against himself, when he realized the world had gone silent. The earth was no longer shaking beneath him. Lowest stood, turning to face the highest point of the bowl, where he had fallen in and where he knew the Tyrant would be.

The direwolf was sat down on all fours, tongue longer than a man lolling in its mouth. Those red eyes, so full of hate, were fixed on Lang, marking every breath the boy made. It knew

what the boy was carrying inside himself, Lowest could see it in its eyes. Howl was the ancient enemy of the wolves, named such that he would take away their voice so long as he lived, stopping them from communicating to each other and to the darkness.

Lowest looked at Lang, eyes hazed over and muttering nonsense. The boy didn't know where he was, or that there was a demon from a long-forgotten time staring at him not twenty yards away. If he had known, would he still be laying there, or would the Vestige already be knocking the bow? Lowest pushed the thought from his mind. Idle thoughts do so little when wolves are watching. Lowest straightened and turned back to the Tyrant. The beast wanted the boy, those hateful eyes never moved from him; and as Lowest watched the beast hunger for him, he found himself wishing nothing other than to thwart it, to watch it starve.

He stood in between beast and prey. As he did, he saw its eyes narrow and its maw close in a snarl. Upon hearing the snarl, three wolves walked into the entrance of the bowl, heads low and hackles raised. They were growling as well. Warriors sent to fight in the area for the entertainment of their king. The heretics were said to delight in that sport.

No other wolves came, and so Lowest looked over the three sent against them. Two were grey and one was black, their eyes the same shade of gold. Lowest knew almost nothing of wolves, but he could see that these were younger than the ones which watched on. They were smaller, timider, and each of them was without scars. Lowest knew why they had come. They were to prove their worth to the pack, and do it in a place the pack controlled.

As they stepped in, the Tyrant rose, and with a couple easy steps walked to the entrance. There, it rose onto his hind legs, until it stood nearly thirty feet tall. It slammed its weight against a tree, forcing it down to the ground and blocking the entrance. It then did it again and again, until the shallow side of the bowl was completely blocked with refuse, all the way till the sides were too high to jump over. The arena was set.

Lowest dragged Lang backwards as Khazad stepped up to face the three, the bow was left behind in the snow. Khazad swung the mattock with a flourish and then set his stance wide, returning their snarl. Lang safe for the moment, Lowest turned to watch, keeping an eye out for the wolves surrounding, in case they decided to intervene. The young wolves spread out, but could not go round his side without coming in reach of his mattock, so they stood in a line before him, watching, waiting for their chance.

Clearly, they knew nothing of the patience of dwarves. Khazad could have waited all two hundred years of his life. Settled into his stance, the dwarf watched all three wolves at the same time, mattock ready. Lowest stood behind him, the panic at being surrounded by his nightmare had worn off. This was war, and he had seen it before. Unarmed, Lowest watched, ready to throw himself onto a wolf which got past him.

He glanced back to Lang, the boy muttering but safe, and as he did, a thought occurred to him. "Lang we are surrounded," he shouted. If he could rouse the youth as he had been back at the tree, then maybe they could turn the numbers. Above them, the Tyrant tilted its head to watch.

“Lang!” The boy did not stir.

“Howl!” His eyes snapped open, clear but unfocused, his breathing shallow. “Howl, the wolves are surrounding us. The Darkness brought a direwolf. What do we do?”

Lang blinked once; those eyes seeming to understand the words. The boy tried to roll over and rise, his mouth still muttering but his eyes focused on the trees above, but the strength wasn't there. Lowest had been weak for three days after receiving the Vestige. If the Bow could understand him right then, there was little chance that it could stand Lang on his two feet. Lowest turned away from the boy, who was spasming on the ground down, trying to rise. He felt a fool.

He left the three wolves for Khazad, turning for the Tyrant. The great wolf, which had been watching Lang writhe in the snow, looked to Lowest as he approached the lip of the bowl. Lowest bent down and put his hands in the snow, balling in between his hands. It was not a weapon and his hands did not reject the snowball as they had the bow. Of course, if he threw it at Highest, or anyone of her favorites, or even anyone who complained about it later, he would be flogged. The Tyrant was all the hatred in the world, there was no bargaining with it, no expectation of mercy. Lowest threw a snowball at its snout.

It was a soft lob, landing squarely on its nose, scattering, sending ice across the fur. The direwolf did not blink, staring at him all the while. Lowest's arm hung in the air, the tingle of the snow still on his fingers, meeting the gaze of the wolf. The Tyrant grinned, and then began an ugly huff. A terrible wheezing that shook the forest. It was laughing at him, its breath foul as an outhouse.

Lowest fell back, gaging at the smell. The direwolf continued to laugh, as the smaller wolves joined in with howls. The forest quaked from the terrible sound, and Lowest sank to his knees, clutching his ear and retching. The beast was too large, too terrible. Even if he had the Bow in him, he doubted he could claim victory against it.

As quickly as it had come, the terrible cacophony fell silent. First the Tyrant stilled, and a beat later the other wolves were silent. Lowest looked up, water in his eyes. The Tyrant was standing on all fours, sniffing the air. It narrowed its eyes, looking north. Then, with only a single glance back at Lang it set off into the woods, running east. The pack followed after, some eagerly, and others with a questioning look backward.

The three wolves who faced them, however, had nowhere to run, unable to jump the banks of the bowl or navigate the pilled wood. They barked, howled, after the pack, but they received no response. Clearly, the Tyrant expected them to do the task he had set them before letting them out of the bowl. They looked unnerved suddenly. They turned back to Khazad, suddenly wary.

Khazad made no motion to indicate that he noticed the change. He still stood in his heavy stance; mattock ready. Lowest, however, watched the last of the wolves flee with a sudden lightness in his heart. They had a chance to escape. He hurried to where Lang lay and picked him up once more. Without a look towards Khazad, he hurried to the dip in the bowl, where the tree

roots dug into the side. Taking a moment to secure Lang onto his back, He began to pull himself up by the roots. Lowest had always been tall, and had no trouble reaching them.

Pulling himself up, though it was only a short few feet, was far more difficult. Lowest did not know how much strength there was in his body, or why he was able to keep going when by all rights he should be in bed recovering, or dead. His missing ear had stopped hurting him, though it had been cut off two days prior. What he knew was that though it was a challenge, his muscles were still strong, and after several minutes of straining he flopped onto the hard roots of the tree. The snow around him had been churned by a hundred feet, and in places soiled, but he was out of the trap. All that remained was getting Khazad out, and quickly.

Lowest turned his attention back to the bowl, where nothing had changed. Khazad still stared down the wolves, and they were backing away from him, pressing themselves to the walls. Lowest could get Khazad out, but only if the wolves remained afraid. Khazad would have to retreat to reach the roots. Lowest made sure that Lang was safe before walking the rim to where it was lower and looking Khazad in the face. The dwarf did not seem to notice him, his eyes in a kind of trance.

“Khazad,” he said in a whisper, careful not to bring the wolves back. The dwarf grunted, but made no sign that he had heard him. “I can get you out while they’re gone. There’s a dip in the bowl and roots to climb. I’ll haul you up.”

The dwarf grunted again, and began walking slowly backwards, never taking his eyes off the wolves. For their part, the three wolves seemed happy to watch him go, only coming off the walls as Khazad was halfway to the roots. Emboldened, but not rushing him, they followed at a distance, more curious than angry. All the while, Lowest whispered instructions to Khazad, letting him know where the roots were.

Khazad reached them as the wolves made a loose encirclement. One wolf on either side of him and one in front. Khazad placed his back to the wall. With two of their prey having already escaped them, the wolves did not seem eager in loosing a third. They began closing in slowly.

Lowest cast about for something to throw at them, to give Khazad just a moment to grab hold of the roots. He made a few snowballs before he gave it up as a bad job and went looking for a long stick. Any moment the pack could return as quickly as they had come, and when they did, Lowest had made the work of eating them that little bit easier. Try as he might, he could not find a stick laying on the ground. They were all obscured by snow, and he didn’t have the time to go digging for them. Instead, he ran to the nearest bending bough and jumped onto it, putting all his weight on the branch. After a moment of thinking that it was too strong for his weight, the branch broke, sending him collapsing into the snow. Lowest jumped up, branch in hand, and hurried back to the bowl.

Little had changed, though the wolves were closer now. Khazad watched them come out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t react when Lowest announced his return, but the three wolves looked up, momentarily distracted.

“Khazad, start climbing.”

He said the words, and the dwarf began. Khazad turned with suddenness which startled the wolves, who retreated back a few steps. Khazad raised the mattock over his head for Lowest, who grabbed it and heaved. Khazad kicked his way up the wall.

The wolves recovered and came running at the dangling dwarf, but Khazad had not wasted his time. He climbed, one hand on the mattock and one pulling up on dangling roots. Within moments he was at the top of the roots, his fingers at the edge of the bowl. Two of the wolves halted their runs, looking up helplessly, but the third, coming from the shallow part of the bowl, sprang for Khazad, its jaws open.

Lowest watched as the teeth caught the calf of Khazad's leg, the white driving through the orange cassock and into the flesh beneath, blood pouring onto the snow below. Khazad screamed as for a moment the wolf hung on to his leg, driving deeper into his leg but the wolf could no support itself by its teeth, and it fell to the earth, blood on its muzzle. Khazad swayed, having reached the top of the bowl, he climbed no further.

Lowest was sweating above the dangling dwarf. He grabbed the mattock and threw it into the snow behind him before grabbing the dwarf under the arms and heaving. Khazad was heavier than his size, weighing about as much as Edred. Lowest grunted as he heaved, his feet positioned unevenly on the roots. Below Khazad, the other wolves were lining up to take their jumps at the dwarf.

Khazad tried to help, kicking his feet and grabbing Lowest in a bear hug. His face began to pale as blood stained his cassock. Lowest felt his back strain and knew that his strength was failing him. So instead of pulling with his tired arms, Lowest crouched down and planted his feet. He heaved with all his body, and Khazad came.

The dwarf rose out of the bowl and tumbled away over the roots, grunting from the pain. Immediately, the wolves still trapped began howling. Their prey was escaping. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Lowest rose and hurried to Khazad.

“Can you walk?”

The dwarf nodded, wincing in pain. Lowest knew little of wounds, the Order being so afraid of illness. He knew certain wounds would kill a man, and wounds which a man could survive. When it came to dwarves, he knew nothing, but if a man was giving off that much blood, Lowest would have left them.

Khazad was hardy, far strong than himself, and so Lowest told himself that over and over. He would survive if Lowest could get them out of the forest. He hurried over to where Lang lay, still muttering to himself. For what felt like the tenth time that day, Lowest slung the boy over his shoulders. Then he went to the mattock and picked it up, nearly stumbling at its great weight.

“Khazad, start walking.”

The dwarf did, rising slowly from the ground. He paused, and then limped over to the branch Lowest had torn from the trees and done nothing with. Khazad stripped it of the leaves which were still clinging to it before using it as a staff. He nodded to Lowest, and began walking through the forest.

Their going was slow, Khazad limping and Lowest struggling to find the strength for the next step. The only sound in the forest was the crunching of snow and Lang's persistent ramblings. His mouth was right by Lowest's remaining ear, but nothing he ever said resembled speech. They did not go far before Lowest was sweating heavily, hunched over beneath the weight of Lang and the mattock. But though they were moving slower than ever, they saw neither hide nor hair of the wolves.

They broke out of the trees, ragged and stumbling. Lowest had expected to come across a wolf maintaining the siege, but none came across them, and as they walked into the grey light of the valley, Lowest knew why. On the other side of the village from where they stood, low against the north side of the valley, smoke plumed upwards. Lowest could see no flame from where he stood, the billowing smoke was proof enough of its existence. The Tyrant had smelled the fire and rushed his army to face the breach in the siege line. Grateful, Lowest muttered a prayer to Howl, and then began trudging through the bloodied snow which surrounded the village.

It was a long walk, but the absence of wolves meant that it was long, but not difficult. Lowest did not look over his shoulder as he walked, secure in the knowledge that the Tyrant was watching other things.

No shout or hail came from the village. Indeed, Lowest did not see a single soul, but he could hear them. There were voices carried in the wind, and the occasional howling. All of it seemed distant. Lowest could picture the fire waiting for them and the feeling when the weight was taken off his back.

It was in a haze of dreams that Lowest managed to stumble the remaining hundred yards, Khazad following steadily in his wake. As they reached the outer houses which now formed the wall of the village, Lowest stumbled into the snow and began to laugh. He was not sure why he was laughing, but once he started it became hard to stop. It was not joy, or even happiness. Laying under the eaves of a home, he wasn't even sure who it belonged too even though he had lived in the village all his life, he laughed till he cried, the tears freezing on his cheek. He laughed simple because there were no wolves around them, because he had seen the Tyrant in all its might and lived.

Khazad threw himself against the wall heavily. He was pale and clutching his leg, his breath heavy. For the second time since the coming of the wolves, Lowest watched as the life seemed to leave Khazad. The laughter slowly died in his throat as he regained control of himself. The day was not over.

He rose to his feet, staggering, and stepped over Lang, reaching a narrow alleyway which had been blocked with a hasty barricade.

“Hey!” he shouted. There was no response, so he cupped his hands, leaning wearily on the barricade, and shouted again. And again. And again. Lowest kept shouting into the winter until his voice was cracked and he felt weaker with every shout. Shouting took so much out of him each time that he began sliding down the barricade. If anyone was there, they were probably dealing with wolves, and the shouts went unheard.

Lowest watched the sky as he shouted. Somewhere up there, the sun was shining, but all he saw was rolling grey clouds. Just a few days ago he had been able to see so clearly that he could count the flakes as they fell, though they were miles from him. The twisting faces of the Mander returned to him, dying and screaming, alive only in his mind. They were there in the clouds above him.

“Help!” he shouted, his voice now broken.

A new face appeared in the clouds, young, brown haired, light brown eyes open wide as they surveyed the scene below.

“You didn’t die there,” Lowest said wearily to Min’s face.

Min took one last look at them down there and vanished, her little voice shouting for help. Help did come, hard faced villagers and shepherds came running to them, their faces breaking into smile, and the three of them were carried into the village, as despair turned to celebration.