

Chapter 11: The Voice Which Rules Minds

The celebrations were already going when Lowest stumbled into the village square. He was supported under each arm by the Algry cousins. Lang was carried aloft by the Algren clan, numbering five in all. Lowest had seen them lift Khazad off the ground, but looking around he could not see what had happened to him. They were led into the village square, where the worried faces which called Howl's Valley home laughed and danced. Lowest could see soot on some of their faces, and a few of those had blood in their hair. Behind the village, smoke was still rising.

They deposited Lowest at the bottom of the small rise on which Highest's mansion had stood. A mug of ale was thrust in his hand, and the cousins ran off to join the dancing. Music was stuck up, fiddles and flutes played by both villager and shepherd, a wild melody as the musicians played whatever tunes they knew, without coordinating. They moved the sheep out of the way and piles logs in the square, starting a fire.

Soon all the village was basked in the glow of the fire, and the villagers celebrated with dancing and drinking. Lowest surrendered himself to the warm glow and the drink in his hands, watching the villagers as they celebrated. They looked nervous beneath their smiles, celebrating this moment as though it were their last. It could be, for all Lowest knew. He had heard nothing about the Tyrant since returning, and it seemed unlikely that they would be celebrating if they had seen it. Lowest kept silent, not that anyone in town would talk to him anyway. Best they remember one last dance than know the beast which was planning their doom even now. Lowest shivered from the thought of the beast, and turned to watch the village to drive away the thoughts.

Kesh and Thaan were both dancing, though neither did so very well, leading their respective clans round and round the fire, distant from each other. Lowest had never know those two to ever have an argument between them, Highest's favorites had always stood united behind her. Opposite Lowest, watching the dancing from the eaves of Thaan's house, were Edred and Masa. The Sword looked like he had at the Mander, though standing under his own weight. Lowest looked closer, and saw the big man smiling privately to his wife, none of the blood on his face seemed to be his own. The blood, combined with soot, made him into a fearsome figure.

Lowest paused in his sweep of the village. Behind Edred, moving with care that none might touch him, was the man who was not a man. The Spear moved through the crowd, never touching them, never speaking to them, but somehow part of them. Lowest could not say why he felt that way, he shouldn't even be looking. The hooded figure stopped suddenly as he walked through the crowd, he had noticed Lowest's eye. He changed direction, walking straight for Lowest. As he passed an ale table which Masa had set up, he took a mug and continued in stride.

Lowest watched, and as he watched he found himself unnerved. He had known the boy, confided in him, played with him, thought him his brother. The thing that was now approaching in a dark green cloak, for it was a thing after Highest had stripped the manhood from it, filled him with a fear. A fear of the unknown. Would he speak to him? What would happen if he did? Lowest took a big swig of his mug.

The swirling green cloak reached him, regarded him for a moment while still standing, before sitting down at his side. An unseen mouth took a great swig from his ale mug. He had always liked his drink too much.

“You know, the previous Lowest used to talk to me.” The voice, at once familiar and foreign, cracked from misuse. Lowest had not heard him speak since they had returned to the valley. A knot formed in his throat. Breathing became difficult. Lowest held his silence, not wishing to be seen breaking the law Highest had set.

The other waited for him for a moment, but when he didn’t speak he continued. “He would never talk directly to me, he was afraid of Highest too. But he would listen when I spoke, and when I was silent he would talk. He never answered me, that would be a conversation, but he would talk. About what he was feeling, what others were doing to him, whatever. What he said was never important, it was that there was someone to sit with, someone who was willing to remember me. It reminded me that I was human still, though they had cut me from them.”

Lowest listened, and as he listened he felt tears running down his cheeks. He set his mug down and covered his eyes with his hands, setting the tears free. Beside him, the man who was not a man fell silent. Lowest let it all out, shivering and weeping, the image of the Tyrant burned in his mind.

A new sound joined the celebration, a distant barking. Immediately, Lowest raised his head, his mind racing to wolves. But it wasn’t a wolf. Sprinting across the frozen creek, not taking the time to cross over the bridge, came Holm. Her blue eyes were fixed on him. Lowest expected himself to flinch at the sight so near the wolf, but he was not afraid. She looked like them, wolfish features in the face, and yet there was a softness to them, a kindness. She did not think only of her next meal.

She threw herself into his arms like a shot from a sling, knocking him over. Lowest found himself laughing as she licked the tears from his cheeks, her tail wagging so furiously that it shook them both. With one hand he grabbed her and with the other he began scratching her ears. Righting himself, he brought her close and scratched her until his fingers were tired. All the while, she watched him with those blue eyes, too understanding.

“I am so sorry,” he found himself saying to her. “I couldn’t have brought you in there. In those woods there is a beast I cannot understand. How we survived I do not know, but I would not want you to face this evil.”

He pressed his head against hers.

“I am so sorry Holm.” Beside him, he felt the man who was not stiffen suddenly. Holm looked at him and then back to Lowest. “Yes, Holm. I gave you this new name for the friend which never returned from the Mander. A friend I miss every day. It used to be three of us. One got left behind, and now I feel myself getting lost in this world. The more I live the less I understand. I am sorry Holm.”

Lowest pulled Holm in close, and as he did he heard the man beside him begin to weep. The soft, steady sounds of pain came from beneath the cloak. Lowest felt ashamed that he could not comfort his friend, he couldn't even move the muscles in his arm toward him. His fingers would not pull free of Holm's fur.

They sat in silence together for a time, watching the celebration of the return. The villagers seemed to have fought a battle with the wolves in the smoke, and their cheer was as much about that victory as Lang's return. The boy was sitting in a chair, a mug in his hands, his eyes vacant. Lowest could see his lips mumbling still. The dancers would come by and clap him on the back or say encouraging words, but Lang didn't notice them. Highest was nowhere to be seen.

The other shifted beneath his heavy cloak. "You know, when we came back, and what happened to me happened, I spent days shouting for someone to notice me, but they would turn away. Edred would feed me, but he wouldn't look at me. I went to find you, but the dwarf told me you were off on a hunt. He was the only one to speak to me, and he only did it once." His voice cracked with emotion.

Lowest felt the emptiness again, the eyes of the tyrant floating before his eyes. There was music and dancing which he could not join, laughter and conversation which his inclusion would only dampen. He had faced something that day which he had never thought he would see, more terrible than his dreams. And as he sat there, Holm in his hands, he could not imagine why he had done it. He knew that he would not go out again.

His companion continued. "When I heard about the injury, I thought it was nothing. You know how hardy the Vestiges made us. But then they said you were dying, and no one in town seemed all that concerned, apart of Edred, at least. I saw Sareth drinking and toasting with Thaan the day after. Highest said we were to leave you to your fate, to let you die with dignity. I came up the mountain to see you once. The dwarf wasn't there, neither was the dog. You were laying in bed, feverish. You didn't recognize me. I dropped off the food I brought and left."

Lowest listened, wrestling with his emotions. The only one who had come to him was the one Highest had erased. He felt sick, the dancers nauseated him. Lowest looked for Gillie, she understood something about the world, something which kept her going.

He didn't see her, and so he started talking, addressing the dog, trying to keep the pain at bay. "Once the battle began, I lost track of my friends. And as the battle unfolded beneath me, I grew afraid. There was so much blood, and terror. I saw people do things to each other which I had never imagined. I do not wonder why he ran, and was lost. What I wonder is why I stayed. I cannot but think that he was sane and I was mad."

The other had stiffened as he listened. When he spoke, his voice was broken and pained. "Isk, I went to the battle, I stood in the line. I could smell death. I held a spear, but I had never used one before. Something inside of me knew what to do, but it wasn't me. When the battle began, I ran, and the thing inside didn't argue. It didn't fight. It told me that what I was doing was right, that the war was wrong. How could I argue against Howl himself, how could I ever

explain it to anyone else? There are only four people alive who understand what it is to carry a piece of another inside themselves, and none of them are a Highest.”

Lowest could not see his eyes, but he could tell that the other was watching Lang sit beside the fire. The boy had been given what was Lowest’s by right, twice over, but as he watched him sitting there uselessly, he found that he felt nothing for the boy. He had always been arrogant through his connection to Highest, strolling around the village as though he were a prince, excused from the work which the other village boys had to do. Always one of the first to throw rocks at Lowest. And yet, Lowest could not bring himself to hate him, though he had been given every honor the village had to give as though they were his by right. Lowest had never seen him shoot a bow.

Watching those glazed eyes, Lowest could not but think that the boy lived in his own cage. Gilded, exhausted, but still a cage. The Vestige could do a great many things, but could it find talent where none existed? The eyes of the village, and of Highest, were on him now, and Lowest did not envy him for that.

He looked back to Holm, who was watching him closely from those blue eyes. His hands stroked her behind the ears as he spoke. “The more I live, the less I understand. Highest took my gifts from the High Highest, chained the man who brought them, claimed they were from the darkness, and then she gave them to Lang, that he might enjoy them. I can’t see the Light in that.” His companion stirred beside him. “The more I think on it, the more convinced I am that men cannot be made to walk the path of the Light. He must choose to walk it; else he is nothing but a captive or slave.

“And more, there cannot be a single path, because everyone who lives walks their own path. If there was only one way to goodness, then most would fail to see it while they walked the path of their life.”

Lowest fell silent. What he said was certainly heresy. There would be no rising for him, he knew it. He would be condemned to die as Lowest, and probably in the next few days. If Highest really could see all things good and all things evil, she would know that he had fought the wolves, and if she couldn’t, then whatever feeling she had driving her would lead to his continued humiliation.

Beside him, the other did not speak. Together they watched the celebrations for the longest time yet. Min came running through the crowded square and vanished into the Algry house at the end of the square, returning sometime later with Gillie, whose hair was disheveled. Together they danced, and soon Gillie was laughing as she twirled her niece round and round to the disjointed music. That was something the Darkness could not touch.

As he watched, Lowest began to speak about the day’s events, describing the Tyrant. The other clutched his robe and rocked gently as he spoke. Lowest did not blame him, it was how he felt seeing the beast. Holm growled at the mention of the direwolf.

“...the only thing I don’t understand, Holm. How did we escape alive?” Lowest mused aloud. “We were trapped in a bowl, a hundred wolves and the Darkness’ own hound watching us, and yet they ran off to some other business, leaving us with only three to face.”

The silence between them was not long, stretching out only so long as to not be a conversation. Then the other spoke. “I was in my home today, “the Abandoned Home” the children have begun to call it. I sat in my chair, warming myself by the fire and cursing my cowardice, what I do every day. On my lap was the gift the High Highest gave to me, a man who deserves every punishment the Light can give.

“I was thinking of...nothing, when I heard it. The whole village heard it. Howling, a chorus of wolves. But this was not the pride they had in that first day of the siege, this was anger. Something had gone wrong. And then there was a voice that silenced all others. When it spoke, all others fell silent and waited for its terrible judgment. Everyone in the village heard it, and we all feared. The thing inside of me was not afraid, however. It stood up, stood me up, and found a weapon.

“I ran into the streets, looking to see it, but all I saw was the forest. Everyone else was in their homes, listening to the sounds. The men on the roofs plugged their ears. I ran to the rooftops and saw nothing moving in the forest. The valley shook from the voice, and the thing inside me knew that it was an ancient enemy. One it must fight.”

He paused, brushing the snow off his cloak. When he finished, he turned to look at Lowest. His face was hidden, but now and again the flickering light of the fire would reveal a feature. His eyes were wide and haunted. Lowest had seen the look on him before, when they were boys, his uncle had joined them in the mountain to watch for wolves, and one day he slipped and fell off an outcropping. The other had been the one to find him, and for the next year his features carried a haunted sharpness to them.

“The voice died and the village shook off the memory. They poured out of their homes, a terrible sound not heard in a thousand years still ringing in their ears, and they promptly got to bickering. They kept at it, for a long time, until Edred came out of his inn and walked through the crowd, and jumped over the wall. The entire village followed him to the edge of the woods. Under Edred’s direction, they set fires along the northern slope, and they waited for the wolves to come. The fight was short, and victorious. Few were injured, none died, and ten wolf carcasses were brought back to town.”

He fell silent. Lowest looked to the town. They had won a victory today, but the siege continued. The Tyrant was not going to let them celebrate for long, Lowest knew that much for sure.

Gillie had lead Min off from the dance, lost in the crowd. All the faces, some old and some new, mingled together, their smile ready to fall off their faces. At his side, the other rose. Lowest turned to him. The hooded face was watching the fire.

“I am going to leave you,” he said. “We have sat too long together. And thank you.”

He turned to go. Lowest pulled the dog close, and while the other was still in earshot, he spoke to her. "Holm, I have missed you. I am so sorry for leaving you behind."

The dog smiled and then turned to look at the departing other, those blue eyes shrewd. Lowest watched as the man who was not a man slipped into the crowd, picked his way across the dance floor, and vanished without looking back.

Lowest was left alone in the party, alone except for Holm, who would not leave him. It was enough. He was whole again, and could not think what could take him beyond the walls again. He hoped that nothing would.

In his youth, he had loved to dance in the village fetes, but as he grew, they spent more time in the inn than the dances. Dancing today would quickly kill the mood for the villagers; Lowest was never permitted to dance. It would be too much joy for a man in his position. Lowest had been tempted by the darkness, and had to walk a narrow path back into the Light. Alone, and presented with the way back into the Light.

Few made it. In Lowest's whole life, this year had been the first time that Highest had named a new Lowest while the old was still living. In the coming year, if there would be one for them, Lowest would receive many admonishments for his behavior. Where they lessons if he could not use them to rise?

Lowest watched the shepherds dance, and accepted that he would never dance with others again. There would be a lot he would never do again, unless he found a way to rise in Highest's estimation or her successors. If they all managed to live long enough.

Feeling a peace which could only come from a unexpected chance at life, Lowest rose from where he sat and walked, pausing only long enough to warm himself a little beside the roaring fire, to talk to Edred. Ever loyal, Holm stuck to him like a shadow.

Edred did not see him coming until he was a few feet away. Mug in his hand, he was holding Masa close with his other. When he saw him, he looked up sharply, a worry in his eyes. Masa noticed the change in her husband, and turned around to see the source of the trouble. She frowned as she saw who it was. Lowest had once thought her beautiful, as had all the other boys in the valley, but time had etched a meanness into those features, a meanness which frightened him.

"Higher," Lowest said as he approached. Edred nodded as Lowest bowed to the waist. "When we were trapped by the direwolf and all his servants, it was the fire you started which saved us. You drew them away. I thank you." He dipped his head in a less deep bow, but a proper one all the same.

Masa's frown lightened at his formality, but Edred frowned, still darkened by soot from the fires. "Lowest, it wasn't me but the thing inside of me that saved you. I froze when I heard the howling, it was my body that moved. I watched myself cut down those trees, kill wolves when they came." He paused, and Masa's frown deepened as she listened to her husband talk. When he continued, there was something like fear in his eye. "There was something moving in

the forest. I could feel it. I could feel the lungs which shouted that terrible cry. There is something in the woods.”

Lowest dipped his head again. “It’s a direwolf, Higher. A beast of the darkness. It stands ten feet tall, and thirty long. Its eyes are large as a shield, its teeth were like swords. It was the largest beast I have ever seen, and yet it moved through the forest silently. I almost feel thankful that the Bow was stripped from me, because if I had it burned into my memory I would go mad.” Lowest paused and looked to where Lang sat in a stupor. “I think you might be the only one who can face this enemy.”

Edred rocked backwards, shouldering the weight of the burden, but nodded, his jaw set. Masa looked to him, worried.

With a final bow of the head, Lowest turned around and walked away. He had done his duty, and had learned that it was best to talk to Edred alone now. Masa, whatever she had been in his youth, now saw him as a rodent. Best to avoid her where he could.

As Lowest ambled through the crowd, he looked up, and found the heavy grey clouds breaking. The sun was up there, its light catching on the snow. For the first time since his injury, Lowest felt himself at ease.

Soon others saw the breaking clouds and the celebration hit a higher note, with songs sung praising the light. The drink flowed freely, and though Masa’s inn was well stocked by the merchants who came to the valley, Lowest would not be surprised if she ran out of liquor that day.

The children gathered, Min among them, and they began the familiar rhyme:

“When early snow does fall,
The Lone wolf makes his call,
Dark Howlers cry a doom
In woods near Howl’s Tomb.
Sheep Flock,
Wolves stalk,
Which color wool
Will they pull?

Blue and Red
Lost their head.
Green and White
Died of Fright.

Sooty Black

Won't come back.

Only Grey

Got away.

And Rose?

Rose Froze!"

Immediately they scattered through the town in search of their assigned color. Min seemed to have been given a color other than grey, she was smile as she ran off. All the children were smiling, eager to have fun after day of fear. Their parents were smiling with them as the children scampered through the town trying to find their color.

None of them had listened to the words, words which made Lowest shiver. How could they not hear the warning? The words of some prophesy were there clear as day. They offered no hope for him. Nor for any of them except Gillie.

The words ringing in his head had revealed deeper mysteries then they had at first glance. The song that the children sang as long as Lowest could remember, and there it was, announcing his death.

It was often remarked in the village that the surnames were connected to colors. The proud Alreeds, grubby Albleus, haughty Algrens, numerous Algrys, distant Alwhits, industrious Albleks (to which both Edred, Ammardain, and the man who was not a man were all part of), and the malingering Alrese. There was only one of those remaining, and he stood Lowest, like his father.

Each of them was given a color in the rhyme, and each of them died. All except grey. The evil which surrounded them would consume them all. There was no mention of a dwarf in the song, but only grey got away. Lowest doubted that there would be much leeway when the destruction came.

"Rose froze!"

So that was how he would die. Freezing. There was plenty of snow in which to do it. Or maybe he would seize up again when he faced the Tyrant. It happened to him once, it would not be a surprise. The only question was how was he going to freeze if he was never leaving the walls of the village again. He wouldn't not with that waiting for him.

As he thought on his death, he stood rooted in the middle of the celebration. No one seemed to mind him, stepping around him as if he were a statue. None wanted to celebrate with him. Holm walked carefully around him, like a shepherd round his flock, but she was the only one to paid him mind.

All of this, everything around him, was destined for destruction. They would all die, and he as one of them. The cold winter wind would blow through the town and the valley would stay empty until spring, when their destruction would be discovered.

He was the last Alrese, and there was not like to be any more. Lowest was not forbidden from marriage, but no family would accept giving one of theirs to Lowest, the shame would be too much. That left eloping, and if Lowest's chances were slim now, they would be worse eloping. Given that Highest only rarely raised a Lowest, there would be no chance for him to start a family. Which, of course, only mattered if the Tyrant did not destroy them all in the next few days.

Lowest looked to the hills surrounding the village. There were eyes watching them, though he could not see them. The unclouded sun cast shadows onto the mountain, and they would be waiting there.

The children returned, having brought their various colored items back to the circle where they chanted the rhyme. Items tossed into the center, the children began their playful dying. Up in the hills were the beasts which would kill them. No doubt the Tyrant was watching, and plotting.

Lowest turned away from the children. Death was coming.

He set off, not sure where he was going. He brushed past Edred, who was now talking in low tones to Thaan. Edred was not the man to talk to, he would not understand the danger. Lowest didn't really understand the danger.

The words of the rhyme echoed in his head. They felt vague and random, but the feeling of doom hung in the air when he heard them. It was said that the Sword Hand was announced to the world in a prophesy. The Second Son was gifted with prophesy. Words of the future were not forbidden by the Light, but prophesy was not meant to come from any but a Highest, those nearest the Light.

The rhyme was as old as the village. Where it came from none knew, but everyone in Howl's Valley played the game at one time or another. Lowest had spent little time outside the valley, but he had not heard the song. It belonged to the valley, warning of a doom which was coming to pass. His doom.

Lowest found himself at the home of the man who was not a man, which had once belong to a great storyteller, but now belonged to a ghost. It stood at the outer wall, facing the mountain, jutting out somewhat from the wall. There was a guard on the rooftop, who was not watching the woods but lay on his back and watched the sun climb the heavens. He was a shepherd, one with a familiar face but whose name Lowest did not know.

He knocked carefully on the door. There was no response. Lowest looked above him to see if the shepherd was watching, but he didn't see him. Hoping that he didn't know who the house belonged to, Lowest knocked again.

The door opened to find the other standing there surprised. One hand was on the handle, the other on the knife at his belt. His hood was off his head, revealing a sallow face, half lit by a fire behind.

“Listen,” Lowest said in a rush. “The rhyme, the wolf rhyme, the game the children play. Think about the words. They are prophesy, and doom for us. Just think about them, and keep a weapon close.”

The other did not reply, his eyes fixed on Lowest’s, burrowing into him. After a moment, he nodded and Lowest turned from the door, walking off into the streets. He heard the door close behind him, and dared not turn around to see what the shepherd was doing.

He returned to the celebrations, which now ran wild. The men on the walls had climbed down from their posts and joined in the revelries. None had seen him go or return. It was as though he was a wandering cow. Unable to join the dancing, the drinking, or even the idle conversation, but not knowing what to do with himself, Lowest sat himself down on a barrel and watched.

The thrill of returning alive to his village had worn off in the conversation with the other. Life unexpectedly still filled him, but though he wanted to shout and laugh until his throat was raw, or spin in the firelight until he could not walk. Anything he would want to do would swiftly bring retribution as it would distract from the narrow path he was meant to be walking.

So instead, and completely alone except for Holm, he watched them. He watched as the children began a snowball fight, as the dancing people bumped into each other as villagers gathered and mingled and broke apart. One crashing so hard into Meles that their wine stained his white coat. The boy didn’t mind, being drunk already, and poured his mug out to make the color uniform, and together they stumbled off to find more.

His lonesome vigil was interrupted by the arrival of Highest, who swept over the celebration in robes of deepest purple. She wasn’t smiling.

As she walked, the celebration stilled, the music died, and all eyes turned toward her. Lowest saw where she was going, her path was aimed straight at the muttering Lang. Thaan and Kesh materialized out of the crowd and hurried to attend to her. When she reached him, she looked him over, her hands running over his face. Lowest did not know what she was looking for, but evidently she did. She turned around suddenly, her robes whipping through the air.

“The ritual was only half complete,” she said, a hint of anger in her voice. “He knew the words to say, but he was not the proper voice for giving the Vestige. I do not know what power he has, if any.” A chill swept through the crowd. “There is fault to be laid for this. What failure was made lies at the feet of Lowest, but did not give him the time he needed. He did not sacrifice himself as I commanded, clinging more deeply to the life in him than the Light.”

Lowest felt every eye in the village look to him, angry. In their minds it was his fault that their savior had been broken, his fault that their salvation was not at hand. Lowest’s breath began to quicken, his heart pounding. They didn’t know, they would listen. The Tyrant was out there. He looked for Gillie out in the crowd but could not find her.

Panicking, Lowest fell from the barrel and touched his head to the snow. “Highest, this is not true...”

“You dare name me a liar?” she shouted.

“No, Highest. You simply do not know.”

“I know all things good and all things evil.” She rose to her full height, her robes swirling behind her. Thaan and Kesh loomed large beyond her shoulders.

“The Tyrant is out there,” Lowest shouted, his voice echoing over the square. He dared not lift his head to see their reactions. He could feel his missing ear on the side of his head, and began fearing for what she would take.

Highest paused. “The what?” A murmur ran through the crowd.

“The Tyrant, the direwolf which has inhabited the woods. It’s there, watching us.” He rose and pointed to the woods, his voice breaking. Many heads in the crowd looked off to the hills around them, expecting to see the beast Lowest spoke of. Highest cocked her head, looking wolflike, as she watched him.

When no wolf materialized on the mountainside, the crowd looked back at him. Lowest saw confusion in their faces. Why was Lowest ruining their happiness? Why had he caused the ritual to fail? Lowest fell to his knees and touched his head back to the snow. Beside him, Holm began to growl.

“I...I...Lang saw it,” he shouted to the village. “He saw the beast, he saw it.”

“Is this true Lang?” The question hung in the air, and was not answered. “You see how the boy’s mind was addled in the botched ritual? Lowest has been aiding the wolves.”

“No...no, ask Lang, ask Howl.” His voice began to fail him. His heart was pounding, hoping that someone would listen to him but knowing that they wouldn’t. “Ask him...ask him...ask Howl.”

“What?” A new voice cut across the square and Lowest looked up, hoping to see who was brave enough to stand for him. It was Lang, rising unsteady to his feet, blinking his eyes in the sunlight. Lowest’s heart rose. If the Bow was commanding the body, it would speak for him. “Auntie, what’s going on? Where am I?”

Highest stood stunned, watching the boy stagger to his feet. Behind her, the villagers began whispering among themselves. Lowest could not hear the whispers, but he knew what shocked him. Highest was always called Highest, no matter who was speaking. In her life, she had never been called auntie.

“Lang?” Highest whispered. Both Thaan and Kesh were looking at the boy as though he were dangerous. Perhaps he was.

“Auntie, how did I get here?”

Highest stuttered but Lowest didn’t hesitate. “Lang, Lang. Tell her about the wolf, the direwolf. You saw it. Tell her.”

Lang looked over to him, his feet wobbling, and Lowest saw by the firelight as his eyes went wide. The shivering stopped and Lang looked into the forest, frozen in place. He was looking for the beast, Lowest could see it. A violent shaking overcame Lang and he tore his eyes off of the hills. Shutting them, he fell to the ground, the shivering ruling him.

“Lang, tell her that you saw it.” Lowest was begging now, his clothes wet from the snow, his voice broken.

Lang looked at him, locked eyes with him, and then turned to Highest and shook his head. He broke down crying, hiding his face from the looming mountain. Lowest’s blood froze as he watched the boy lie. He could see the fury building in Highest’s face, and knew that a terrible judgement was coming. Lowest would never rise. Not after this.

Rose froze.

He couldn’t think of anything to do but watch as Highest collected herself and walked over to him. Holm’s growl turned to a whimper. The clouds began to gather again.

Highest came to a stop just before him, the wrinkles set deep in her face. Lowest could feel the anger rolling off her. “Listen to me know,” she said in a voice that carried over the entire village. “Lowest has been possessed by the darkness, spinning falsehoods. Everything he has said is a lie. You are not in danger from anything but a mindless pack of wolves. I know this.

“See what a madman his disease has made him. Lowest is the puppet of the darkness. I have not the time, nor resources to drive the darkness from the puppet, to cut the tethering strings of evil from him and set him free. I tell you know, that I know all things good and all things evil, and Lowest is evil. We shall not erase him, as I have others, but none of us will give to him our warmth, our food, our compassion. He will serve us, obey us, but he will not cross our thresholds. Any who is kind to him shall fall. These things I know.”

Lowest listened to her pronouncement with tears streaming down his face. “No...please, please. I saw it. I saw it. Its real, its real.” Strength left him.

In the crowd, he saw Gillie. She was holding Min close, Min’s face hidden in her aunt’s skirt. Her face was white. In the firelight he could see the tracks of tears running down her face.

He was Lowest, and somehow, he had fallen further.