

Chapter 12: Night Closes In

Lowest sat unmoving for some time, staring blankly into the snow. He could hear the villagers, they were somewhere beyond, somewhere where life could still be lived. The stinging wind cut at him. He stared at a footprint in the snow, left by someone who could sit beside the fire, someone who was not banned from all forms of friendship. Lowest wasn't sure if Holm was still at his side. Why would she be. She would never again now the roof of a house, or the warmth of a fire. It would be best to give her to Edred, she not suffer with him. What was he going to feed her? He didn't know how he was going to feed her.

He stood up, still not seeing clearly. He didn't know where Khazad had been taken to and hadn't seen him since their miraculous return to the village. Whatever magics he had to heal himself would be taxed once again. If the dwarf could walk, it would be best for him to gather his things and leave the valley. Better to die in the hands of wolves than witness this final withering.

Wandering where his feet took him, still not seeing his path, Lowest walked from the fire. He had no desire to see smiles, not when they would never be shared with him. As he walked he became aware that he was crying. Tears rolled down his face, freezing on his cheek. Why cry though? He was a dead man, a forgotten man, a hated man. He was nothing any more, so why cry? Tears were meant for others, so that they could see pain and come to aid. No one was coming to Lowest's aid.

Lowest looked up, for the first time since his chastisement looking clearly. Above him loomed the great bald head of the mountain, and somewhere up there was his home. That, at least, had not been taken from him. For a moment Lowest considered making a run for it up the mountain, reaching his home and baring it. He could make it, if he was careful. Probably not if Holm was with him, but he could leave her behind. He turned and saw her sitting in the snow just behind him, her eyes locked on his. She seemed to almost understand what he was thinking about. She would not leave him. Lowest gave one last look up the mountain side, and gave it up as a bad idea.

If they lived through it, he would return to his home and never again leave the high mountain. Let them call Risings, Lowest knew he could not rise, so he would not go. He could not understand the path he was asked to walk, could not see a way back into the Light. If his path was to be judge by someone like Highest, there could be no salvation for him.

Lowest let the heretical thoughts course through his mind. He was not afraid of them anymore. At least in his mind he could think unfettered. Highest would never now his thoughts. They were his, and would never be taken away from him. A secret rebellion. A secret freedom.

In his mind, he insulted the Highest with all the foulness he knew, and felt the pain in his heart lighten. Outcast though he was, he was still alive, and though he had to do whatever anyone ordered him, and endure what he had to endure, he would not be made to face the Tyrant again. That was left now to Edred, the liar Lang, and the other, if he would go to battle for people who would never speak to him again.

Going nowhere in particular, Lowest found himself turning from the mountain and making his way down to the west side of the village, where the valley ran down into the wide lands beyond. There would be no freedom in those lands, but there would be less pain.

As he looked over the frozen valley, something hard hit him in the back of his head and Lowest fell to the ground, dazed. Then came another, and another. Beside him Holm was growling. Snowballs continued to smack into him, for that's what they were. The village children, Lowest could not see Min among them. He grabbed Holm to hold her back and then resigned himself to the blows.

The children pelted him, laughing as they did, and it was the laughter which stung greater than the snow. Lowest remembered his father bearing the snowballs. Throwing things at Lowest had always been the favored pastime of the village children. It would not kill him. That would be the wind.

Eventually the children got bored and wandered off, perhaps because he did not cry out as they struck him. They shuffled off, leaving Lowest cold and bitter. He returned to his secret freedom, thinking evil of Highest, only now those thoughts included the villagers and the children. It felt like a darkness, an evil, to make him hate them, but he did not reject it, because it was his. Perhaps the only thing remaining that was.

From a young age they were taught that the Darkness was waiting for them, reaching out to take them, and that only by listening to the words of those higher could they be saved from its grasping hand. How could the Light call for men to be beaten, to be silenced, to be forgotten? If it was darkness to remember that he was a man also, then it was best that these thoughts were coming to Lowest, and not to someone who was still walking in the path of the light.

Lowest brushed the snow off and walked to the overturned wagon which he had vaulted earlier that day. Light, it seemed to long ago that they had stood at the snow bank and watched for wolves. Lowest wondered if he would ever learn the name of the shepherd who had died, if anyone knew or cared that the boy had died. Were they looking for him right now, wonder where he had gotten to? He could see the dead eyes when he closed his own, though thankfully not as clearly as the dead of the Mander.

He curled into a ball with Holm in the corner of the wagon, making himself small. The wood was cold, but at least he was out of the wind. Together, Holm and Lowest rested in the wagon and waited for sleep to deliver them from this long and terrible day.

Just like everything else in the world, sleep did not seem to want him. He was tired, more tired than he had ever been, but his mind was restless, thinking endlessly on the same thoughts. The sun was still in the sky, though twilight was beginning to touch the edges of the sky, But though he had battled wolves twice in the day and survived, sleep would not come to him, not for several hours.

When he did sleep, it was a dreamless sleep, without shape or sound. Lowest felt himself floating at times, warm. Once he thought that there was a voice calling out to him, but it was just

a color forming around him. There was a shaking, and then a rumbling. The rumbling grew louder and louder until it was shaking him.

Lowest awoke to find Holm shaking in his arms, her growl so powerful that he could feel her growl in his chest. He was warm, warmer than he thought he would be. There was something heavy draped over him. A blanket.

How had that gotten there?

He wasn't cold at all. The night was not halfway over, judging by the completeness of the darkness. The night air had a bite to it, which began nipping at him as he took the blanket off. Lowest took a deep breath of the night air and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. The village was quiet, the celebration breaking up at some time ago.

Beside him, Holm continued to growl, but she did not rise from a crouch. Puzzled, Lowest looked around for what was bothering her. Was someone coming at him in the night? He placed a hand on her, trying to calm her.

And as he did he noticed another sound, a scratching and a sniffing coming from behind them, against the wagon wood. Something from beyond the village.

Immediately Lowest sprang up, Holm followed him at his side. He looked to the rooftops to see the guards, but he didn't see anyone. They were empty. Indeed, there was no sign of anybody in the town. Lowest stumbled out into the street, feeling like he was in a dream. It was a dream, it had to be. The

Sniffing fell silent behind him, just for a moment. Half a heartbeat later there was a furious digging. The snow piled up on the sides of the wagon gave way. Despite knowing it was a dream, Lowest cried out. He cried the alarm, calling again and again that the wolves were here. They were coming.

The first snout popped through the snow wall followed by paws. The great hairy beast contorted itself through the gap, forcing its way into the village. Lowest shouted again and again, all the while praying for this to be a dream, for the walls to still be standing. Holm began barking, her side pressed up against his leg.

The wolf twisted and then stood upright in the village. It smiled at him, a grin all too knowing. Holm's barking reached a fever pitch. It looked around, saw that they were alone, sat down and howled. The lone cry rent the air, and it was swiftly answered by a hundred voices, and one deeper than all others. Around him the doors were flung open, and villagers and shepherds stumbled out into the street, eyes wide.

A second wolf worked its way under the wagon, and there was a great clawing and scrapping at the wood barring the way. More were coming. Shouts were coming from all over the village. There were screams and the sounds of barking and growling from behind them.

Lowest looked for those who were near him and found himself looking at Ammardain. The heavy blacksmith was in a shirt and was carrying a sword. His apprentices were still spilling out of his home. He met Lowest's eye and nodded. Then he charged the beasts.

Lowest did not join the charge, he couldn't. The dream was shattered. Reality welled in its wake. This before him was the horror of the Darkness. As Lowest, he could not raise a weapon. He had broken the laws of the Light before, and it had earned him pain. He backed away from the fighting, Holm ever at his side. He turned, taking one final glance at Ammardain, and ran from the fighting.

He stumbled, the village now swarming with people trying to figure out what was going on. Chaos reigned. Lowest dodged four people as he scrambled back to the bridge. They were all in their nightclothes as they grabbed their weapons and went to battle, unsure of where the enemy was coming from.

As he ran through town Lowest saw wolves, first only one or two at the fringes, hiding in the shadows, but the number steadily grew larger such that by the time he had reached the bridge in the center of the village, there was a wolf for every four villagers.

The wolves ran, quickly avoiding the blows from villagers, until they met up with others. Then, as a pack, they went hunting. Where the villagers were watching, they melted away, but where they were distracted, the wolves struck. Lowest saw Kesh Algren, the wrinkled man made of so much hate, one of Highest's favorite pets, get bitten on the leg and pulled into the space behind Thaan's home by a wolf white as moon light.

As Lowest stood on the bridge, he watched the battle unfold. There were a few furry shapes laying still in the snow, and where the wolves were struck they did not seem to get back up again, breathing pitiful last gasps before passing into the darkness. There were more men wounded. They would get bitten or raked with claws. When they fell they screamed for aid, and those passing in the night would pull the wolves off them before they could be eaten.

What the village needed most was Light. The clouds hung heavy across the sky and there was nothing but embers remaining of the great fire they had lit that evening. Light, that they could see what they were doing, who they were fighting. Lowest knew what he could do.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, for though his body possessed some memory of what it had been able to do in the fullness of its might, in the last few days it had been placed through more wear than ever before in his life, Lowest ran towards the smoldering fire.

The battle was more confused in the village square, and Lowest had to dodge wolves and swords to reach the embers. He would not have made it had it not been for Holm, running at his side. Where the wolves came to close the great Howl's shepherd launched itself on them, tearing with such ferocity that it frightened the beasts away. Where the danger was men, Holm gently grabbed him by the shirt of his shirt and pulled him from danger.

He at the fire pit now, hurrying to rekindle it. But rekindle it with what? His idle thoughts distracted him as he ran, and something caught his leg in the dark, sending him tumbling head over heels in the snow. Holm's belated bark of warning came a moment later.

Face down in the snow, Lowest could feel wolves watching him. The law of nature was to never look weak in front of predators. But though their eyes were on him, they were not near him. Around him swirled villagers, some armed and some otherwise. Safe for the moment, Lowest turned and faced whatever had tripped him up.

It was a chair, set out for someone to enjoy the fire, but which had never been taken back inside. As he scrambled to his feet, Lowest grabbed the chair and carried it to the embers, where he broke it apart and made a pyramid from its wood. He then gathered up what embers he could find and placed them together under that tent, before he blew on it with all his might.

The embers danced and sparkled beneath his breath, but they did not catch. Again and again he blew on them with a gentle breath, but they would not catch.

Frantic now, Lowest began searching for kindling, anything which could breathe life into the fire again. It was dark, too dark to see. If there was kindling just before his nose, he would not see it.

Instead he tore the clothes from his body. It was the coat which Edred had given to him for the climb up the mountain, the one which Masa had not wanted to give to the Lowest. He tore at it with his fingers until the cloth gave way. The cloth came freely and he carefully placed it onto the embers and blew.

Sparks.

The barest glimmer of light against the dark. Lowest could not fight, could not battle, but he could make light. Something small to wage war against darkness. The Light which Highest claimed for herself was not the path that he could walk. And while he thought in secret rebellion against that slim path, Lowest would not work for the darkness. Let them harm him in the pursuit of their narrow path, he would not leave them. That was his path to the Light. The true Light.

He blew on the embers once more.

And the fire caught.

It was small, weak against the wind, like a new life struggling to catch its breath, but there was Light. His Light.

The fire lived and caught on to the chair. Slowly, the embers remembered what it was to be fire. The circle of light grew, slowly, until Lowest could see the color of Holm's coat.

The chair would not be enough. It could hold the fire for some time, but soon it would be consumed and all his labors wasted. As the village around him continued in a confused melee, Lowest stood up and searched for more fuel.

There, just beyond the light of the fire, lay a barrel, which would have made a fine chair for a musician. Lowest rushed to it and began breaking it up for tinder. His fingers were bleeding as he tore at the nails, the wood becoming slippery in his hands. As soon as he had a board out he would throw it into the fire. Slowly, bit by bit, light returned to the village. The shadowed shapes of the wolves were thrown into the light, and as they were the beasts retreated, sticking to the shadows.

The villagers surged in the growing light as Lowest ran to and fro gathering wood and throwing it on the fire. Soon the fire was roaring and the light it cast filled the village square. As the darkness withered before the flames, voices lifted up: shouts, cries, cheers. As the fire light grew stronger, so did the resolve of the villagers. They could see their foe, they could see each other. They could join together and fight the darkness.

Lowest ran the wood back and forth until his lungs were burning and he could barely stand. He fell beside his fire and tried to catch his breath again, Holm ever by his side. He sat, and he watched, and thought about what he had seen.

The wolves had attacked in the dead of night, when they retired drunk from celebration. A well-planned assault, though, they had a way through the walls but no way to break them down. Their forces had not flooded the village when they had the chance, giving the villagers time to rally together. It had wounded many and killed some, but they were not yet destroyed. This was victory.

It felt terrifying.

Lowest stood up after a moment's peace and pulled a log from the fire. Then with a torch to light his way, he set off in search of Khazad.

With the wolves hiding in the alleyways, searching for easy meals, or else clawing their way to the walls and under. Lowest could only imagine the wolves waiting outside of the walls, eager for their chance at blood, now denied.

He walked up through the center of the square, on either side the villagers keeping the wolves at bay. He did not know why, but he found himself walking south, away from the tavern. There were more homes on this side of the river, perhaps he was taken there. Gillie would know where to find them.

As he thought that he realized why he was going away from the inn. He needed to see that Gillie was safe. She had given him the blanket, he knew she had. He could not see her in the crowd, though there were many swirling in the night. Lowest began running.

The village flew past him as he raced to the large, long house of the Algy's. He brushed past the last guard, the line standing some twenty feet from the Algy home. Twenty feet through the darkness. Lowest crossed it in a second. He slammed into the wall of the home and began shouting.

"Gillie, Gillie are you there?" Lowest heard no response. He waited a moment, then burst through the door.

There was a draft inside the home, cold air hitting him as a wall. Lowest looked for the source of the cold air. The wall to the outside was missing, torn out from the building. Beyond loomed the frozen side of the mountain.

Wolves were waiting for him, standing in the home. The light was poor, cast by only the fire of his torch, and it seemed to die as he stepped into the home, swallowed by the darkness, stifled by the wind. Opposite him, a hole had been made in the wall. Lowest did not need to wonder what had made that hole, he had seen its face. There were five of them, their muzzles stained with blood already. Their eyes were on him.

He looked to see who was still living, praying that someone was still. The wolves were contented to let him watch. They had had their fill. There were bodies on the floor, half consumed, bitter and broken. Dark, wet wood flickered in the light of his torch. Bodies were always little when the life had left them. Lowest could not tell who was laying there, not in the light, not with the level of destruction they had endured. He stalked the overturned tables of the Algry house, looking for Gillie's body.

"Isk!" The cry froze him in place. He turned and saw Gillie sitting in the corner, a small figure wrapped in her arms. Her husband grabbed them, holding them both tight, watching the wolves have their way with his family.

This was not right. Grey was meant to live. The song said so. Lowest felt a coldness grab hold of his insides and hold them tight. The prophesy, if such a word could be used for such a small village, promised him that they would get away. This was not survival, this was annihilation.

There was only one answer. This was where grey got away. Lowest would deliver them, it was promised. He would not freeze, not now. The tyranny could come for him later, and carry him away with a single bite, but Lowest would not go right now. He advanced into the ruined home, waving his torch in front of him.

The wolves fell back readily, having had their fill of flesh. They watched with a curiosity, eager to see what he was going to do. Lowest was like a colorful bird to them, not something to each but something to watch. Behind him, Holm walked steady, an anger radiating off her that he had not felt before. She was with him.

He stood at the edge of the living room and the wolves retreated out the door, ever watching. "Gillie, run," he said, "run out the door. The village is safe. Get out the door and run until you reach the fire."

She raised her head. It was like a pale imitation of her own. A mask of the face he had known for so long. She nodded and stood up, her husband raising blindly to follow her. Lowest looked over to see what the wolves were doing, but it was too late.

As he looked over to Gillie, three more entered the house, hulking shadows of death. Holm launched herself at one, bounding over a table and falling on one. Her teeth sank into the

flesh and the wolf gave a squeal in terror. They tumbled off into the distance, clattering against the furniture.

Bounding out of the darkness came the two other wolves. Teeth flashing, they came straight for Gillie. Lowest swathe teeth glisten in the firelight, bloody. They did not sink their teeth her, but into the small leg she was carrying.

Min let out a scream, an ear shattering scream. The pain in her voice broke Lowest's heart, filled his mind with fear. A child was in pain. Gillie's niece, who she cared for more than any other person in the valley, the child who had always been kind when none other would give to him.

With a retch if their large bodies they tore her by her legs out of Gillie's arms. Gillie fought, but she could not hold on to the child's arms. Gillie was dragged across the floor, the home full of her screams. Holm was still across the room, wrestling with a wolf.

There was shouting somewhere else, but Lowest could not hear the words.

Gillie was in his ear, screaming, begging. "Isk, Isk, please. Save her. Save her."

His missing ear was burning. It was not his place. It was not his place.

But it was awful.

It was the most horrible thing he had ever see. In all the thousands killed at the Mander, in the wake of the Tyrant's face, nothing matched this.

The wolves pulled her from the house, into the snow beyond. Min was still screaming.

"Please Isk. Save her."

Lowest walked, as though in a trance, to the edge of the hole, torch in hand. He was forbidden from bearing weapons, for that was evil. But how could it be darkness to pull min from those jaws. He was not certain that he could save her, but he could die before she did.

"Please, please."

His ear was burning. Lowest tried to take a step beyond the hole, but his legs would not move. He was a coward, he knew it then.

At the edge of the fire light, a wolf let go of Min's leg and loped up to her head. Min was crying, Lowest could see the tears on her face. The wolf looked to him, and with a grin, sank its teeth into her throat.

The crying cut off at once, and the life left those kind eyes. The wolves dragged Min into the darkness.

"Please Isk."

Lowest wept.