

Chapter 2: Howl

The week leading up to the Rising was spend resting. Isk would walk to the promontory rock twice a day, aided by Khazad and Holm. The walks became easier as his muscles remembered something other than lying in bed. Dwarven soup helped too, weak though it was.

When they weren't talking round the firepit or walking to the rock, they amused themselves in their occupations. Khazad, no longer needing to look after Isk, took two journeys into the mountains to search the stone for, as he explained, the stone's strength. In the meantime, Isk strung his own bow and tried to draw it, but the old strength just wasn't there yet. When he picked up Howl's bow, however, it was easier to draw than it was to lace his breeches. Isk found some amusement in that.

Deep inside of him, in the place where the Vestige swam around his soul, there was a joy at holding that bow. Five feet tall and with a string which looked like wrought silver. It was beautifully fashioned, carved from three pieces then joined together. In a normal bow, this would not be possible, reducing the bow to a one string harp. But in Howl's bow there was something else, some hidden magic or lost skill of craft, which brought these three pieces of wood into harmony. With it, at least when he was in his full strength, he could accurately send an arrow three miles. All along the grip there were scenes of wolves fleeing from the wielder of the bow. That was Howl once, now it was him.

An image came, unbidden. The fletches waving in the breeze, red then white then red again, the colors of Howl. Those feathers were given to him when he first arrived in the camp. His fingers hurt slightly from loosing the arrow, a familiar tingling. The arrow, his arrow, flew clear over the heads of the clashing armies, over spears, over banners. He could see from his vantage point on a small knoll in the midst of the army as the arrow flew true.

Isk put the bow back on the wall, driving the memory away. The sound of the clashing swords rang in his ears. His legs began shaking. Holm barked. His legs gave way and he fell onto the bed, exhaustion spasming his muscles. It was not the Moon's Disease, which could lay men down with random attacks of shaking. Isk had seen it work on men, rendering them insensible until it relaxed its grip on them.

No, this was what happened to him when he saw the war. He'd seen this too, on the long march to Bredar. Men who were shaken from the fighting. Isk had hunted all his life, he was familiar with blood, but what he saw at war, what he alone saw, had been more than what he was prepared for. All men saw horrors there, but only those horrors right before their eyes. Isk saw all the battlefield, and in perfect detail. That was the Vestige inside him, the power which others were envious of.

There was no wound that he did not see. Each death on the field happed before him. He watched the souls of men ripped from their home. There was no way to look away without closing his eyes, and he could not close his eyes, not when he was looking for someone.

Holm laid her head on his chest, watching him with her intelligent blue eyes and offering up her ears for scratches. Isk took her up on it, running his fingers through her fur. Slowly, he gained control of himself.

Those were old wounds, wounds which were half forgotten when he lay in his delirium, half-forgotten but ever before him in strange twisting shapes. Edred never spoke of the war, not since they had left the field, and there was no speaking to the one they had lost. Only three had been levied from Howl's Valley, only three were ever called upon to serve the High Highest. They wore the three vestiges from the third son, and there was no need for more men.

His hand was idly tracing a route between Holm's two ears as the dog waited patiently for him to regain control of himself. Isk had never trained her for any of this, she simply knew. He forced those memories down.

Isk did not pick up his bows the rest of the week. When Khazad was away, he occupied himself with carving a new walking stick. As he carved, he watched the fire and whistled half-remembered tunes. The forest beyond was quiet, afraid. Whatever that black shadow had been, Isk did not see it again, though he looked for it every day. Perhaps it had been only a trick of the light, a final delusion from his illness. Nothing he knew of could move like that.

It hardly mattered. Creatures of the forest, particularly the rare and nasty sort, did not attack villages. He might be in some danger here, alone on the mountain but for a friend and a dog. Howl's bow would have to defend them then. Even in his weakened state he could probably send an arrow into the village with some accuracy. Should he be attacked in his own clearing, he was confident that he could put an arrow through the eye of whatever called the forest its home.

The red and white feathers stabilized the arrow and took it clean over the heads of the armies, still entwined in madness. The arrow flew to the hill where the heretic king watched the battle. The steel tip broke, for a moment only, the surface of the water, before it plunged further.

Isk threw the walking stick into the fire, disgusted with his own memory. The curse of the Vestige. He could remember everything from the last year with such clarity, yet who he had been before that seemed a gray haze. Those memories were so much harder to bring up, and when he did they seemed devoid of detail. He could remember running up the mountain to the promontory rock only because he did it every year.

He wished for new memories, ones which could drive away the death he saw every time he closed his eyes. Except the Bow did not work like that. The new memories stood alongside the ones from the previous year without forgetting the latter.

So he looked into the fire, that ever-changing patterns which were then devouring his walking stick. He noted each curve and wave in the hopes that all his memories would be fire, that it would be them that came before his eyes unbidden. And then he began making a new walking stick.

When Khazad was there, his memories did not swim before his eyes, but the dwarf was far more eager to talk about those days. He had stood beside Isk at the Mander, but he hadn't

seen what Isk had. He was too short, his eyes weak above ground. He had seen more of war, however, and the images of men and dwarves dying had little effect on him. Khazad was more than happy to speak about war, though he most often talked about the victory and Isk's place in it. That was what war was meant to be, unfettered glory, and that is what the dwarf saw.

Isk did not begrudge his friend his happy memories. It was better than the pair of them sitting haunted around the fire.

His strength did return to him over the week. Or part of it at least. He didn't need help to reach the edge of the promontory at week's end, though he still relied on his old walking stick to walk. His new walking stick was finished the night before the Rising, a new walking stick for the new year.

"Last day tomorrow," Khazad said as they both watched the fire on Rising's Eve. They had just finished a hearty meal of soup. Isk took to finishing the whittling the stick after the meal. "Going back to proper mountains."

Isk laughed at that last remark. "Do the mountains of my home not meet your lofty standards?" Holm raised her head to watch them.

Khazad laughed with him. "Worry not what the Dwarf King shall hear. The iron is poor and there are few minerals in the rock. Dwarves would not come here unless all other mountains lose their wealth." They fell silent for a time. "Been here longer than first thought."

"And I thank you for that." There was nothing he could give to the dwarf who had saved his life, twice. The only thing of value which he possessed was Howl's bow, a relic of immense significance. Giving that away would cause the High Highest to call the faithful to war to recover it. "In this last year you have done more for me than any other. My home is yours."

Khazad waved his hand sheepishly. "Such things friends do. Think not of it," he said, before starting a dwarven song Isk had never heard before. Isk smiled and watched the fire until it became embers, then watched those embers die one by one.

The next morning Isk woke early. He had slept well, untroubled by wild dreams. If he did dream, it was of meat pies at the Rising table. He did wake once, when some animal was sniffing around the fire, but Isk didn't rise from bed to investigate it.

Holm and Khazad were sleeping when Isk rose, the dog sleeping on top of the dwarf. Neither looked up as he passed them. The cool autumn air greeted him at the door, the air of the Rising, of the new year. In the camps, enroute to the Mander, Isk had been told that in the days before the Darkness and the Sword Hand, the new year had been celebrated in winter. A ridiculous notion. The new year was a time for food and drink and song, all of which belong to the last days of autumn. The winter is starvation, not joy. It was a tool of the Darkness, the evil which the Sword Hand slayed but at the cost of his own life. Powerful he had been, but not enough to remove the evils already unleashed on the world. So winter remained, but today was the last day of joy before the coming cold.

Isk walked out into the clearing, the sky full of morning light, though the sun was hidden behind the mountain. In other places, Isk had learned in his year away, the celebrations began at first light. Here in Howl's Valley, however, the celebrations would begin when the sun crested the mountain, at the very moment when it shone down into the valley. That had been Howl's signal to his men to fall on the flanks of the Darkness' horde.

They had hours to make it down to the village, so Isk began gathering wood for the fire. When it was going, he went into the woods with his walking stick and kettle. The river which flowed through town and shaped the valley ran through the woods not far from his home.

He passed beneath the eaves, crossing the threshold into the wilds. The forests of the Howl's Valley had been his since he was a boy, when he had first learned to hunt from his father. Isk had been at home at in the woods since that first time. All boys learned how to shoot a bow to guard the sheep in the mountains and hunting was a necessity for most families when winter came. Isk never knew why he had been chosen for the Vestige. He was faster than the other boys in the Rising Eve race, and a better hunter, but these things didn't make soldiers.

Now he was most assuredly the best hunter. He was always aware of which way the wind was blowing and could see and smell his prey long before they could do the same to him. The woods were quiet, and still in darkness, hidden in the shadow of the mountain, but Isk could see loose stag hairs carried in the wind. There was a smell of wolf in the woods.

Wolves made Isk's skin crawl, and most of the faithful. They were intelligent, and loyal to the Darkness alone. They stalked in the night in their packs, far from the hordes of darkness, or else served as scouts before the approaching death. That terror long haunted the night; their howls tore through the hearts of men. In the years of Darkness, men did not sleep. That is why the Sword Hand named his third son Howl, to take the voice from the Darkness' most loyal servants. Isk had heard those stories, same as everyone. The children in the village had a rhyme and game about them which had always frightened him. Every time he had heard it, he was plagued by nightmares that night.

Isk pushed the wolves from his mind. Best not to dwell on evils which lingered still in the world. He listened to the leaves beneath his feet, driving the thought of those eyes and teeth from his mind. Besides, wolves were rare in these woods. His father said it was because howl Howl had fought them. These woods did not belong to any wolf, these belonged to him. The Vestige inside him swirled in approval.

There was a cold in the air which had nothing to do with the lack of sun. Isk smelled a storm, snow was waiting in those clouds. It was early, too early for snows. If it was a lot, then the shepherds who came up the mountain would be trapped in the village for the winter. They were a rough lot from the plains, but the village boys made good money watching the sheep. Highest didn't trust them, ordering them to be watched. When there was a problem with them, she had the blacksmith and his apprentices rough them up.

He reached the river still thinking of wolves and shepherds. The clear mountain water would freeze soon and he would be left melting snow. South of him, just before the two

waterfalls took the water into the valley, there was a hart and a hind, drinking from the river. They watched him carefully, but their fear was not for him. They were afraid, Isk could tell by the way they stood. A sudden movement, even raising his hand, would send them running. Fear ruled the forest.

Isk knelt down and began filling the kettle in the clear water of the running river, whistling a tune to himself, when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. There were eyes on him. He stood up as calmly as he could, making sure not to stumble as he rose. Whatever was watching him was eager for something. That much he could feel in the air. Isk looked over to the deer. They felt it too, their eyes wide and fearful. The wind deadened, taking the smells of the forest with it. Sweat began beading on his brow. This was it, Isk was certain of it. Whatever beast had its eyes on him now was the tyrant of the forest, the beast which held the forest in its grasp.

As slowly as he could, he turned in a circle, hoping to at least see whatever it was that was thinking about eating him. Across the river the deer were all he saw. There were rabbit warrens and various nests, but nothing stirred in them. North of him was the mountain, all he could see in that direction was a lone mountain goat climbing up into the heights, unafraid of whatever dwelled in the forest below. Behind him, he could see where he had come from, nothing had changed. A family of squirrels which he had passed on the way to the river was frantically trying to gather a meal before whatever had violence in its heart decided on them. To the south there was only the running river and the valley beyond. Isk checked the water on the off chance that the beast living in the water, but he saw nothing there.

He had seen nothing, but still his heightened senses were screaming at him, warning him that soon he would have to fight to the death. There would be no fighting, he told himself. In his weakened state, the beast would tear him apart without any trouble. If there was trouble, he was going to dive into the river and take his chances with the waterfalls and the cold water.

Isk knelt back down to finish filling his kettle, his leg tense and ready to spring him into the water. Nothing came. The deer had gone as he surveyed the area, leaving him as the only satisfying prey in the area. His legs began to ache from the tension. Slowly, the feeling of hungry eyes on him lessened, and he was left alone in the woods, alone except for the squirrels.

Isk did not feel any safer. He looked around, growing increasingly frantic, hoping to spot anything else in the woods, even the wolves he had smelled earlier, but he saw nothing. Fearing that his senses had failed him, Isk left the river bank and made his way home. He tried to walk calmly, both to reassure himself and to let the beast know that he was not afraid.

The entire walk back, sweat ran from his brow, and it stopped only when he returned to his clearing. Neither Khazad nor Holm was there to greet him, but he felt safe all the same. This was his clearing. He had felled the trees himself, built the home, and dug the firepit. This was a pocket of order set against the wild wood. His pocket. He was safe as assuredly as if he had placed warding stones on the eves.

Putting the terror of the forest and its mysterious beast behind him, Isk hung the kettle from the spit above the fire and waited for it to boil. He had managed to pick up a few tea leaves in the woods, though it would be a weak brew. As he waited he sang traditional Rising hymns. There were a great many, but the ones he liked best were about Howl. That had not always been true. When he was a boy he had best liked the songs which explained the Rising, because he found it difficult to understand what was going on. But in the last year, he began to think more on the songs of the Sword Hand's three sons, and Howl in particular.

The kettle began whistling with him and he poured a cup of tea. All the world was calm as he drank it. It was not a peaceful calm, it was the calm of fear. Isk took the time to enjoy it all the same. He had never before felt so afraid in the woods. Whatever was terrorizing the forest was going to pick the woods clean, eating what it could and leaving nothing for the villagers to hunt in winter. Isk looked up to the cold mountain peak. There was food there, mice and voles, the occasional goat. If the forests were hunted clean by those hungry eyes, that might just be the only way to live. He shivered. That mountain had no love for men.

The door to his cabin swung open just as he was finishing his first cup. Khazad came out, his red hair a mess except for the beard, and a sleepy Holm followed after him. After morning's greetings, the dwarf immediately began preparing a soup. They had a few hours still, though it would be best if they could set off after breakfast. With Khazad leaving after the ceremony, Isk wanted to be down there early.

They talked about the usual topics, Khazad explaining the route he was taking back to the dwarven kingdoms. Isk knew the route well enough, at least as it tracked through the faithful lands. It was a peaceful road, free of bandits for the most part. The faithful knew the penalties for being found engaged in banditry.

"Going to wash before ceremony," Khazad said after they had their soup.

"Don't," Isk said, more forcefully than he intended to. Khazad looked at him. Isk explained himself. "There is something in the forest. It's hungry. I could feel it watching me, but I couldn't see it. You go into the water for a bath, you might not come back." The hairs on the back of his neck began pricking up again.

Khazad listened without a word, and when Isk finished he nodded. He trusted the power that Isk had been given. He had seen it for himself. "But will uncleanness shame the Rising?"

"No," Isk said. "There's a sacrifice of a sheep every year. Highest coats her hands in its blood. You'll be fine. Besides, the river runs through the town. You can bathe there if it becomes an issue."

"Then best be off," the dwarf said. He went into the cabin and began collecting his things. Isk stayed by the fire and watched it dance, burning its flames into his memory. Holm stayed out with him, watching the fire with the same sadness. The only thing that broke the stillness was the sound of the dwarf gathering his pack.

Isk began feeling queasy, imagining the hungry eyes in the fire. He had not seen them in the forest, but he knew that they had been on him. In his mind's eye they were golden like a wolf's. He did not need to imagine the hunger in those eyes, not when he had felt them on him. That hunger ran deep.

"Ready," came the dwarf's voice from his cabin. Khazad was wearing his cassock. His traveling pack on his back, unused for the many months Isk lay wounded. Isk picked up his walking stick and roused Holm.

The three of them set off down the mountain. As soon as they crossed into the forest, the feeling of being watched began again. Holm's ears flattened and she began looking around nervously. Khazad did not notice the fear in the forest, talking cheerfully about seeing his mountain home once more. Isk listened, but he watched the forest, hoping to find those eyes among the falling leaves. He could see the veins on leaves falling half a mile away, but the eyes were nowhere to be seen. All he could feel was the fear.

The ground sloped down gently toward the village. It was only after Isk's cabin that the mountain became steep and rose into snowy heights. The village boys had run this path the day before, just to see who was fastest. They didn't pass by his cabin, though he had heard them running. They followed the trail of churned up leaves, Khazad moving past talking of his home and onto the songs which he would soon be singing with his people. His strange words carried into the cowering woods, battling against the fear which beast had laid on these trees, a fear he could not feel.

Strange dwarven singing did not dispel the weight Isk felt, but it did lighten it somewhat. Holm followed after them, growling softly. Isk watched the forest, but he had convinced himself the beast would not attack them. It must not have a taste for man, otherwise he would have been attacked that morning.

Following the trail set by the previous day's runners, they soon found themselves walking along the river. The slope of the ground had become almost unnoticeable. Isk grew accustomed to feeling watched. The river beside them went partially to assuage his fears, jumping into its calming waters should be enough to save them from the whatever it was.

Isk began to frown as they grew closer to the village. He knew these woods better than the ones further up the mountains. Something was off. He could still feel the weight though they were half a mile from the village. These were not wild trees here, but were tended to and coppiced to give better firewood. They were not walking through the wilds anymore. Birds were common here, but he didn't see a single one. There weren't even nests. Across the river, a shepherd he didn't know was gathering firewood from the trees.

Khazad continued singing all the way into town. They came in on the opposite bank of Edred's inn, walking past the homes of the people Isk had thought the sum total of people in the world when he was younger. Of course the shepherds came from the lowlands, but Isk had thought they came from beyond the curtain of the world. When he grew older and realized that there was more than just the mountain, the river, and the hills, Isk had felt no interest in seeing

the wider world. That was where the wolves were. After he had been invested, he trembled as he walked beyond the town's barrier. The world beyond Howl's valley had its share of terrors and joys. There had been wolves in the wide world, but Isk found that they were dumb beasts, blind without the call of their dark master.

None of the villagers were in their homes. They were instead out in the streets of Howl, celebrating the end of the old and the birth of the new. Each one was in their most colorful shirt and dresses. Isk was in his grey shirt, the only one he had that was not stained with blood or sweat. He wore brown trousers. The children were running about, trying to gather up enough to play the traditional village game. Shouting, laughing, and the deep aroma of meat pies filled his senses.

Isk's eyes devoured the faces he had known for so long, partly because it felt good to see a face that was not Khazad's. They were all the same, perhaps more joyous than usual. None called to him, but Isk was still winding his way through the village.

Sareth Ammin, a shepherd who did not go down the mountain in winter, but paid boys in the lowlands to watch over his sheep in winter, was talking to Thaan Alableu, the village thatcher. Thaan was a bit too close to the Highest to have a high opinion of shepherds, so it was strange to see them talking, but both of them were fond of hunting, perhaps that brought them together. Besides, it was the Rising, all people should be joined together this day.

The thatcher was a small, simpering man. His large grey eyes were most often focused on whatever was causing Highest a headache that day. Because of this, he was placed highly in in each years Rising. His mouth was slightly crooked, twisted by years of his strange frown. His family, the Alableus had been the captain of Howl's guard, and so often served as Highest. Thaan had inherited none of his ancestor's heroic stature or grace. Isk had known the man's father briefly, the man had been old when Isk was a child, and though infirm and prone to looking dazed into the distance, he cut a more heroic figure than his son.

The shepherd was younger than his companion, a man of thirty-one summers, only a few years older than Isk. He had sandy hair which he kept close cropped. His face was smooth, unblemished by a single scar or mole. He could have been considered handsome, if it weren't for his watery eyes. They gave the impression of dullness, an impression that was often proved correct. Sareth had been the one Isk hunted with when the boar had gored him.

Thaan's eyes flickered toward Isk as he approached. Something like anger flashed in them, his mouth curled for a moment. He turned away and lead Sareth toward Highest's home. Ordinarily such a look would be missed, but Isk's eyes caught it. He stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" the dwarf asked, noticing the frown on Isk's face.

"Thaan is angry with me, though I can't imagine what for." Isk paused, a worrying thought blooming in his mind. "And if Thaan is angry with me, then the Highest is going to want to skin me."

"Best be careful, then."

“Yeah. This is a touchy day. Let’s be on our best behavior.” Isk led them into town.

Fortunately, not everyone had the same opinion of the new arrivals. Isk would have worried had everyone turned away, but they were greeted warmly by old friends. Isk put the hatred he’d seen in Thaan’s eye away. He could remember it in perfect detail if he tried. Instead, he buried it with the faces of his friends.

They were uncertain of Khazad, but the dwarf needed only sing them a song and he was accepted into the celebrations. They him near the Rising table and stuck a mug in his hand as he sang for the women who were cooking, none of whom knew that they were hearing bawdy dwarven drinking songs.

Holm stayed with Isk, her ears flat back and she watched the forest nervously, pacing around him. She ignored the food the children dropped for her, single minded focus on the trees.

“Isk!” the shout came from across the river. There, standing on the bridge which connected the two sides of town, stood Edred the Bold and his wife Masa. Edred stood as solid as the walls of Bredar, and beside him Masa like a willow. The angry scar he had received at the Mander had lost its color, becoming a simple line which ran from his brow to his jaw. It had been the work of a Homolian warrior intent on killing the king of Bredar. The Vestige Edred wore, the Sword, let him fight on with the wound. Isk looked for reassurances in his calm grey eyes. It was there, joy for this day and his friend’s recovery, joy for his marriage to Masa. Those same eyes calmed thousands of soldiers on the banks of the Mander. Isk began to look away, focusing his attention on his steps, but just as he did he thought something like regret flashed in those eyes. Isk looked back into those grey wells of calm and did not see it there again.

He must be imagining things. Isk shook his head and walked up to the bridge. Edred offered him a hand and pulled him into a bear-like hug. Masa did not take her hands off of her man.

“It’s good to see you up and walking, Isk.” Edred’s voice was like the running of the river, constant, swift, and calm. “There was a time when we thought you would not survive.”

“Another man would have died, fortunately my Vestige works as well as yours,” Isk said, nodding to the large man’s scar. One of Edred’s large hands traced his scar. He was the only other man who knew what it felt like to have someone else’s soul swimming inside. The magic of the other two sons of the Sword Hand had not manifested in Vestiges. And the wearer of the third Vestige had never come back from the Mander. “I was delirious for months once the infection set in. All I had for company was Khazad and the dog.”

Edred looked sheepishly to his wife. Masa, who had been watching her husband with a loving affection not often seen on that once beautiful face. Age was grabbing hold of Masa, though she had not yet seen thirty summers. She had been in the flower of youth when she had kissed Edred goodbye. When they returned, worry lines crossed her face. The beauty that had once been hers now lived in her eyes. There was a deep well of love in those eyes.

“I am sorry that I did not come to you in your sickness,” Edred began. “Highest said that you were dying and would be dead by the next Rising. Masa did not want me getting your sickness.” He held three fingers to his heart at each mention of sickness, to ward off disease. He had never been one to follow superstitions, at least not before his marriage to Masa.

“I could not allow my husband to get sick,” Masa said. It was not apologetic and she did not meet his eyes.

Isk waved them away. “Our people are many things, but we are not great healers. Disease is the tool of the Darkness, which still lingers. Most days I lay in bed, not knowing where I was, or who. I do not fault you for these things. I only wish that in my lucid moments I had some variety in companion. Khazad and Holm are faithful friends, but I often wished for more.”

At the mention of Holm, Masa gasped and Edred looked at him sharply. “He was speaking to you?” Edred asked quickly. He cast about to see if anyone near had heard what was said.

“No,” Isk said defensively. “Holm is what I have chosen to name the dog.” She was at his feet, her tail thumping as if to aid his defense. Isk looked down at her and grabbed a handful of her fur. She was still looking at the woods.

The tension did not leave Edred or his wife. “You know what Highest did to him. You were there.” He grabbed hold of Isk and spoke in low tones lest anyone overhear them. “That name was taken from him. To speak to him is a crime.”

“To speak of him is a crime,” Masa corrected. Her eyes were full of venom for Isk and his dog. No, not venom. Fear.

Isk raised his hands in a calming gesture. “All I have done is rename my dog after a friend who did not come back from the Mander with us.” But he had. He had been with them every step of the way, there and back. Sullen and quite though he was on the return, he was still a friend. Isk had done his best to be kind to him then. Those would be his last good memories. When they returned to Howl’s Valley, the third Vestige bearer, the Spear, was punished.

His words seemed to placate Edred. The fight went out of him and he let go of Isk. Masa was still afraid, but she would not argue with her husband. She turned and left, walking into the festivities. Khazad was still singing and villagers had gathered around him to hear him sing.

“I beg you, call her by her old name, at least here,” Edred said. Isk turned back to face him. “Buckler is a good name for a dog.” There was worry in those eyes.

Isk only shrugged. It was proper to remember the fallen. “There is something else I must talk to you about.” Edred did not appreciate the change of subject, but let Isk continue. “There is something in the woods, something large. When I walk under the eaves, my body warns me that I am being watched. The forest is afraid.”

Edred frowned. “The forests are empty.”

“What?”

“Villagers have gone into the woods searching for quarry and come back with less and less each time. It has been two weeks since anyone has brought something back, and a full month since they’ve brought back anything large that a rabbit.”

“I saw deer in the woods this morning.” Holm began barking at the tree line.

“Then you have seen more than us. Sareth has been in the inn each night complaining about his poor hunting. I can feel the hunger in people. Winter is going to be hard for the valley.”

Isk nodded, petting Holm to calm her down, but she continued whining. “Edred, winter is going to begin soon. These clouds are filled with snow.”

Edred swore, something Isk had not seen him do since they were boys. “A long and challenging winter. Highest was thinking of seizing the sheep herds to feed us.”

“Theft?” Isk asked, alarmed. Highest ordering the village to steal the sheep was unthinkable. The shepherds would go down the mountain and complain to their Highests, causing a conflict only the High Highest could solve. Isk had met the woman, and could not imagine her giving any solution but the censuring of Howl’s Valley. “That would mean war among the Ordered.”

Edred grimaced and showed him an old welt on his left arm. “I know. You know. The third would have know.” He laid a hand on Holm to show what he meant. “But the people of the village don’t. They don’t know the world outside the valley. They look at Highest and think that she holds all knowledge.” To suggest otherwise was heresy. Isk was suddenly aware of how dangerous their conversation was. “She says she knows all, but I’ve never heard her mention the High Game, and I doubt she knows how to make the royal pudding of Bredar.”

“Edred, stop.” Sweat was beginning to bead on Isk’s brow. The large man fell silent. “Just say what happened.”

“Highest called the villagers together while the shepherds were still in the mountain.” Edred knelt down and gathered Holm in his arms. She was growling now, but not at the large man. The river sang beneath them. “She told us her plan. Everyone was on her side. Even Masa.” A conflicted look came over him as he mentioned his wife. “I spoke up, said stealing a thousand sheep would not go unnoticed in the lowlands. She thanked me, and then said that we would have to deal with the shepherds.”

Isk felt a shiver run down his spine. Had the world gone mad since his injury?

“I said their absence would be noted. The lowlands would send people to find the shepherds and there would be no way to hide our crimes. She hit me with her cane and said that she could not commit a crime, for she was Highest...”

“...knower of all good and all evil,” Isk said together with Edred. It was a phrase they all knew well. Highest said it to assuage their doubts. Isk had known the High Highest to say it as well, the credo of the Order. “Are we going to war against all the Order?”

Edred shook his head. “She let the matter drop after that meeting, though the shepherds have been taking a long time gathering up their flocks this year. Usually, they are in their homes this time of year. There’s a look in Thaan’s eye every time he sees one of them.” Isk knew the look.

Isk let go of Holm, who stood to face the woods and growl. Isk’s old friend looked at him, and for the first time Isk saw a tiredness there. It was the same tiredness which he himself felt.

Masa returned, coming as a storm. “If you’re done speaking heresies, my husband must help me make our portion of the meal.” She didn’t let them debate it, grabbing her husband by his bright blue shirt.

“It was good to see you up and about,” Edred said as he was led away. “Come to my tavern tomorrow and we will talk.” That did not comfort Masa, who led her husband away quick as she could, but it did give Isk some peace.

The valley was a confluence of woes. Isk could picture the wind moving through the trees, sending the leaves dancing. In spring, in summer, in autumn. Peace reigned over Howl’s Tomb, peace in his valley.

Isk turned to face the woods and the towering mountain above. He froze, his heart began beating in his chest and the bridge beneath his feet fell away from him. There, in the woods beside the flowing river, beneath the great mountain where Howl prepared for his final battle, a great red eye watching him. It was ten feet off the ground, watching carefully, full of hatred. It was probably as long across as his leg.

The Tyrant of the forest was watching them, watching him. Isk could tell that it knew he saw it. When the roving eye came over him he felt the terror which filled the forest. Isk tore himself from the eye and tried to look at what sort of beast it was, but though his eyes were blessed by the Vestige and he could see men miles away as though they were beside him, he could see no part of the beast but the eye. It surveyed the town once more, blinked, and was gone.

Holm stopped growling as soon as it was gone, resting her head against his stomach. It was only then that he realized he had fallen to the ground to hide himself from the terrible eye.

“Isk, are you alright?” Sweating, he looked over for the voice. The young Gillie Algry was running towards him. Gillie was a few years younger than himself. As a child she had been eager to run with Isk and his friends, but they had reached the age when they looked down on younger children. Try as she might, she never could get them to play with her.

She had grown into a beauty, though not quite as beautiful as Masa had been the morning they left for war. Her dark hair was done in the style of a newly wedded wife, a complex braid down the back. Isk had always liked the way it looked on women. Perhaps it was just because they smiled more when they had it. All the village rejoiced when a woman got her bridal braid.

Everything seemed happier. She was wearing a dress patterned in reds and whites, Howl's colors. Her dark eyes were full of concern.

Just as she was about to reach him she pulled short. "You're not sick, are you?" She made a warding gesture, three fingers over the heart.

"No, I just thought I saw something in the woods." The panic in him began to subside. In his heart he knew the Tyrant was hungry. He couldn't explain what he saw, they would think he was having fever dreams. So he lied, thinking of the most terrible thing he could. "I saw a wolf in the woods, walking around the clearing."

Gillie turned, alarmed, and scanned the tree line. "I don't see anything, are you sure?"

"Gillie, I counted the hairs on its snout," Isk said as he stood. "It's out there." He felt no shame for lying, though he knew he should. The Tyrant hid itself in a way that he did not understand. He should have been able to see its body, but all he could remember was the eye. A wolf was the most frightening thing he could think of without be thought of as sick. "I think it hunted the mountain clean."

"This really is going to be a bad winter. Cooper kept saying it would be." She looked back to the festivities, scanning the crowd to check on her husband. Isk grabbed hold of the railing and stared into the water below, memorizing its changing pattern in order to drive out the eye.

"It is, Gillie," he said. "Such as we have never seen in our lives."

She turned back to him. "Oh, Isk, I'm so sorry. This talk of wolves has got me afraid. Are you alright?"

Isk waved her away. "I'll live. My body is still weak from the wound, and I wasn't expecting to see a wolf here."

Gillie placed a hand on his back. "Come," she said in a motherly tone, "have something to drink and recover."

Isk wanted to refuse, the shame of the lie was too much to spend more time around Gillie, but she would not let him refuse her. Holm walked beside him, keeping her eyes on the woods but not barking. Gillie talked freely and about any topic other than wolf Isk had invented. He let her take his mind off of things.

It was a short walk to the gathering. No one sat at the tables, it would have invited ill fortune to do so. Instead, the women were gathered around great bubbling pots and the men around ale. The children ran where they will. A group of them had gathered enough for their game. They stood in a circle and recited the old song, each of them being assigned a color by the song:

"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.
What of Grey?
Got away.

And Rose?
Rose Froze!"

The game was for braver children than Isk had been. He knew the rhyme, every child in the valley knew the rhyme, but the thought of all the sheep getting pulled out of the flock by wolves frightened him so badly that after the first time he had played it, he did not get a peaceful night's sleep for a month. He never played again. Even now the song raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He would have troubled dreams that night.

As soon as the fate of the rose-colored sheep was announced, the children broke their circle and began looking for something matching the color they were assigned. They would then return to their circle. They all dashed away, except for one. Min Algry held back tears as she walked away from the circle. Gillie, who had been talking about how much she wished her first child would be a girl, called her crying niece over to them.

"What's wrong, child?" she asked when Min reached them. Gillie knelt down to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Min fell into her aunt's arms. "Aunty, I have to find grey." Her voice was quiet, trying to hold together. "Grey is boring, and I'm always the grey sheep."

“Oh darling,” Gillie said, “what about last week when you were the white sheep, or the time before when you were the rose one? You’re not always grey.”

Min sniffled. “Yeah, but then its every other time. The other sheep are so much more fun.”

Isk knelt beside them, drawing Holm in close. The dog was intelligent enough to understand when something was wrong, and gave Min a couple licks on the face. She giggled at that.

“Min,” Isk said. “It’s just a game, but the grey sheep is the only one smart enough to get away from the Darkness’s servants. Every time I heard that rhyme, I would pray to Howl that I was the grey sheep.” That did not cheer her up any. “But if you want to, after the Rising, you can show me how you would act as all the other sheep.” She smiled at him, tears forgotten. “Take my dog as your grey thing.”

Holm gave Isk a look somewhere between doubtful and amused, but she followed after Min dutifully.

“Thank you,” Gillie said as Min returned to the circle. She watched her niece go with a look Isk had not seen since they were little and they came across an injured sheep.

The other children were returning with their prizes. Once they returned, they began pretending to be sheep facing a wolf pack. The green and white children screamed and ran around before they clutched their hearts and fell on the ground giggling. The red child pretended to get their head bitten off by an imagined wolf, the blue one grabbed their head and went insane. The black sheep got eaten and the rose one froze to death. Min pointed to an imagined wolf and had Holm scare it off. It was a morbid game to be sure, but it was the game of the valley. When the game was finished, the children hugged the dog and broke apart. Isk got up and started toward the dog.

“Isk, where are you going?” Gillie called after him.

“I’ll eat the soup later,” he called back to her. “Thank you for your care.” In truth, he was hungry, but there were others he wanted to see before the Rising began.

Gillie didn’t let him get away that easily. Isk heard her run up behind him. She grabbed his arm and held on tightly. “If you’re not going to eat, that’s your business. But you fell over when you saw a wolf, and given your condition, I’m not letting you walk alone. Where are we going?” She rested her head on his shoulder and let him lead her on. Isk leaned on her for support.

“I would like to speak to Ammardain, and I would like to see the one we lost.” Isk could feel Gillie tense up at the mention of the lost one. Holm shrugged off the children and followed after them.

Isk led her to the smithy. It was silent and the forge fire was out. Ammardain was there, a large man and well-muscled. There was a small gathering of people around him, made mostly of

his apprentices. They were dour, closed in tight around the blacksmith. At the arrival of Isk and Gillie, their conversation broke apart.

“Isk,” the blacksmith said in his low, sweeping voice. “Good to see you on your feet.” The apprentices made room for the two of them.

“Ammardain, there is something I have to tell you about,” Isk said. The crowd did not break apart, but stood there watching. “There are wolves in the forest. They’ve hunted the forest clean”

The apprentices shifted uncomfortably. Though he was looking into the blacksmith’s hard face, he saw them watching him sharply. Evidently they had been discussing the issue.

“Are you sure?” the blacksmith asked.

Isk gave him a look. This close, Isk could see the inside of his eye. Everyone in the village knew the powers which the Vestiges gave. “I am. It was walking the edge of the forest and looking hungrily at the sheep.” One lie on top of another. He would have to pay for those lies one day. Highest made it absolutely clear that lies were punished in this life or the next. How could the warriors of light defeat the Darkness when they used its weapons.

Ammardain and his apprentices exchanged a look. Wolves were worse than they were expecting. Isk saw a shiver move through them. On his arm, Gillie shivered.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Ammardain likely knew what Isk wanted, he just wasn’t brave enough to voice it himself. Highest would undoubtedly flog them for taking such measures without her permission. But there was a reason that Isk went to the blacksmith first. He was the only man in the valley who could do his job. His apprentices were still learning the ropes and should Highest take her vengeance on them, there would be no one to serve the valley until the next spring.

Isk banished the heretical thoughts from his mind. He had been having those more frequently. Discipline was required. Highest was not cruel, she was defensive. The proper way of living was hard to walk, and the Darkness cunning. She had to be watchful of four hundred souls, and keep away rot and decay.

“I know that you think the coming winter will be harsh,” Isk said after a moment. “You gathered your apprentices and what men you hold sway over to discuss the baren forest. Wolves have come to Howl’s Valley for the first time since the War for the Light. They have hunted, never sated. Now we face a harsh winter.”

“This we know,” Ammardain said, cutting him off. “But what would you have us do?”

“Arm yourselves.” The weight of the words shook them. It stood on the edge of heresy, the edge of the Light. Highest was concerned with the people of the valley, Isk told himself that repeatedly, as though thinking it could make it true. Isk shook away that last thought.

To defeat the Darkness, the living evil which reduced the world to baseness, the Sword Hand set about ordering men. Each was given work and a place inside the Order. He had ordered

everything in life, and weighed each action on the path towards righteousness. Those whose work sustained the War for the Light were banned from holding weapons, except at utmost need. Had Isk not carried the Vestige of the Bow, such a suggestion could have seen him beaten and killed. The Vestige was a piece of the Light in the Sword Hand, part of the goodness which made the Third Son. In battle he had found himself giving orders, though he had never been to war before. But they were listened to and followed, and the Ordered saw victory because of it. The part of him that was Howl was a voice for righteousness and kept evil thoughts and deeds away. When they looked at him, they saw a Howl.

The smith and his apprentices had been thinking about arming themselves, Isk could see it in their eyes. They were the largest men in the village; Highest used them to keep the rough shepherds in line, unarmed of course. Such were the lengths which they were willing to go to in the face of starvation.

Edred said that Highest was aware of the coming hardship. She was willing to steal sheep from the lowlands to make it through the winter. But she had not thought to arm the village. Perhaps she thought that Edred was enough to rob the shepherds. He might have been. Isk had seen him in war. But Edred slaughtering shepherds would not free the woods from the Tyrant.

“Arm yourselves,” Isk repeated. “Knives, swords, whatever you need. They’re out there, and they are hungry. When night falls, watch for them. They will come from the forest for the sheep. Highest will give the order to arm, but it will come too late. Save us while we can be saved.”

Ammardain and his apprentices were silent; Isk could see the thoughts turning in their minds, but after a moment, the blacksmith nodded, and that was that. His apprentices would do as he said. Of course, if Highest found out...

Isk stopped that thought before it could form. Leaning on Gillie, he returned to the town center. The children of the village saw Holm return with them and gave a shout, chasing after her. Holm gave Isk a reproachful look, as though it were his fault that the children loved her. Then she ran off, barking at the children to follow after.

“Do you think that was the right thing to do?” she asked quietly. She needn’t. The sound of talk and celebration would mask their conversation.

“Gillie, I am not a warrior, not by any measure. I went to war for the first time last year. But there is a piece of me that was Howl. It knows war, desperate battles at the edge of hope. It was telling me what to say there.” He took her arm off of his and stood straight. “All the stories say that wolves grew small after the Sword Hand defeated the Darkness. Wolves are dumb beasts now. Hopefully that means that they’ll move on. It’s best to be prepared.” Isk gave her hands a squeeze and left her behind. Gillie did not follow after him.

The weight of the lie was crushing him, and he had to remind himself that not everyone had as strong of eyesight as he did. They did not notice the beads of sweat or the smallest twitches of the face. The wolves would not leave the town unscathed because there were no wolves, the ones he smelt in the forest would surely have fled the valley. There was only the

Tyrant, and the hatred in that great red eye was unmistakable. It would descend upon the town as soon as it hunted the woods clean.

Isk would need to carry Howl's bow with him at all times. It was made to destroy the children of Darkness. He was too weak to draw the bow all the way, but even a partial draw of Howl's bow wielded by his hand was enough to kill a man.

He was still ruminating on the bow when he saw the man who was not a man. He was sitting under the eaves of Highest's manor. Lowest was sitting next to him, talking to himself. A scrawny man, who had been made Lowest for stealing a shirt from old man Algry. He had remained Lowest for seven years since.

Isk did not want to talk to Lowest. He wanted to speak to the man who was not a man, the one who had once been called Holm. Edred, Isk, and Holm had been as close as any three boys had ever been. When they had been chosen for the Vestiges, they had been so happy. Three friends off to see war. Only two had faced the death. Three friends returned, but only two remained.

The man who had been Holm looked thin. His face, which had been so prone to laughter, looked like it had done nothing but weeping since returning. The valley walls used to shake with the sound of his laughter, a sound more beautiful than the High Bells of Bredar. Uncontrolled tears began rolling down Isk's cheeks.

The shepherd boy had faced battle, but what he saw terrified him. There were more people at the Mander than he had ever seen, and they were all killing each other. He ran, and for that shame the Highest erased his name. His home had been pulled down. Acknowledging him meant being beaten. He was not hurt, because that would be recognizing him.

So Isk cried, unable to help. He had not run from battle, but his legs shook right until he took the fateful shot. All men are cowards. Who could face such frequent death and not think for their own safety? All Holm had been was smart enough to run away.

From the edge of the woods came a deep, resounding gong, and the valley fell silent. The Rising was beginning.