

### Chapter 3: Lowest

At the sounding of the bell, the celebration in the valley fell silent as the villagers left the food and drink behind, moving as a crowd into the hollow where Howl fell. There was a low buzz among them, excited to see where they would stand in the next year. Highest would already be in the clearing, standing upon the steps to Howl's tomb.

Isk wiped the tears from his eyes and followed after the crowd. The man who was no longer a man did not follow the crowd. There was no need for him to, he could fall no lower and there was no hoping to rise. He was outside the order of the Light. Maybe he would help himself to food while the village was at the Rising.

Lowest left his companion with a kindly smile. He walked slowly, giving way to the crowd as he went. He had little hope of Rising, not after all the hate Highest and her favorites placed on him. When something went wrong in the valley, if there was little food or the merchants were late, the Lowest was blamed for it. He was yelled at and humiliated. When the village was at its worst, he had rocks thrown at him. If there was a Highest, there had to be a Lowest, that person who failed to walk in the path of the Light. At least he was still on the path.

Holm rejoined Isk in the crowd, her fur matted. She looked tired, but her tail was wagging. Khazad was somewhere nearby, Isk could hear the dwarf talking, but he only ever caught glimpses of the cassock. Edred and Masa were walking arm-in-arm to the clearing, Masa never took her eyes off her husband. The shepherds from the lowlands which had not left the mountain in time were in the crowd, doubling its size. If they could not be at the Rising in their own villages and towns, it was best to be part of one, even though the Highest of Howl's Valley could not properly raise them.

In a slow and disorganized procession, the villagers walked the carefully kept route to Howl's tomb. The trees were carefully pruned that the boughs did not overhang the route. There were the occasional stone steps, kept meticulously clean of moss. What grass grew in the forest path was kept low. There were no signs, no markers, but each step was familiar to the people of the valley. Isk did not feel the fear of the forest as he walked the path, though if he stepped from the trail he was sure that he would feel it. This was the path to Howl's tomb, and whatever the evil living in the woods now, the Light which had lived in the third son kept it at bay.

He would occasionally look into the forest, scanning the trees for a sign of the Tyrant, or even the Tyrant itself, but he did not see either. The only sign that something was wrong in the forest was that there were no animals, no squirrels, no birds.

The distance from the town to the tomb was half a mile, and so the procession of villagers came into the clearing where Howl lay just before the sun rose over the mountain. The clearing was wide, enough to hold the entire village and more, but shaded. Unlike the path from the village, the glade needed no care. It remained the way the Sword Hand desired for his son. Large trees surrounded it, casting shade at all hours of the day, except when the light was strongest. Flowers of red and white grew in beds which the villagers dared not disturb. They were called Howl's Guard, and they watched over the tomb.

Howl's tomb. The place where the third son died while distracting the hordes of Darkness from their task. A place of sacrifice. He died that his father might strike unimpeded at the heart of all evil. No matter how many times Isk stood before the grave, he was always filled with awe.

It was not the size of the tomb which awed Isk. He had seen greater tombs for lesser men when he was in Bredar, kings and Highests demanded to be buried in mausoleums which announced the heights they reached. Howl's tomb was larger than anything the villagers could hope for, but it would sit in the shadow of the tombs of Bredar. No, the power of Howl was not in size, but in dignity.

From the quiet hollow rose a low plinth of carved stone steps. The stone had come from the mountainside, the Sword Hand's magic taking the stone and carrying it to this resting place. That was the legend, at least. Legend also said that the Sword Hand perished as he destroyed the Darkness. A small doubt awoke in him, and for the first time in his life he did not believe the legends he had been taught. Frowning, he traced the source of that doubt, expecting to find some lingering shadow, some touch of the Darkness. Instead he found the Bow, watching from his eyes and doubting the story of its own burial. A bolt of worry shot through Isk. Why would a piece of Howl doubt the legends about itself?

The stone was white marble flecked with spots of red. At the top of the steps was a smooth platform, and on that rested the perfect marble tomb of Howl. It was white, without a marking of red. On the short side of the tomb facing the path to town were three rubies, each cut into a perfect circle as large as a shield. Those were said to be made by the First Son. The rubies had glowed when they were filled with the Vestiges, but now they were dark, not catching the light of the sun. Their faces were carved with the symbol of the Vestige they held, the Sword, the Spear, then the Bow.

Highest stood on the steps of the tomb, just short of the platform. It was forbidden for any but the Highest to stand on the steps, though in his childhood Isk remembered when she would stand on the lowest step. None but they who were about to be Invested could stand at the graveside. She was an elderly woman, though she stood with her back straight and her head held high. There was something about her face, a bitterness entrenched in the wrinkles and a look in her eyes. She was without warmth to her. Some part of her once renowned beauty lingered in that face, high and cold. Highest did not look at the coming crowd, but kept her eyes fixed on the tree tops above them.

The sun had begun to crest the mountain, bathing the valley in light, though they would remain in the shade for some time yet. Isk could see it behind the treetops. The Rising had begun.

Highest did not wait for them to settle, but began the recitation when the sand ran out in her hourglass. Those who were still filing in would face her wrath. Isk found a place on the edge of the gathering and there watched with Holm. Khazad was hard to spot, but he was there, in the throng. Hopefully the ceremony measured up to his expectations.

“Stand before me, people of Howl’s Valley. I have seen your works in this last year and have come to understand your place in the Order.” Highest began the recitation with a disgusted grimace that only Isk saw. It was the same speech every year, and the villagers knew it by heart. “The Darkness which once ruled the world lingers on, weak but not destroyed. It leeches into hearts and brings us to fight against the Light without our knowing. The Order sees this is all of you. What goodness you have in you will cause you to rise, what wickedness will cause you to fall. Your place in the war is known to the Light, and now shall be known to all.”

With the preamble over, she began naming the towns folk in their order. “The Highest of the village shall be myself, for I am the closest to the Truth, and see its designs clearest.” That was not a real surprise. She had named herself Highest every year since she first rose to that position. According to Isk’s father, the previous Highest had been that way too, naming themselves to the highest position in the valley. On his way to the Mander, Isk had seen villages which did it differently, the Highest stepping down after each year so that another might lead them.

Isk didn’t listen as she listed the reasons why she would hold the position. For each person, Highest would give her reasons as to why they were where they were. For herself, it was always the same. She knew better than the villagers, and thus had to stay in place.

Instead, Isk watched the crowd. Most reacted the way he did, bored looking around. They had heard all of this before. What they wanted was to know if they were rising or falling, and hearing the same old justifications held nothing for them. Those that did watch her with any sort of enthusiasm were the ones who thought they could rise higher by loyalty, and Khazad. The dwarf was just happy to be there, taking in every moment. If this were Isk’s first Rising, he probably would enjoy it, even out of passing curiosity.

Highest stopped praising herself and continued to the next person. It was not an insignificant roll, being second to Highest. Should she die, they would become the next Highest. In all his years, Isk had not known Highest to keep the same second two years in a row. All her favorites had filled the roll, but none lasted.

“Beneath me shall be Lang Alreed.” That announcement sent a silent ripple through the crowd. Isk watched Highest intently. None spoke out against it, for to speak during the Rising could be a mark against you. Even so, the villagers were shocked. Lang was Highest’s only living relative. A young man who spent his time causing trouble with his friend Meles Algren. Not once had he ever been disciplined for his pranks, for fear that Highest would punish anyone who spoke out against her kin. She was very protective of the boy, refusing to hear a word against him. Isk remembered his own childhood, when Highest would strike him, Edred, or Holm for the smallest infractions. Lang had twice lost flocks in the mountains. When their shepherds complained, they had been flogged. Isk listened to hear what possible reason there could be for placing the boy so high.

“For his assistance to the people of Howl’s Valley, for caring for the Highest, for watching Masa’s inn at night.” Isk looked over to where Edred and Masa were standing. Masa looked like someone had offered her sheep droppings on a platter, but she did not make a sound

of protest. “For discovering what caused the forest to empty of game and rectifying it for all time. He has saved us from a harsh winter.”

This was all new to Isk, and apparently, to the villagers as well. His sharp ears picked up faint whispers through the crowd. The boy had never risen very high, and the villagers thought that was punishment for the trouble the boy made. Isk scanned the crowd for Lang. He was kneeling before the steps as was proper. None of the villagers would be able to see his face as they were behind him, but Isk was standing on the side, and his eyes could see the smirk. Inside of him, the Bow was revolted.

From there the procession went much as it always did. When Highest called a name, that person came out of the crowd and received their rank and praise. After Lang came Thaan, then Kesh Algren and his son Meles. After them, their extended families received their ranking. Down the list she went, naming her favorites above all others.

This was Isk’s first Rising in Howl’s Valley carrying a Vestige, and it was unlike any he had seen before. As those first names were announced and their achievements announced, he felt revolted. Rage was building in him, an anger that he could ascribe only to the Bow. The thoughts that this was a mockery of the Light, that the Darkness was giving these pronouncements.

Isk tried to fight his thoughts, forcing down his anger. It was Darkness, he told himself over and over, the Darkness was giving him these thoughts. The Bow laughed at him as he fought back, laughed knowing that it was a piece of Howl himself, a piece of the Light. If the Darkness could not lay a hand on him when it ruled all the earth, how could it corrupt him now, long after its defeat. It knew the rot of evil, it could see it in Highest’s face.

Isk looked away from the tomb. As he did, his gaze fell upon Edred. His face was flush, and he was biting his bottom lip so hard that he was bleeding. Masa was watching him in horror. The Sword must have been telling Edred the same things the Bow was telling him. Isk scanned the crowd of the man who was no more, but he wasn’t there.

He could take his eyes off of the proceedings, but he could not block his ears. Highest had moved from her favorites to those who deserved their place. That seemed just as bad to the Bow. Ammardain, who taught valuable skins in the war for the Light, who fed his apprentices and gave them a home, was the highest of these. Isk’s fists began clenching. They were beyond his control.

When Edred was called up, significantly below the blacksmith, Isk nearly charged the tomb. His feet began moving without his direction, his hands reaching for his belt, expecting to find a knife or some sort of weapon. It didn’t find anything. Unarmed and furious, Isk found himself walking toward the tomb. What he was going to do when he got there, he didn’t know. The Vestige knew, but it wouldn’t tell him.

Something stopped him, tugging at his leg. Isk turned to see Holm grabbing his trousers. She was growling softly, but her hold on him was soft. The Bow fell silent inside of him at the sight and the rage left him. Holm felt the anger leave him and let go. No one in the crowd had noticed that he nearly charged the tomb. He was breathing heavily, his back slick with sweat, but

he was his own. He searched his soul for the Vestige, but he could not feel it. A sudden loneliness blossomed inside of him.

When he came to his senses, Edred was no longer kneeling before the tomb. Isk could see him back in the crowd, looking pale and clutching his arm. He was shaking and blood ran freely from his lip. Masa was at his side, worry on her face. The large man had held himself back better than Isk had, despite being the one which was insulted. Edred probably didn't know why he was enraged; the man resisted the Darkness like the stone walls of Bredar. Isk had never talked to him about how he felt carrying a Vestige, but he did know that neither of the other two could see as far or hear as well as he. Their Vestiges may not have thought as the one inside of him did, but Isk could see the proof that they felt the same.

The Rising continued unabated, none had noted the reaction of either man wearing the Vestige. Isk did not notice the proceedings, trying to regain his composure on the edge of the crowd, so he did not note when his former place came and went. It had been given to a washerwoman for her efforts in keeping the town clean.

When Isk calmed down, the weight of that fell on him. He had fallen. For the first time in his life he was lower than where he had been a year ago. It was a shame, a shame which most the villagers knew. Somehow he had stumbled while walking the path of the Light, somewhere he had erred. He would hear an accounting of his deeds when Highest called him forward to the tomb, but try as he might he could not think of the reason for falling.

He was alone, a woodsman who lived above the village in the wild mountain. After his parents died, he had little to do with the valley, and yet he had always risen. When news of war came, he had not volunteered for the Vestige, true, but none had. It was forced upon them by Highest. She had called their names at the Rising, before the names of all others, and led them to stand upon the platform. Isk had been afraid, but he placed his hand upon the ruby bearing the Bow. He shook and shivered as it had entered him, wracked in ecstasy. He marched to war, followed every order given to him and gave such orders as he was meant to. He fought as was his duty. He watched as thousands of men butchered each other for the name of the Light. He had loosed the arrow which flew over the heads of both armies, the arrow which was true. He had watched as just for a moment the pupil expanded, noticing the arrow too late.

If he had done wrong, he did not know it. Praise and gifts of gold and other treasure were heaped upon him by the High Highest. She stood above all in the Order. If Isk has done something wrong, surely she would have known and corrected him.

Unless, of course, the Darkness ruled the Highest of Howl's Valley.

The thought came unbidden to his mind, a parting shot from the chastised Bow. The Vestige was there, he could feel it again, but it was not pressing against him. It was outraged, but it did not share that anger with him. No, it would keep it for itself and leave him to live in a world ordered by a tinge of Darkness.

As Isk sorted through his memories, another ten villagers had come and gone, receiving their reward for the year's labors. Isk had fallen, and far. There were still a hundred and thirty

names to be called. His name would come soon, he was certain of it. Whatever mistake he had made would certainly have been outweighed by the good he had done. Beyond the gentle wooded hills of the valley, the tales of his deeds were being told and praised.

He fell, and kept falling as the sun rose over the valley. Isk the Hunter, renowned where ever the Order still held sway, remained unranked even as apprentices and shepherds were. Quite a few villagers began looking his way, surprise in their eyes. They were asking the same questions he was.

“Cooper Algry shall be after her,” Highest’s voice came. She ruled the glade, everyone eager to know their fate. Her voice had them watching in rapt attention. Once or twice she had looked in his direction. Satisfaction was etched into that face. “For he did help with the lambing, and when wood was needed, he gave his own.”

Cooper was a good man, there was no begrudging his place. He took good care of Gillie and was by all accounts a reasonable man. Isk could not but feel a stab of hatred that that man stood as high as he did as he kept falling. Isk knew that hate did not come from the Vestige, he didn’t have to follow the emotions to know that they came from his own heart.

If it was the Darkness pulling on him in that moment, Isk did not care. The shame was too much to bear. Even Khazad was looking at him now. The dwarf had never seen a rising before, but there was no mistaking that things were going wrong for Isk. He would have thought that after the Spear had fled from battle and the humiliation that had been for the Valley, the two heroes who had won the Mander would be praised. But Edred had not risen far, and Isk was apparently being punished for some unknown crime.

Very well, then. If he was to be punished, then he would bear it with his head held high. Isk pushed away the hate which was stirring in him, it was no one’s fault that he fell, and he stared his shame in the face. His back straight, his eyes fixed on Highest, he bore it. His father had endured worse shame.

The numbers tumbled by. Half the valley had received their place. The looks at him were no longer quick or covert. People openly gaped at what was happening to him. Even the shepherds from the lowlands were starting to notice that something was going on, though they did not know him on sight. All they knew was that the Bow had not yet received praise.

Admonishments began to enter into Highest’s explanations. Eventually she would not give any praise and lay a person’s failings to all the Valley. Isk could not fall that low, he could not imagine it. The High Highest had sat him to her right eight months ago. There was no higher honor. He would not entertain the thought of falling that low. Lowest had stolen five years ago. Was Isk to be just above him? The High Highest would be insulted if he fell that far.

But fall he did. She had named nearly all the adults of the valley, only fifty names remained. The announcement that Min Algry would be higher than him was an icy dagger. The children and those few adults not yet named were watching Highest in anticipation, but Highest could not change the place of any that had already received it. To do so would announce that she had made a mistake. So the villagers were starting to give each other confused looks, and Isk

heard the low whispers as they asked what could be going on. He could hear those words if he wanted to, but he did not need more shame, so instead he focused on what Highest was saying.

“For helping her mother and carrying food to the shepherds. However, Min must be more attentive in her learning, or she will not rise.” That last part was always said to children. Min nodded seriously, obviously thrilled to be named above the other children, but trying to set a good example. Children were often ranked low in the Order as there was little they could do in the fight against Darkness. They were placed just before those that failed to walk the path. The next few names would be the children of the valley, and after that the real humiliation would begin. Isk braced himself.

Highest reeled off the children of the valley, kinder to some than to others. The Bow was upset when she said bad things about children, but it did not stir his emotions again. There were a good number of children in the valley, and by his count only seven adults who had not yet received their place. So that would be his place, with the drunkards and the thieves.

The few babies were ranked beneath the other children, as they did nothing but take from others. When the youngest babe received their place in the order, Isk stood straight and looked to Highest.

“Beneath her shall be Renns Algry, for he has continued to drink and give himself to the sin of sloth.” Cooper’s father had fallen after his wife had died, and did not care that he was being shamed. All he cared about was that no one tried to take his drink from him. Cooper spent much of his time looking after his father, but he never complained. A knot of panic began to build in Isk.

“Beneath him shall be Sokra Alwhit. For he has started many arguments for his love of arguing. He has often stood at the edge of heresy and caused pain to the people of the valley by forcing them to think of things unnatural.” The old man walked before the tomb with a cheery smile. All Isk’s life the man had stood just as low. He had never risen. Everyone knew that Highest hated the man, but there was nothing she could do about it. To lower him would be acknowledging that the man’s questions were beyond her ability to answer. Even in his childhood, Isk has liked that old man. His ridiculous questions were fun to entertain as he ran through the woods with Edred and Holm.

Five remaining. His fingers were beginning to tingle, as though needles were pricking them. As Sokra walked away, she called up his son. Klees Alwhit was a large man, broad in the shoulder. A good and sociable man, thoroughly devoted to his father. And that was his great crime. Highest would have preferred that he repudiate the wild questioning of his father. Wherever Sokra went, so too was his son, and thus the man was placed beneath his father in the Order. Indolents and idlers was the label placed on them, titles which did not bother them in the slightest. Somehow they had enough food to eat and so they did not bother themselves with the work of shepherding. The only time Klees was not at his father’s side was when he had been sent on a journey. He was widely traveled, more than Isk, hunting the books his father sent him for. Half of all the letters which came to the valley were addressed to one of the two. Klees knelt before Highest without complaint and received his dismal place in the Order with a smile.

“After him shall be Hamala Greenwood. She has refused to work these hills or help us as we face a long winter. She claims to belong to the Highest of the Fields, but she lives here, and so I have the right over her.” A small woman walked past the tomb, but she did not kneel. Instead, she threw a single rose onto the steps. She had lived in an outlying home for the past five years with her husband. Despite living in Howl’s Valley, she claimed to belong to the Highest of the Fields, who kept the memory of the Second Son of the Sword Hand alive.

Her husband was next, the little man who spent his time tending his rose garden. He had a shrewish face, Isk had never known anyone to have problems with the man. Anyone but Highest and her favorites, of course. He also laid a rose on the grave and moved on without kneeling.

Two remained. A pain in Isk’s chest bloomed. It was a shame he had not ever felt before. This would be him, this had to be him. Whatever faults he had, whatever sins he had made in this last year, he could not be Lowest. He had won the war. Edred had fought valiantly, he had saved two kings from danger, but Isk had sent that arrow flying. He had won the Mander against the heretics and preserved the Order.

He caught the glance of Highest. She was relishing this. The Bow boiled inside of him, but he was too frightened for anger. All the valley would know his shame for falling to be second lowest. Maybe he could leave with Khazad, travel to proper mountains. It was only right that he be given the same hospitality that Khazad had received here. Of course, that would mean taking care of a sickly friend alone for months. Isk looked for the dwarf, a great feeling of gratitude welled up inside of him. He met Isk’s eyes. There was concern there. Isk had been a poor host. Whoever long he lived, he would owe the dwarf a debt of gratitude.

“After him shall be Breason Alore.” That was a name the valley had not heard for five years. Five years he had been Lowest, punishment for stealing a shirt. Now the man was free from the shame. He was no longer Lowest. No one would throw rocks at him. Isk watched in shock as the man ran before the tomb and knelt. He was weeping tears of relief.

Tears of relief, for no longer being alone, for no longer failing the Light. Breason was free. Isk began shaking, but not from rage. This was fear, the fear of everyone in the valley. Some sin had dragged him down, dragged him down until he was the lowliest creature in the valley. And now he would spend the next year at least serving as the Lowest.

He did not listen to the shocked gasps of the crowd or the murmuring which was rapidly becoming talking. For a moment, for one brief moment, he thought of running. He was faster than anyone else in the valley and stronger than all others but Edred and the man who no longer was. He could run and no one would catch him. Bredar, that was where he would run to. All the Order would hear that he had been named Lowest and they would be outraged. An army would come to the valley and scourge it clean for the insult it had offered the High Highest.

But that thought lasted only a moment. That war would kill all the people of the valley, the people who raised him, who he had gone to war to protect. Besides, his father had taken this shame with his head held high. Isk could no longer claim to stand above his father, no longer

separate himself from that shame. He had fallen as low. His father had stood proud at the beatings and against the stones. Isk would as well.

His legs were shaking, his fingers curled in on themselves. He tried to think but his mind was full of a buzzing that melted thoughts away. He was Lowest, so what did thoughts matter?

“After him shall be Lowest.” She never said the name of the person who was made Lowest, because from that moment on they had no name. They were Lowest, the person who had failed to walk the path of the Light, the person who bore all the shame for their community.

Trembling, Isk walked toward the tomb. It was a walk that he had done twenty-six times, yet never in such shame. Once everyone had cheered as he had been named to the Vestige of the Bow. Now they kept their silence. Isk kept his eyes on Highest as he approached the tomb, but the Bow let him see the rest of the village. There was shock in many eyes, and triumph in others. Highest’s favorites smiled that he had fallen so far. Edred was hunched over, sapped of strength by his Vestige. There were tears in his eyes. Masa clutched her man, but watched Isk grimly. Khazad wept openly, the only time Isk had seen him do so. Even at the funeral from the dead of the Mander the dwarf had watched stoically.

His friends wept, but they were not with him making the long walk to where he would lose his name. Holm was. As he walked through the silent crowd, she was there beside him, padding along. She knew something was wrong, so she walked with her flank touching his side and her ears back. There beside him, unafraid to be seen there, uncaring of the laws of men.

Isk would not run away, he would not flinch. His father had been made Lowest. Highest had said it was for spreading the Darkness’ rumors. Isk did not learn those rumors until he was much older, but as far as he knew those rumors were true, all the valley accepted them. They just never spoke them out loud after what happened to Isk’s father. Highest had received her place after becoming the lover of the previous Highest. Inside of him, Howl’s Vestige growled, a growl that was softly echoed by Holm.

At the base of the tomb he paused. Above him, Highest watched with a sneer, her lip curled. Isk could see it in her eyes, this was victory for her. She stood at the top of the steps, her arms outstretched. It was as though she were a conqueror, but what she had conquered he did not know.

He stood still before her, and she arched a brow. It was a question. Would he kneel before the tomb and accept his place, or would he defy her and enter heresy? The Vestige laughed at the question. *Heresy?* it seemed to say, *your is not the path of the light, for that path is not so narrow.* To kneel was to lose himself, for a year at least.

His father had knelt, and he had never risen again.

That was all there was to it. His mother had died of shame not long after that and for a long time after that he felt the pain of his father being Lowest. But he had stood here and looked into the eyes of Highest, who knew all Good and all Evil, and he did not run.

Isk knelt.

“For speaking the name which I had erased from the world, for breaking the word of Highest. For these reasons I strip his of his name and make him Lowest in Howl’s Valley for a year. None shall name him anything but Lowest. I also strip him of the Vestige he wears.”

“What?” Isk had not meant to speak, but the indignity caused him to shout. Isk knew the stories as well as anyone. No one had ever been stripped of the Vestige. He wasn’t even sure that it was possible. Inside of him, the Bow was equally unsure, but he got the feeling that it would not be leaving willing. Holm sat down beside him and looked confused at Highest.

Highest snarled as she spoke. “Do not question me, Lowest. I know you spoke the name I erased.”

The Vestige laughed inside of him, and Isk was surprised to find himself laughing alongside it. There were gasps in the crowd. “You have no right to. In Bredar, the captain of the High Highest’s guard is named Holm...”

He did not manage to say the rest of what he meant to, as Highest rushed down the steps and struck him with her walking stick. The blow landed across his temple, but did not send him sprawling. It felt like a smack, not a strike. That was the Vestige.

Isk ignored the blow and switched to the other sin he had made this year. “And how have I made you break your word.” This was not what was supposed to happen. The Lowest was supposed to kneel and be humiliated. Isk was too angry to play the part. Another strike came in as he spoke, but he hardly noticed. Holm was nervous, standing on her haunches, but she did not bark as he was struck.

“You lived,” Highest shrieked as the blows came raining down. Isk could have swatted them away like flies, but he let them hit him. They did not hurt too badly. Were he back to his former strength, he might not have noticed them at all. “You lived when I said you would die. You made my word false. It was only by the powers granted by the Darkness that you survived, I know it.”

“I lived by the power of the Light, by the piece of the man on whose tomb you stand. I was spared by it.” Isk shouted so that all the valley would hear, and they would know he was not the spawn of the Darkness.

The blows stopped. “You see,” Highest said to the villagers, “You see what happens when Lowest holds on to a piece of Howl. It is his place to take punishment from us. But he cannot be punished for his sins so long as he holds the Vestige. We must strip him of it.”

Behind him there were a few shouts, but most kept their silence. Just then sun was hidden by a cloud and all the valley was thrown into shade, and as it did Isk saw a single snowflake drift in front of his eyes. He looked up for a moment, ignoring Highest as she rallied her favorites to her aid. Dark clouds had moved in after briefly allowing the sun to shine over the valley and begin the Rising. Storm clouds, and they carried snow. The winter would not only be harsh, it would also be long.

Rough hands grabbed him and dragged him onto the steps. Isk did not fight back, though Holm barked and some in the crowd shouted in his defense. Isk did not note the voices. He had accepted becoming Lowest, that his place in the Order would be so small. He didn't fight back when they threw him onto the platform before the tomb itself.

Instead, he watched the sky. That is where the Light was said to live, where the Sword Hand resided, where two of his three sons watched the world. His eyes, blessed with the power of the Bow, could not see them there. What he saw was a blizzard. Already the waves of snow were descending on the town. The clouds stretched out into the horizon. In all of them was snow. On his skin he could feel the bare touch of cold, stirring across him.

In some recess of his soul, the Bow was shouting at him, screaming that he fight back, but he would not. Lowest did not fight as those higher than him meted out their punishment. He watched the snows come down as they placed him below the ruby seal which was the Vestige's home. Highest spoke the words which only she knew, but Lowest did not listen, he watched the snow fall miles above him, marveling at every flake.