

## Chapter 4: Warmed by Fire

He screamed, and the sound filled the valley. When the Vestige had entered him, it had been ecstasy, every fiber of his being delighting in the sweetness. It was only fair that losing the Bow would be agony.

He was on fire, every muscle, every joint, all of him screamed in the agony of losing the Vestige. At the Mander, he had heard men die and seen those fatal wounds delivered to them. After the battle he saw the wounds Edred had received. What Lowest felt as he lost the Vestige was death. That death and pain from the Mander moved through his soul and burned all that was inside of him. The wound he had received from the boar was nothing, the feeling of disease as it ate at him was forgettable in the face of this.

Lowest wished for death, wished for the pain that rode through him to consume him whole and carry him off. He came near to begging the Darkness to see him dead, but as it left him the Bow stopped that thought. *Do not do that irreversible act*, it had whispered to him as it left. *For the Darkness which does linger still would give you the end, but in pain worse than this. You would not fight when you had your chance, and so you must learn this lesson. The next time you must fight, I pray you stand.* And it was gone.

How long he lay there in agony and how long he screamed, he did not know. Lowest was shivering, his throat raw when he came to. They had beat him, punishment for refusing the blows when he had carried the Vestige, but compared to the pain of losing the Bow, the hits felt like relief. His body had passed through the scourging fire and come out the other side numb to pain. His fingers curled and spasmed without his control, his muscles twitched. He had not the strength to take deep breaths, breathing short and shallow.

There were tears in his eyes, he realized. He had been weeping. That realization caused him to weep more. The Hero of the Mander, Lowest. Lowest because he had lived when he was said to die. Lowest because he honored a friend he had lost. Lowest because he had not run when he had the chance.

His father had not run. He had borne the shame squarely. Lowest had done the same.

His skin was wet from sweat and snow. Snow. He shivered violently. A blizzard had come over the town, and he had been left alone at the tomb.

That wasn't true either. Something was with him, warming his legs and draped over his shoulders. Lowest raised his head. Holm was there at his legs, her intelligent eyes watching him. At the sight of him moving, she gave a bark.

Footsteps crunched through the snow and Lowest found himself looking into the face of Khazad. The face was the same as the one he had known, but it was without the detail he had known it in. He could no longer see the hairs growing on his face or track every crack and divot in his skin. He did not need the Bow to read the expression on the dwarf's face.

Khazad pulled him into a sitting position and wrapped him tightly in what Lowest recognized was his cassock. The dwarf was in a blizzard bare chested, wearing only a strange

pair of knee-high orange trousers. His skin was wet as Lowest's but he did not seem to mind. Lowest could not see what he had been doing, the world was blanketed in white. The snow had come down hard and was showing no signs of slowing. Wind whipped at his face, sending a slurry against him.

"Alight?" Khazad asked, shouting against the wind. The question was so ridiculous that Lowest laughed. It was agonizing. His fingers were numb, his limbs exhausted. All he had was pain.

"Yeah, alight. How long was I out?" He looked into the sky, trying to find the sun behind the clouds, but he couldn't. The snow flakes came into focus just as they landed on him, their order as they fell from the heavens now hidden from him.

The dwarf pulled him close to warm him. "Screamed for half an hour. After that, shivered in the snow ten minutes. Whole village left for the feast when stopped screaming."

Lowest nodded. They had wanted to see if he was going to die to know if there was going to be a new Lowest. Once he survived, they let him be. With the dwarf's cassock over his shoulders, his arms round his waist, and the dog on his legs, he was starting to feel warm. He could have waited out the storm there. The pain was numbed by the snow and the sudden cold was held at bay by the pain. If death were to take him now, it would be peace.

But he could not rest there. He had duties that day, no matter the pain he was in.

"Khazad, thank you. You have done more for me than I can ever repay. I hope to see you again in this life. I will miss you when you go. When you return to your people, tell them that we are not as cruel as you have seen here today." Speaking so much was a pain, but Lowest needed Khazad to know his gratitude. The boar wound began to throb at his side. "Before you leave, I need you to take me into town. I have duties to perform this day."

"Am not leaving," Khazad said gently. "Not walking down the mountain in the snow. Am taking back to house on the mountain. Rest."

He began lifting him up. Holm circled round them, watching the snows.

"No," Lowest protested. "The Lowest must serve the town on the Rising, he must be humbled. Otherwise he cannot begin to rise. I must serve the village, Khazad."

Lowest could see that he had not convinced Khazad, but they had to pass through the town no matter what. They trudged through the snow which was halfway up his calves and knee deep for Khazad. Holm walked ahead of them, peering into the woods every few steps. The cold was beginning to get to Lowest, mixing with his fatigue and his pain to swallow him whole.

When they reached the village, the festivities were nowhere to be seen. The tables were still set out, but the cauldrons of food had vanished. The walk back to town could not have been long enough to for them to eat the meal. In order to fulfill his duties, he had to find the meal, and for that, the most likely place they had relocated to was Masa's inn. Khazad started leading him off into the mountain, but he protested, demanding to go to see Edred. The dwarf relented.

Lowest would have felt bad about misleading his friend, who had spent so much time taking care for him, but his duties were more important. After all, how was he supposed to rise again if he shirked his duties.

As they crossed the bridge, Lowest looked into the woods. The snow lay heavy on the trees, but he couldn't see into the woods. He couldn't count the leaves or see any insects on the bark. Lowest felt a pang of sadness, the Vestige truly was gone.

The memories weren't. Just casting back he could see the last year vividly in his mind's eye. The Mander, his wound, the flames he burned into his memory that he might forget all of it, it was all there. It was a blessing and a curse, he decided as they reached the other side. The horrors remained, but his mind had not been scoured clean when the Bow left. His name was taken from him, but he remained who he had always been. His strength, sight, and hearing had been removed, but he could still hunt. Lowest muttered a silent prayer, asking his strength return before the Tyrant assaulted the town.

It was a short walk to the inn from the bridge. Lowest grew worried when he didn't see heavy racks in the snow. If the entire village was eating there, the snow outside should have been churned up. There would be music and some people gathered outside. Khazad began slowing, noticing the same thing. He shot Lowest a questioning glance, which he quelled with his own. It was his duty to serve on this day.

Khazad let go of him and pushed open the door to the inn. There was no burst of music or talk. Holm walked in and shook herself clean, Lowest shuffled in after her. Only the innkeeper and her husband were in there, staring in surprise at their guests.

"Isk," Edred said as he rose, surprised. Masa was staring daggers at them.

"Lowest," she corrected in a harsh tone, reminding her husband not to commit heresy. Their dinner was large enough for ten, stews and roasts covered the table and the air was heavy with the scent of Rising herbs.

"Pardon the intrusion, highers. I only just came to after the Vestige was stripped from my soul. I thought the Rising feast was being held in your inn. I apologize for interrupting your meal. If you would just tell me where the meal is being held I will leave your home." Lowest bowed his head formally as he addressed them. When he finished, he looked at them. Masa looked satisfied that at least one of them knew his place. Her husband, pale with blood on his lips, had tears in his eyes.

They stood there in silence for some time as Lowest waited for either to speak. Masa only stared at Lowest angrily. He lowered his eyes. Meeting their eyes was challenging them, or so it was said. It was Edred who broke the stony silence.

"When we reached the table, the snow had already covered the town. Highest broke bread and asked us to feast in our homes. She and her favorites went to hers for the feast." He said the last part bitterly. His wife heard and frowned.

“Thank you,” Lowest said, bowing sharply. He turned and walked back out into the blizzard, not looking at the dwarf, who he knew would be concerned. Obediently, Holm, who had been warming herself by the fire, followed after him. The wind bit at him as he stepped out into the blizzard. Lowest felt the dwarf supporting him again.

“Should go up the mountain,” Khazad said gruffly. The storm was bad and growing worse. It was just after midday but the storm made dark as night. The walk back up the mountain would be long and cold, and the longer they delayed the worse it would be. Lowest longed to be back in his home, to be warmed by fire after a long day full of shame. Of all the memories which swirled in his mind, the memory of his father on the Rising when he became Lowest swirled before him.

He had fallen, and he had served. That’s all there was too it.

“Highest, help me to Highest.” His voice was desperate as the he began to lose feeling in his fingers. “I must serve today.”

The dwarf grumbled, but did not refuse him. They did not manage to go ten feet before the door behind him was thrown open. Khazad turned, and in doing turned Lowest. Edred walked into the storm, not noticing that the wind or the snow. In his hand was a pair of heavy coats.

“Isk, I need to talk.” He covered the distance easily, tossing one coat to the dwarf. Edred supported Isk as the dwarf put the coat on.

“I’m Lowest, not Isk. I won’t be Isk for a year at least.” His father had been Lowest and performed his duties for three years. Isk would serve for as long as he was meant to serve.

“Isk,” Edred pleaded, but Isk turned away. He was Lowest. He had to remind himself to be Lowest and forget the name Isk. “Damn you man, I stand higher than you. And I hold a Vestige. I will call you whatever I choose.”

There was no denying that. Isk paused as he turned. No matter their place, holding a Vestige meant holding a piece of Howl himself, a piece of the light. Just as he had commanded Ammardain to arm himself and his apprentices, there really was nothing he could do to refuse Edred from command. How could he know what the Sword was whispering into his ear?

Edred continued in a whisper when he saw Isk stopping. “I stood at the Rising, listening to Highest name the Order, and as I listened I shook in rage. There was an anger in me that I had not felt, not even at the Mander. It felt as though the Vestige inside me was seizing control. My fists clenched without me, my feet wanted to rush the tomb. I had to bit my lip to stop myself from shouting. Highest placed her blood and her favorites above all the other people of the valley, as she has done every year of our lives. How is it that we stood by so many years while she did that? How is it that I stood by and watched her strip you of your Vestige, and for crimes which no man can reasonably hold against you?

“The Sword wanted me to shout. It whispered in my ear and told me that that this was the Darkness. Evil had taken the grave of Howl. But she was Highest, Isk, third in all the Order. I

could not stand against her. I could not shout. The Vestige told me that today's works were wrong. Howl told me to stand, and I failed to."

Isk watched his friend and a feeling of pity welled up inside of him. He had felt the same things, felt that Highest was doing wrong, and had done nothing about it. The Bow had boiled inside of him as he heard Highest speak, and had seized control him. Had it not been for Holm, he would have stormed the tomb and thrown Highest off of it.

"I don't know what to do with myself," Edred said, pleading with Isk. As long as Isk had known him, he had been a man of certainty. He had known that he was going to wed Masa, no matter that all the other boys in the village thought the same. Typically quiet, he began going to the inn every night and held keep people in line for the recently orphaned Masa. The boys figured out too late what he was doing, by the time they began copying him he had made it seem like he was their leader. Anyone who made a spot of trouble in the inn was immediately shouted at by ten boys. Isk watched as Masa fell in love with the brute.

The few times he had trouble deciding, he had always come to Isk and Holm. Now only Isk remained, chastised and humiliated. Edred was a pious man, loth to do anything outside the light of the Order. He now ignored the confines to speak to his old friend.

"What do you not understand, higher."

"I am meant to obey Highest, for her word is the only and she knows all good and all evil. She stands third in all the world, third nearest the Light. But inside of me is Howl himself, a piece of the Light. He was the third child of the Sword Hand. He died in this valley in the battle against the Darkness. That piece of Howl wanted me to strangle Highest. I still feel the rage inside of me, furious that I restrained myself. What am I to do when the Light is at war with itself? Who between them can I trust?"

Edred deflated as he spoke his worries. Isk knew why he came to him with them. They were well beyond heresy. To say that the Darkness had corrupted a Highest was evil. To think it was evil. But if it had not, then that meant that the Vestige had been twisted. What other reason could there be for the Vestige to want to destroy a proper Highest? If the first thought was a vile heresy, then this second was enough to shatter the world. Howl, the third son of the Sword Hand, the son who chose to fight a battle he knew he would not win, the son who had died that the world might be saved. If his Vestiges had fallen into Darkness, then the Order had failed and a new wave of mindless evil was set to swallow the world whole.

Two unthinkable thoughts. Yet today, both Edred and Isk had thought them. Heresy. Ruination. Isk had no answers. What he did have were his memories.

"I felt the same thing today," he said. "I watched the Rising as I had done my entire life, and I was outraged. Highest did as she had always done, but today I felt that it was wrong. I do not know why. The Vestige inside of me howled in rage, and had Holm not grabbed me by my trousers, I would have charged the tomb. I felt as you did. You have committed no crime. And were our third friend with us in the Rising, he would have done the same.

“I cannot say who is right in a battle between the Light and the Light. The ancient Order which the Sword Hand created to guard against the Darkness must hold our faith, for if they cannot safeguard the world we are doomed. Howl is the Light itself. If it can be corrupted, then there is nothing left for us to fight for. Have courage. Trust not one or the other, but yourself. You strive for the Light each day. Trust the heart that beats in that chest. It alone will not fail you on the path.”

When Isk finished, Edred collapsed into his arms, weeping. Isk would have fallen had it not been for the dwarf, who had finished putting on the coat, which hung down below his knees. Supported by Khazad, both men wept in the blizzard. Isk did not weep because of the conflict he found inside of him. He had chosen to obey Highest rather than Howl, and he would pay that price for a full year at least.

Instead, he wept because those were the words of his father. His third year as Lowest had been the harshest. He was beaten often as Highest said such punishment would drive the sins from his body. Those pains were beginning to wear on him and he would not live to see a fourth year as Lowest. Isk had begun to avoid the town for shame of seeing his father beaten and stoned. The first time he had seen his father beaten, Isk had thrown himself on top of him to shield him from the blows.

It had been after that, and after he had been punished himself by Highest for interfering with the proper work of the Order, Isk’s father had said those words to him, though without mention of the Vestiges. He had been a wise man, even though he died without his own name. A familiar pain tugged on Isk.

Edred pulled away, snow gathered on his shoulders. “Wear the coat, Isk. It is my gift to you.” Gifts were a large part of the Rising, but they were never supposed to be given to Lowest. The explanation Highest always give was that it was wrong to reward wickedness, and that the desire to receive gifts again would give reason for men to rise. No doubt the woman would look upon the coat as a heresy, but Edred was not going to be dissuaded from giving it. Once he had set his mind, there was no changing it.

“Thank you, friend. I must go and serve this day, but I will repay this kindness. We did not have much time since we returned to the valley to settle back in our ways. I nearly died and you got married. I would be honored to drink in your inn, old friend.”

Tears still in his eyes, Edred smiled and offered his hand. “Come tomorrow. The day after the Rising sees an empty inn. Let us drink to the one we lost, and to your eventual rising.”

Isk shook it. He put on the coat as Edred walked back into the inn, feeling warmer. “Nice to know that there are still good men,” he said, watching his friend leave.

Khazad shook his head, sending snow flying like ash. “Good men speak when they see evil walking.” His voice was gruff.

“Then why didn’t you speak up today?” Isk asked, leaning against Khazad for support. He knew the dwarf was not being harsh, merely direct. There was a bluntness to the dwarves which took a deal of getting used to.

“Simple,” Khazad said as he began leading him back across the bridge. “Am not a man.”

Isk laughed and the dwarf chuckled by his side. It was painful. Crossing the bridge a second time was wearying. Isk was at the edge of his strength, the pain had slowly been replaced by an all-encompassing exhaustion. His muscles ached and every step he took made him shake violently. He felt worse than when he had recovered from the boar wound.

His thoughts drifted to the two bows hanging on his wall, neither of which he could draw. Howl’s bow required the Vestige in order to move the string at all. His own he was in no condition to string, let alone draw. Not that it much mattered with the woods hunted clean by the Tyrant. There would be nothing to find unless he climbed into the mountain and searched above the tree line. He had seen a goat up there this morning. Of course, if the Tyrant decided that the village was too challenging a meal, it would eat the mountain goats too.

Remembering the great red eye terrified him, but he was too tired to dwell on it. The valley was severely undefended with only the Sword to guard it. True, the valley had never been attacked by anything as far as Isk knew, but there was a first time for everything. Whatever the Tyrant was, it was probably more than Edred could handle.

Isk’s thoughts and fears were interrupted as they reached the other side of the bridge. An eerie light shone from inside Highest’s home and smoke began to twist away through the blizzard.

“What is happening?” Khazad asked. “Is it part of the Rising?”

“It’s a fire Khazad.” A solitary set of footprints led away from the home. Isk looked down the path just as the curtain of snow lifted slightly. He saw dark figure walking away. The man who was not a man. Isk knew him immediately from the way he walked. “I can barely walk. You’ll have to check if anyone in in there still.”

Khazad didn’t look convinced. Isk couldn’t read expressions as well as he used to, but he thought perhaps it was because he thought Highest got what she deserved. He only agreed after constant pleading from Isk. He set Isk down gently at the end of the bridge and commanded Holm to stay with him.

When he had dashed away, Isk was left watching the fire start to burst out of the mansion. Its flames gave shadows to the blizzard, throwing the village into a dark relief. Isk cursed himself for being so weak, being unable to save anyone. Surely to serve on the Rising meant to pull people out of harms way.

An idea struck him. He could not go in and save anyone in his condition, but he could send more help. Isk began shouting, despite the pain which it caused him. He shouted against the blizzard, which had no intention of letting him be heard. He shouted himself horse as Holm

barked beside him. The snow piled up on him and he began to feel cold to the bones. He was now shaking violently.

All the homes nearest to him were owned by Highest's favorites, all of whom would be inside the burning mansion. Isk had to yell louder. A gust of wind carried the fire higher. Flames were now licking the rooftop. There was no sign of Khazad.

Plumes of black smoke began curling into the sky. Isk was in a bad place now. He was still shouting, his throat raw, and Holm kept barking. The trouble was that he was going numb. He could no longer feel his fingers. All boys in Howl's Valley grew up on the tales of what happened in the snow. Missing fingers in the village was not uncommon. Usually the shepherds were down the mountain before the snows set in and there was no reason to go up it, but every once in a while there was the need to go. The men who could not get down fast enough lost fingers. Occasionally men did not come back at all.

Isk knew the signs of frostbite, same as any child who grew up in the valley. He had been out in the snow near an hour and a half, and for much of that time he had been wearing a shirt and trousers, with a dwarven cassock wrapped around him. If he lost any fingers then he would never shoot his bow again.

"Holm," he shouted to the dog. She stopped barking and turned to face him. "Drag me to the mansion."

By the light of the growing fire, Isk could see her as she gave him a skeptical look, but faithful to the last, she let him grab hold and dragged him beneath the burning eaves. The snow melted away as the fire raged. Soaked, but basking in the heat, Isk asked Holm to fetch Edred. He should have done before, rather than shouting into the wind. Holm shot off into the blizzard.

Just then Khazad came out of the burning mansion, two bodies on his shoulders. He was followed by Highest, her head held high. The soot of the burning building did nothing for her haughtiness. She was carrying her thick walking stick. Isk could see flecks of his own blood on it in the fire light. Behind her came Thaan and Kesh, and after them came their families. They were orderly, marked with soot to various degrees. Once outside, they separated into families and stood away from the fire to watch the great house burn down.

Holm returned as quickly as she had left, followed only moments later by Edred. The large man was not dressed for the blizzard. He slowed as he surveyed the roaring fire. When he spotted Isk, he ran to his side.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Isk saw Highest look over at them in a flicker of annoyance before turning her attention back to her home.

"Yes. Khazad and I had just crossed the bridge when the fire began. I might get frostbit but the fire has done nothing to me." Isk held out his hands toward the fire. Edred frowned before turning towards Highest. Before he left to speak with her, Isk called to him. "Edred, I saw him walking away from the house just as it caught."

“Who?” Edred asked, turning back to Isk. Between the fire and the harm to Highest, he was not paying too close attention to what Isk had said.

“*Him*,” Isk said with extra emphasis. Edred’s eyes went wide and he peered into the snow, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man.

“Incredible,” Edred whispered to himself. “Maybe his Vestige told him to.” He sounded awed that one of them had actually done something today.

Their conversation was cut off abruptly when an argument erupted between the families. Isk and Edred turned to watch as the Algrens and the Alableus began accusing the other of starting the fire. The guests of Highest who weren’t connected to those two families stood back and watched. Foremost in the arguing were Thaan and Kesh, Highest’s favorite.

“Your boy was playing around with the fire,” Thaan thundered, his voice heard over the howling winds. “Pulling logs out of the hearth and waving them around. You should fall.”

The normally soft and reedy voice of Kesh answered him, “Highest asked to light the candles, none of yours stood to aid her wishes.” His family murmured their assent, though their voices were drowned by the wind and groaning of the wood. Meles puffed his chest out proudly. He had risen.

Land Alreed watched the events nervously from behind Highest. A frequent maker of trouble, this was beyond his capacity to make. Isk could not see as well as he had been able to this morning, but even in the blizzard he could see a flicker of annoyance when Meles was mentioned.

Highest herself did not note the argument. She watched the fire, shocked that such a thing had happened. Isk had been inside the mansion several times when younger, and knew it to be full of wonders not seen in the valley. It was only after he left that he learned many of the treasures kept so jealously by Highest were common place. As children they marveled at the glass she kept, the only pieces in the valley. When she showed them the glass which made small things larger, they had thought it some sorcery. In Bredar he had seen a hundred such glasses, and had wept openly at the glass statue of the Sword Hand. Isk watched her face as her treasures were destroyed and wondered if she knew how common they were.

The argument escalated. As one they began shouting and some began packing snowballs to hurdle at their foe. Holm placed herself between the arguers and Isk. Khazad had placed the two bodies down, leaving the two members of the Algren family to recover on their own, coughing in the swirling snow. He walked over to rejoin Isk, a look of disgust on his face.

Dwarves were a hard folk to upset. They had faced some of the worst the Darkness could muster, and mentions of pain or loss were met with the sad saying, “The Lost suffered more.” In the camp before the Mander, soldiers had placed bets to see who could upset the dwarves, not one of them were able. The sight of his friend in such a state made Isk shiver.

Snowballs began flying and the two sides rushed each other. A flurry of fists as they came together, men grappling men and women fighting the women. It was ugly. At the Mander,

Isk had seen what humans could do to one another, the horrors came ever fresh to his mind. Those were soldiers. There had been some level of grace to their fighting.

The battle Isk now watched had none of that. The families wrestled each other in the snow, quite a few of them were on the ground already. Blood mingled in the snow as the fighting grew fiercer and fiercer. Edred watched on, horrified, though that may have been because of the Vestige inside of him. Isk could see a battle was being waged inside his mind. His lip would snarl at the sight, his hand curled into fists. No doubt the Sword was itching to throw itself into the fray and punish those it felt had taken a higher place than their due.

The highest people in the village, those who Highest saw as the nearest to the Order year after year, pulverized each other. Isk watched enthralled as he warmed his hands in the fire. Some of those hands had dragged him to the altar a few hours previous and beaten him there. They were below only Highest herself, exemplars of the Light for all the village to see, to strive to being.

Isk shook his head. Those ideas were new, thoughts he never entertained in all his life. His father had spoken ill of Highest and spent the rest of his life being punished for it. His mother, in the years left to her before she died of shame, taught only one lesson to him, never think ill of Highest or her works. Isk had done so, though he found it hard to do when his father was received her justice. When he could not stomach the sight of those who had humiliated him so, Isk had left for the woods, building his cabin in the mountains. Each day he spent hunting or whittling, fighting down thoughts which reviled Highest. As he did, he rose, each year standing taller until he was awarded with the Vestige of the Bow.

After a year of wearing it, it felt as though the flood gates had opened. He had not had thoughts of that nature in the year of campaigning. The Bow had been set against Highest from the moment Isk had returned. He had struggled against those thoughts in the first month back, but today had set those thoughts free. Isk could no longer look at those who stood higher than him and see anything other than a man. He didn't need the Vestige to think those thoughts anymore. A small feeling returned to his hands as he warmed himself by the fire, feeling the old chains on his mind fall away.

Highest did not look at the brawlers, their fighting beneath her notice, but it was not beneath the notice of the town. Now that the flames were consuming the building entire, villagers came rushing to see the trouble. A large crowd gathered, calling to Highest for instruction, but none came. So instead they stood and watched the fighting and the fire. Isk saw Cooper and Gillie Algry watched on with apprehension similar to Edred.

"Reap what is sown," Khazad whispered into his ear. The dwarf watched the fighting with a kind of grim satisfaction.

Had Isk still had the Vestige, he probably would have been grinning with him. But Isk was himself for the first time in a year, and as he watched the villagers battle themselves, he remembered the great eye of the Tyrant. There was something out there waiting for them, something which had scoured the mountainside clean. Isk knew what his place was.

“I started the fire,” he shouted out into the blizzard. Behind him he heard Edred gasp and felt his hand on his shoulder. Holm looked at him funny. Khazad shouted in his ear, but Isk didn’t listen to him. “I started the fire.”

Isk kept shouting though his throat was hoarse. Highest turned from the fire and watched him, her expression unchanging. She might have been looking at a sheep for all she cared. In that blank stare he saw that she knew he did not set fire to her home, and understood what he was doing. Khazad said nothing at his side, only shaking his head sadly. Edred was shaking Isk violently, shouting over him that they had been at his wife’s inn when the fire broke out, swearing by the Vestige inside of him that Isk was innocent.

The village gathered and the fighting stopped. It was Lang who walked through the families and pulled them apart, pointing at the shouting Isk. There were funny looks shared between them, as though they knew he was lying.

Lying was a terrible sin before the Light, but worse was the strife which Isk saw before him. The Darkness was strife, it turned friend against friend. That was evil. It was that evil that Isk could fight. Perhaps the only evil he could fight now.

Highest approached him, and after her came the two families, their blood mingling with the ash and the snow. She said nothing until she stood above him. “Is it true what you claim, that you burned down my home?”

“No Highest, no. He didn’t mean it.” Edred fell into the snow, pleading with Highest. “He was with me when your home caught fire. It couldn’t have been him. It couldn’t have.” He prostrated himself and kissed the hem of her robes.

“It is true,” came the gruff voice of the dwarf.

Isk did not look at either his friends, nor at Holm, who was standing beside him, sheltering him from the wind. His eyes were locked on Highest’s, those cold pits which judged all actions.

Isk nodded. “I started the fire”

He was struck so quickly he did not know where it came from. A pain bloomed in his skull and threatened to take over his entire being. A second blow came shortly after the first, though the pain was so bad that he had hardly felt it come.

“Children, go and gather every hand in this valley. Lowest has committed a crime most heinous. We have not known its like ever in our home. Each villager shall strike him once with their left hand, and once with their right.”

Shivering in the snow, feeling the warm trickle of blood run down his face, Lowest waited for the blows to fall.