

Chapter 5: Children's Rhymes

Lowest did not remember the blows falling on him. The first had been given by the two families and after that he was delirious. Sometimes the blows were light such that he had only just noticed the hand, sometimes they broke his skin. Through all of it Highest gave a sermon, one which he did not hear. A day of torture passed.

How long it took for the village to administer his punishment he did not know. Both his eyes were shut by blood and he had no control over his body anymore, which curled into a ball and shook violently. At some point the beatings stopped and a gentle pair of hands picked him up and carried him. Where he did not know, he hoped he would be warm there. The cold wind battered him as they took him away from the burning mansion.

Lowest wished for death then. He uttered a short prayer, whether to the Light or Dark he did not know. Nor did he care. The end was all he cared for. Beaten twice in the same day, humiliated from falling to Lowest, stripped of his Vestige, and frozen so thoroughly that if he came out the other end with a hand full of fingers it would be a miracle. It would be kinder for him to die.

When he had been a child, his father told him the tale of his grandfather's death. As winter settled over the mountain one year and the shepherds were long gone down the mountain side, a group of boys got it into their heads to stand at the mountain's peak. A challenging climb even in the heat of summer. They went without telling anyone where they were going. It was only by tracking their footsteps that their parents managed to learn their plan. The winter lay so heavy on the mountain side that they could not climb it. Each parent gave a reason they could not go, until his grandfather, who stood lower than them, was saddled with the rescue. He had gone, carrying as much as he could that would save them. He found the children in a cave, given them all the supplies he had carried, even offered them the clothes off his back. All of them survived, though they lost a few fingers. Lowest's grandfather, on the other hand, came back down the mountain raving about how hot he was, though he was not wearing any clothes. He did not survive another night.

That was the fate of all who stood outside in the snow for too long. As far as deaths went, it had never seemed too bad. Perhaps they were taking him from the fire so that he could claim him. They would set him down in some snowy bank and leave him until the world got warm again.

The wind died and the warmth came to him, but it wasn't what he wanted. For one, the ground beneath him was hard like a floor, not soft like the snows. The warmth was all wrong too. It should feel like his body retreating inside itself, but instead he felt his side baked in a soft warmth.

He lay there, hoping that the pain that consumed him was going to kill him. Being dragged off into the eternal sleep was all he desired. Around him he heard voices mumbling, and something soft and furry curled up at his back. It was then that Lowest knew that he was not going to die that day. The Light was not yet finished with him.

As he lay there he wept, letting the pain swirl around him. Lowest had seen horrors, evils which the people of the valley could not understand. Edred alone knew them. But in all the terrible hours of the Mander, he had never felt the pain that those men felt. He envied the dead. Their pain had ended, often within moments. Lowest seemed cursed to endure pain after pain and never see reprieve. In all his years he had never seen a Lowest treated the way he had been, not his father, and not even the man who had held the post this morning.

How far Lowest had fallen. That pain hurt as much as any blow. His father had never stood that high in the valley. Perhaps Highest had always suspected him of bad breeding. When his father fell he had accepted the shame; his father had never dined with the High Highest, nor ever been a hero to anybody. Lowest had heard thousands call his name, his old name. Gold and riches unnumbered had been offered to him, enough to buy the entire valley.

Yet here he was, the battered pulp of a man, frozen half to death. Such were the honors which his own village lauded him with. Not one came to see him when he was wounded, none spoke for him when he fell.

Lowest shivered before the fire, dark thoughts swirling through his mind. Envy and anger were evils which lay waste to towns, he reminded himself. The heretics were envious of the progresses of the Order, and so they began wars. Edred had given his explanation for why he did not come to his aid. They were the same reasons which he had given himself for not shouting at Highest.

The howling of the blizzard overtook the conversation and the cold rushed into whatever home he was being kept in as the door was opened and shut. As quick as it had come, the cold vanished. The murmuring was gone too.

A voice Lowest could not place was talking, but the words were muffled and he could not make them out. Whatever had been said caused a flurry of activity as people moved to and fro. They made no demands of Lowest, leaving him by the fire. The door opened and winter seeped in again, before the shutting of the door left him alone in the warm silence.

Holm was there beside him, but she made no noise. Spared from death by goring, he had managed to be healthy for all of a week. Now he was laying at someone's hearth, waiting for the cold hand of death to take him. Lowest was surprised that he was able to think as clearly as he was. Bloodied though he was, it did not feel as though any bones were broken.

Gingerly, he tried to open an eye. His eyelids did not obey him, so his still shaking hands began to pry them open. He found that the pain was more bearable, and that he had regained feeling in his fingers. Lowest had no idea how long he lay there, but the cold which had tried to consume him was only lingering at the edges of his fingertips. He would not lose any fingers this day.

It was that realization which drove dark thoughts away. There was strength in him still, strength enough to drive the darkness away. However long it had been since he lay there, it was enough to recover himself. He peeled away the crusted blood and opened his eyes carefully. In front of him was an intricate hearth and a roaring fire. Lowest recognized the place immediately.

He was in Masa's inn. No doubt she protested to her husband about keeping him there, but the large man must have insisted. Lowest watched the flames in a trace, gratitude welling up inside. He was not alone. The darkness in his mind fled from these thoughts.

Time had no meaning to him, and he watched the flames in perfect peace. The door behind him opened and a chorus of voices came in, shaking Lowest from his daze.

"...and I've never seen a storm like it." The speaker was the unfamiliar voice. Lowest turned around to see who it was. Standing between Edred and Khazad was a man Lowest had never seen before, brushing snow of a light traveling cloak. His clothes were soaked and the man was shivering, his face covered by a rag. Lowest had seen traveling clothes like that in the Lowlands, where greens and yellows were reserved for merchants. Howl's Valley got their fair share of peddlers, particularly when pilgrims came to the tomb in spring. Few other mountain villages would receive so many. Strange timing. Like the two hundred shepherds who Highest had delay from leaving, the strange merchant was now trapped in the valley until the spring thaw, or the sudden blizzard loosened its grip.

Khazad grumbled in approval of the merchant's words. "Like lightening from a clear sky." He saw Lowest looking at them and breathed a sigh of relief. "Alive after all."

Edred looked over and smiled before leading the merchant to a table. The merchant gave Lowest only a brief glance before allowing himself to be led on. Khazad did not follow them but came to check on Lowest, inspecting his finger and the cuts he had been given.

"Is a trader who was trapped halfway up the valley," the dwarf whispered in his low voice, nodding to the merchant. "Carriage was stuck in a snow bluff. Needed help getting out. Paid a short visit to Highest and then came here. Said something about speaking to the Vestiges."

"That's not me anymore," Lowest said in a croak. His throat was sore from shouting over the blizzard and the pain of losing his Vestige. It would be days before he spoke normally again. Given how well his body had taken the blows, he hoped that it would not take too long. "Let him talk to Edred, he's the only one of us left." Khazad shot him a look which made him feel defensive. "What? One of us was stripped of their name and all communication with him is a crime against the Light, and I am definitively not the bearer of a Vestige any longer."

"Might still want to speak." Khazad stood up, a puzzled frown beneath the beard. He gave Lowest a glance and then left him for the conversation.

He needn't have bothered. There was a sudden outraged shout and a storm of boot steps as the merchant came to the hearth. Now that he had removed his face covering removed, Lowest saw a small and water pair of eyes set into a hawkish face. He had a short-cropped beard in the style of rivermen.

"Is it true?" That was all he asked, his voice bubbling with fury.

Lowest rearranged himself so that he was prostrate on the ground before the other man. "Is what true, higher?" he asked, touching his forehead against the wood as a mark of respect.

He did not look up at the man's face, but his voice gained a harshness which honed the fury into a terrible anger. "Edred the Bold has told me that he fell in this Rising, and that Iskander the Hero, the Hawk, Victor of the Mander, has been made Lowest."

"I fear it is true, higher," Lowest said, touching his forehead to the wood a second time.

"You fell? It's an outrage." The words were furious, but the fire left the man. He sank into the high-back chair, defeated. "What will the High Highest say?"

"It is nobody's fault but mine, higher."

The man shook his head despondently. "That hardly matters. I was ordered to come to this valley to give three gifts to the three Vestiges. Thanks from the entire Order for you three, personally. The High Highest made this gift herself. And now you are Lowest. The High Highest can't give gifts to Lowest."

"I also ate at her right-hand after the Mander, higher." Lowest's voice was still hoarse, but speaking with it dulled the pain. He was feeling stronger in his limbs now, which was strange considering the beating he had received. Perhaps the Bow had not left him. That thought caused wild joy to run through Lowest, and he found himself smiling as he stared at the wooden floor.

"That just makes things worse. She can't have eaten with anyone that far from the Light. It's an insult to all the Order. What did you do to fall so low?"

Lowest looked up at the merchant. Deference was expected to all those who were nearer the Light, and looking at them as Lowest might be seen as a challenge, but curiosity got the better of him. The merchant had his head in his hands and was shaking himself, as though trying to wake from a dream. Lowest looked back down. The joy he was feeling was tinted with pity. The merchant would certainly pay for Lowest's mistakes.

"Highest gave two reasons. First, that I spoke the name Holm, which she has commanded to be forgotten. The second was that I made her speak falsehoods when I recovered from the goring of a boar. She had said to the entire village that I would die from my wounds, but I did not, higher."

"An outrageous," the merchant said, rising again. "Such crimes I have never heard. A man defeating his wounds is a victory for the Light. Your health is a triumph, not a failing." Lowest watched the man pacing, and as he did he noticed Edred and Khazad exchange a look which he could not decipher. "Does she really think that she can strip a name from all the Order. Such things I have never heard in all my years. And stripping a hero of his Vestige. Has the Light forsaken us?"

No one answered him as he paced the room. None wanted to search their souls for what they thought.

"Pardon me Voss," Edred said after a while, "but why has the High Highest sent gifts for the three of us. Surely she would only send two. She was the one who demanded that..." he

paused for a brief moment, unsure of what to say, “the Spear be punished for fleeing the field. Our Highest punished the man so severely because she was shamed by his actions.”

“She did expect punishment, perhaps the shame of falling severely,” Voss said. “But you three have, or had a piece of Howl himself inside of you. You were the Light. No man can be good if you three cannot be. Naming any of you to be Lowest is an affront to the Sword Hand, and striping a name from the tongues of man is madness which I have never known.” He sat back in his seat heavily. “Get up man, stop groveling to me. I had expected to fall on my knees before you, not to see this.”

“No.” The firm voice came from the rooms beyond the common area. Masa came into view. “No,” she reaffirmed. “He is where he belongs. How can a merchant say what is proper? He should grovel before his betters. He has committed sins, he said so himself. Keep him there, perhaps he might learn humility.”

Lowest had never heard such harshness from Masa before. He dared not lift his head from the floor, knowing that she was watching him for the slightest transgressions. If only he could turn his head slightly and catch a glimpse at Edred. His courage failed him, knowing that that was just what she wanted of him. So he remained prostrate as other spoke of him.

“A kind proprietor you are,” Voss said wryly.

“Careful now,” Edred said, his voice a grave warning.

“Of course, Master Sword” the merchant said. Lowest got the sense he was bowing to Edred. “I only mean to mention that the High Highest gave me my place, and because of that I stand higher than you. You cannot countermand my orders.”

“Then I shall tell Highest,” she said breathlessly.

“Please do, but also tell her that I have gifts for the three men who carried Howl into the Mander last year, and no command of hers will prevent me.” Lowest could not see what happened of Masa, but there were rapid footsteps, followed by a door slamming shut. He let out a soft sigh of relief. When he returned the following night, he would pay for what was done here today. Masa never turned anyone away, but she would make him grovel. He’d seen her do it to the previous Lowest. But that was later, tonight he was among friends.

“Rise, Isk, and take a seat in the chair. Master Edred, do you know where the third is?”

Lowest, no, Isk, sat upright and took the smallest chair near the fire. If he was going to step over the line of propriety, he was not going to do it running. Isk got a proper look at the remaining patrons. Khazad was looking sheepishly at the door which led to the rooms, where Masa had undoubtedly just gone through. Edred was angry. Isk knew that look well, but whom with he had no idea. He gave Voss a cross look, but had his back set firmly to the door his wife had disappeared down. Voss remained seated in the high-back chair, a smug expression on his lips. Only Holm looked unperturbed, her tail thumping lazily by the fire.

“I do not know where the man who is not a man is. And I am not going looking for him in this storm,” Edred snapped. Then, regretting it, he sat down in his usual chair and took his head in his hands. Isk could not see his face, but he did see Edred’s body slump into the chair and heard him breathing heavy.

“It would be best if I gave the gifts together, rather than hunting you three down one at a time. The High Highest gave me letter to go with the gifts.” Voss’s tone softened when he spoke to the last Vestige holder who had not been disgraced. “Let me know when you find him. I’ll take a room.”

“I’m not going out there tonight,” Edred said firmly.

Voss only shrugged and turned to watch the fire, a sadness etched onto his face. Isk stood from his seat, thanked the merchant for his kindness, and went to the door. There were few hours left in the day, and with the Tyrant in the woods it would be better to go up the mountain side before night fell.

“Are going?” Khazad asked as he reached it, at the same time that Edred said “Isk?” Isk turned to face them. He saw that while Voss was watching the fire, he had tilted his head to better hear the conversation.

“There is something in the forest,” he said. “Something terrible. It has hunted the forest clean and now, bereft of food, it will find its meals in town. I must return to my home and gather my things, because there will be a battle when it comes.” Edred chewed his lip, worried. Khazad knew Isk’s thoughts on the matter, and accepted them with no fuss. Voss made no sign that he had heard them.

“Have you seen it?” Edred asked after a silence.

Isk nodded. “Just after our conversation on the bridge. I was Speaking with Gillie when I saw a great red eye watching the village from the trees. I had the Bow with me then, but as I looked to see more of the beast, I could not. Only that eye full of hatred. And when I walked through the forest before, I could feel its hate bent on me. Edred, I think that you are the only one who can face it right now, and judging from the fear that rules the forest, the outcome is not certain.”

The room was silent except for the fire. Holm seemed on edge and would not meet his eye. It was the dwarf who broke that silence. He clapped his hands together, said there was nothing to be done, and joined Isk by the door. Voss did not spare them a glance, but Isk could see the man shivering.

“Isk,” Edred began, his voice almost imploring, “are you sure about all of this?”

It was a fair question. Isk looked inside of himself, expecting to find the Bow waiting for him there in secret. How else could he have recovered so quickly? He did not find it, and instead of the confidence that it had always been there was a knot of uncertainty. If what he had felt and seen in the forest was truly out there, then he did not see how he could win. In the Days of Darkness, men lived and fought and died without guarantees of ever seeing the Light. Only the

Sword Hand and his sons could secure it. Afterall, men were small compared to the host of evils which the Darkness had at its command. If the Tyrant was some ancient evil still lingering in the woods, then only Edred had a chance against it.

“The days of my certainty have passed, Edred. Now all I have are pains and fears; I fear the coming winter more than I have ever feared anything before. I am going to get my bow, and should the Tyrant come to Howl’s Valley, it will learn the fate of all evil that dares step between these hills.”

Khazad gave another clap and opened the door. The cold wind rushed inside and stole Isk’s breath away. He shivered and looked out into the still falling snows. Briefly, the snows parted and the clouds rolled back, giving him a view up the mountain. Four miles through the snow. Suddenly Isk was away of just how tired his body was, and how many pains he still had in him.

“Isk, Khazad, wait a moment.” Edred disappeared into a backroom and came back with clothes. “Change out of those coats, they’re bloody.” He put down the pile he was carrying and saw that it included hats, warm trousers, and gloves. Edred went behind the bar and tossed them each a pair of boots.

“Will Masa allow this?” Isk asked, knowing the answer. He had always known her to have a sharp tongue, having learned how to keep the inn since she was young, but never had he imagined that he would earn her disdain.

Edred frowned. “The clothes are mine. I’ll be washing them.” He said it with such firmness that it settled the matter.

That was good enough for Khazad, who changed quickly. After a long look at Edred, Isk followed suit. The clothes were ill fitting for both of them. Too large for Isk and too long for Khazad. It was only after much muttering and fiddling with the clothes that they were prepared for the snow. Isk bowed low to Edred as they stepped out into the snow.

He could not tell the time, the valley was thrown into a deep darkness by the storm. There was no sign of the villagers, and the fire at Highest’s mansion had been put out, though by what Isk did not know. A thick black smoke was still billowing. The snow was falling as fast as ever, but the wind had died down, so while it was cold, it was not biting so. It could have even been pleasant were it not for the pain and the ever-present worry in his mind about the Tyrant.

Following after Khazad, who insisted on going first to make a trail, they left the village and crossed into the forest. Isk had been expecting the wave of fear as he crossed under the heavily laden boughs of the trees, but he felt nothing. He looked to his companions. Khazad had not noticed anything when they were in the forest earlier and gave no sign that he felt a presence now. The only oddity about him was that he was not talking or singing. Isk did not think that was a sign that he felt the Tyrant. Holm, on the other hand, lay her ears back and watched the shadows warily. She made no sound as she watched the trees. Isk shivered. So the Tyrant was still out there. He just could not feel its presence anymore. Feeling more vulnerable than he had in a year, Isk began watching the woods.

Around them the forest was making a music of its own. The trees still had their leaves, and as the snow began to weigh down the branches, they began to groan. The creaking pains of the trees made the hairs on the back of Isk's head stand up. They were not far from the river, but it made no sound to ease the tension on the forest. Frozen in the course of a few hours. Isk could not but wonder how cold the coming winter would be.

Behind him, Holm let out a sudden low growl. Khazad froze as Isk turned to see what the trouble was. Holm was staring intently into the darkness on their left, her eyes fixed on something Isk could not see. Had this been a day prior, he would have been able to see clearly into the darkness. Now he could only make out the tree twenty yards from them. For a moment he thought he saw the shadow of something large move, but the moment passed and he could not be sure.

"See anything?" Khazad whispered through the darkness. The sound of a voice nearly made Isk jump.

"Nothing. Only shadows. We should get out of here fast though. Holm, come."

Holm did follow after, but she never took her eyes off the darkness and walked in a kind of side shuffle. Her growl was now constant.

A sharp crack filled the dark forest, the sound bouncing off the trees. Isk threw himself to the ground, his nerves on edge. Snow got under his coat and wetted his skin, chilling him. Khazad had given a great curse at the sound and jumped so that his back to a tree. Holm was now barking ferociously into the darkness.

Isk looked for the source of the noise. He found it in a large tree branch which had snapped from the snow. It lay just ahead of where Khazad had been standing. Dazed, cold, and in pain, Isk stood and shook the snow off. It did little for the snow that had already gone down his coat.

"Are you alright?" he called to Khazad. The dwarf only nodded, eyeing the branch with suspicion. Isk turned to his dog. "Holm, be quiet." She fell silent immediately. Isk got the feeling that unfriendly eyes were on them. They were not far into the forest; the ground was not yet steep. If the Tyrant decided to eat them, Isk could not see them giving it any trouble. "We move quickly. If we make it to my cabin, you grab your mattock and I'll start a fire."

"If?" Khazad asked. There was no note of fear in his voice.

"Yeah, that's the best I can give you."

Khazad grunted and started off at a brisk pace, trampling down a path. Isk followed after, struggling to keep pace. The day's events were starting to catch up to him and his legs did seem to have any strength left in them. Soon he was breathing heavily just to keep up with him. Holm kept close at his heels, silent except for the occasional growl. Isk looked into the forest each time she did, but never saw anything other than trees. The feeling of being watched never left Isk and soon he felt that they were being followed.

The ground beneath them grew steep and soon Isk was on all fours trying to keep up with Khazad. The path from town had never been so challenging to him. Several times he slipped and tumbled down a ways though the snow was fresh and had to scramble back. All the while Holm growled into nothing.

They drew level with the falls when it happened. Isk, refusing to pause even though he was spent, kept pushing their little party onwards, even as Khazad called for them to stop and rest for a few moments. The ground had just begun to level out when they heard it. Rising above the sounds of the groaning trees came a mournful howl. The snow was still falling and there was no sign of the moon, but somewhere in the woods, not near enough to panic but not far enough not to fear, the lone cry rang out. It conquered the forest.

Isk's heart went still and his heavy breath quieted. Every hair he had stood on end, though they were slick with sweat. The sound that haunted his childhood dreams, though he had never heard a real one before. Sometimes, when the valley's boys were up the mountain tending sheep, they would gather together and tell stories. The older boys would describe the battle which took place in the valley below them, and as the vanguard of darkness approached, they would always give a howl. It had so frightened Isk the first time he heard it that he covered his ears and shut his eyes, which the boys never let him forget. For years after he heard the wolf's cry on the mountain side, usually at night and always another boy who wanted to see how Isk reacted.

He stood still in the snow, listening. The real thing was so much worse. Isk could picture the maw of the animal, the teeth, and the golden eyes. It echoed through the valley. He was certain that the villagers heard it above them, though he doubted that any were shaking in fear. There was nothing to fear, the stories went, but a dumb beast which had lost all the ferocity and cunning which the Darkness had given to it. No doubt they were still feasting in their homes and telling each other stories of the wolf to seem brave, even if they felt a fear they were too ashamed to admit too.

Listening to the howling beast did fill him with something other than fear. He was surprised to feel a sense of longing as the lone cry filled him. It was a need that he could not explain. Not for meat or blood or fear, the things which he had been told wolves desire, but for warmth.

The call died a sad and shuddering death, leaving Isk feeling empty. Not even the waves of fear which he had felt at the could stop him from taking a small step towards the sound. Holm growled and Khazad, noticing something was off, grabbed Isk and shook him, gruffly pointing up the mountain top. Wordlessly, Isk agreed and set off up the mountain. The sooner they were in his cabin the better. The wolf had probably just alerted the Tyrant to its presence and would be eaten before the sun next rose.

They had not gone five steps before the call was answered. Isk had been told that wolves worked in packs, which made them all the more terrifying. Men worked in teams, and the Darkness had found a servant which did just the same. But he had been told that the packs were small since the fall of the Darkness. The voices which howled in answer were not few. Isk could

not count the voices he heard, there were too many and they came from all around him. Some near, some distant, there were dozens of voices, perhaps hundreds.

The answering call shook the forest. Had there been any animals still alive in the forest apart from the wolves, they would have burrowed deeper into the earth or fled the hills. Isk wished he could hide beneath the ground as he was shaken by the force of the howling. It was not a lonesome cry as the first had been. This was hatred as a sound, a battle cry of ruin.

Isk had the sound once before, at the Mander. As two hosts lined up against the other, they waged war first with their horns. The old veterans had told him that this was to break the heretics' spirit before battle was even joined. Covering his ears that he might spare himself from the rattling howl, Isk looked down into the valley. There was no doubt in his mind that they heard this roar. If only he still had the Bow with him, he would have been able to look through the softly falling snow and into the village, seen the villagers spill out of their homes and look about to see what was causing the noise. He could almost convince himself that he heard the bleating of the sheep down below. Isk could only hope that Ammardain had followed his advice after his fall and humiliation and armed himself.

Beside him, Holm had stopped growling and began whining. She began pacing back and forth. Khazad was fingering his beard nervously, muttering quickly in Dwarfish, almost like a prayer, his eyes fixed upon the dark woods. Isk's own heart was thundering in his ears, but that was not enough to block out the sound of hundreds of wolves promising death on the village.

He had only been to war once and that had been horrible enough for a life time. Men throwing themselves against each other, shouts, the ring of steel against steel, cries, blood. That had merely been the war between men. Isk had heard stories of the war for the Light, of the armies of monsters which the Darkness gathered to itself and hurled against the world. In the short time between his return and his injury, Isk had thought that his war had been what Howl had faced, but now, in a dark forest with only two friends, facing the shattering cry of ravenous maws, he knew that he would rather face a hundred battles against men than a single battle against this evil.

Isk searched himself for the Bow a second time, hoping to find it waiting for him in some secret part of himself. He tired and in pain, but he was walking after being beaten twice. It had to be the Vestige. The Bow had found some way to fool Highest and remain inside of him, giving him its strength. Isk searched, making the Bow in his mind to be some kind of talisman against the wolves. He found nothing.

Empty inside and facing a host of wolves, Isk roused himself. This was no place to stand in a hostile forest. He brought Khazad out of his stupor with a push, stopping himself from shouting. The wolves would have their scent if the wind picked up. There would be no resting until they reached Isk's cabin.

They ran, Khazad no longer trampling down a trail but running across the snow. Isk did his best to keep up with him, forcing his body to move. There was some strength left in him still, not found before the wolves gave their battle cry, a speed given to him from fear. Holm was

behind him, running at an easy pace and watching for the wolves. She was silent now, aware that a single sound would bring the wolves to them.

Every breath Isk took wracked him, his blood pounding in his ears. The touch of winter's numbness returned to his fingers as he scrambled through the snow. In every shadow he saw wolves, and though a second glance would always showed these to be imaginations. A breath of wind across his face and he felt the hot breath of the beasts on him.

Behind him the battle cry faded out and the forest fell silent again. This did nothing to calm his fears, however. At the Mander, when the horns failed to have the desired effect, the battle was joined. All he could do as he ran was hope that they had managed to slip behind the lines. That thought caused a pang of guilt to run through him and he quickly muttered a prayer to Howl to spare the lives of the villagers.

Slowly they approached trees that Isk recognized even in the darkness. They were near. With a sudden burst of energy they stumbled into Isk's clearing. It was mercifully empty, and the three of them took a moments rest. Isk clutched at his side before giving up the battle entirely and collapsing into the snow. Pain welled up inside of him, but even as it did, he began to laugh.

It was a wild exhilaration, near madness. Maybe he was mad after the worst day ever had in Howl's Valley since the defeat of the Darkness. No man had ever been stripped of a Vestige once it was placed upon him. His soul had been shared with another, and now it was empty. In Bredar, Isk had learned that there were madness's which affected minds that they heard voices. Now that he had lost the second voice in his mind he was wondering if he was still sane. There would undoubtedly be others in the valley who thought so. And yet, if he was mad, he had never felt freer. So he laughed and laughed until his body was nothing but pain.

Eventually hands came out and grabbed hold of him. Khazad lifted him to his feet like he was a child and nodded gruffly at the cabin. Together they went into the cabin and Isk got a fire going while Khazad gathered his things. The heavy grey mattock stood beside the two bows, and as they prepared for the return journey, for they both knew that they would have to return to town in the face of the wolves, the mattock was never out of his hand. Isk made no effort to string his bow, he knew that he did not have the strength to draw it. Indeed, he hardly had the strength to sit upright.

He did pick up Howl's bow out of curiosity, but when he tried to pull back the string, it did not budge no matter how he pulled. After a single try he knew that he would not be able to draw it again, and set it aside, disappointed.

"What was that?" Khazad asked, and for a moment Isk tensed up, thinking that he had heard something at the door. Then he realized that the dwarf was shaking his head and thinking about the chorus of wolves. Frightening though the howling had been, Isk was comforted a little to know that such things were not common, even in dwarven lands.

"I don't know," he answered. "I have never heard a wolf howl before, and I never wish to again. I have never known a beast of nature to gather in such a manner. It is as though the Darkness has returned."

“Do not say such things,” Khazad said brusquely. “They are too horrible to think.”

It was a horrible thought, one which chilled Isk’s bones, but he could not stop himself from thinking it. What he had seen was beyond what he understood. If the Darkness had found a way to return, then he could not see hope for them. It was said that it ruled all the earth for three ages before the Sword Hand was born.

“So why do you think the wolves have come here?” he asked. A not small part of himself wanted to hear something that could assuage his fears.

The dwarf offered him none. “The Mountain’s Shadow remains in minds. Why come now, cannot say, but perhaps there is nothing to fear in but a lingering evil.” Isk had heard dwarves talk about the Darkness before, and knew their name for it.

“So the memory of shadow rules their minds.” Khazad nodded solemnly and Isk sighed. “Then we best remember the Light.”

There was nothing more to be said on the subject, so they sat in silence before the fire. Though they were both watching the flames, Isk knew that Khazad was listening for sounds outside. Isk was listening also, but he heard nothing but the hiss and spark of the fire.

It was Khazad who broke the silence, saying something soft and rhythmic to himself. Isk did not interrupt, but hummed along, the tune was old and familiar. Holm watched both of them with a vague curiosity. Khazad reached the last bars before Isk recognized the song, but before he could speak, Khazad did in his low voice.

“When early snow does fall,
The Lone wolf makes his call,
Dark Howlers cry a doom
In woods near Howl’s Tomb.”

The children’s rhyme. Isk shivered. It did not seem like an innocent game in this light of the fire. It seemed like a prophesy.