

Chapter 6: In the Night

The children's rhyme hung in the air like an anvil, silencing conversation for the rest of the night. With nothing left to say, Isk turned in for night as the fire grew low. Khazad continued to watch the fire as Isk drifted off into sleep.

Isk's dreams were troubled, full of fangs and fur and a long mournful howl which seemed to drown the world. Eyes watched him from the shadows, snarling and snapping followed him where he walked, and the sound of voices he had known all his life shouted at him, begging and screaming. No matter where he turned, he could not see the owners of the voices, only their shouts.

The dreams shifted and the sounds were drowned by the howling winds. A bloody snow fell in sheets upon him, burying him as wave after wave held him into place. He tried to run, tried to shout, but the snow fell so quickly that he was buried before he could go more than a couple steps. His screams fell silent and he tasted blood in his mouth.

Silence fell over him, smothering him. He needed to breathe but he couldn't dig against the snow, couldn't claw his way into the air. All he felt was the weight of the bloody snow against him. Oppressive silence reigned over him. It beat against him until his own heartbeat was silenced. All he had was his mind beneath the waves of blood. At the edges of his body he began to grow numb, the cold of the winter settling in to his bones. It hurt beyond all he knew, the cold burrowing inside of him, stabbing him with needles so small that he had not known they could hurt.

Death. Let death come, he prayed in his tomb. Let it come and I will want for no more. Let me be judged by whatever powers be, only let this end. Nothingness could consume him, pain could break him, but let the end be something other than silence. Any price and he would pay it. Only let this end.

Something was walking above him, slowly, as though it was searching for something. Pacing back and forth, it would occasionally scratch the snow above him. Isk wanted to shout, to scream, and let the searcher know where he was. That noise was his salvation, the only thing sparing him from his tomb. Above him, the searcher paused. It had found him. The searcher began sniffing, a soft sound, and a sudden dread washed over him. He felt that he did not want to be found. Let him stay there, trapped, hidden from the horrors of the world. There was more scratching, a sudden burst of it. It was digging, but not with hands. It was paws. Isk knew what was searching for him.

Those paws broke through the snow around him, freeing him to see the searcher. Isk screamed, his fear seizing control of him. A wolf stood above him, golden eyes locked on his own, its fur dark as the Darkness. It let out a low growl, bared its fangs, and opened its maw.

Isk woke with a jolt. It was a dream, all a dream, he reminded himself again and again. His back was slick with sweat and his body ached from the day's deeds. Isk sat in his bed and tried to regain control of his breathing. His heart was racing, the wolf's teeth hung in the darkness before his eyes. Isk turned to search for Khazad. The fire had died, but the few

smoldering embers gave enough light to see the dwarf had slumped over in his sleep. Isk fell backwards in his bed, shivering.

It was a dream, only a dream. But the wolves were not a dream. They were in the valley, and they were hungry. The fear which had subsided from when he woke up rose again. The dream, troubling though it was, was only a dream. It was the wolves outside his door that he needed to worry about.

The wind blew gently beneath the door, carrying the cold into his home without taking away the warmth of the fire. Something moved in the corner of his eye and Isk nearly jumped out of bed. A great pair of blue eyes were watching him sleepily from the dark. Isk thought of wolves before realizing that it was only Holm. He gave a weak laugh and lay back down in bed, watching his dog in the darkness.

Her eyes never left his. She seemed to understand that something was wrong with him, perhaps smelling the fear in the air, but since he was not shouting in pain or actively dying, she did nothing but watch. Isk saw her lower her head, still keeping an eye on him. He wished she wouldn't, for the truth was that those eyes reminded him of the hunger he saw in his dream. She was a kind beast, but far too close to a wolf for him to sleep comfortably.

He lay there in the silence, trying to gain control of his breathing and imagination. Through it all, the still aching pains and the weariness, what weighed heaviest upon him were the words Khazad had muttered. The children's rhyme lay heavy over him like a smothering blanket. It had the inescapable weight of doom to it. He stared at the ceiling, afraid of Holm's eyes, running through the words again and again.

Early snows were falling, swift and heavy. Isk had never known snow to fall on the Rising. Winter was often harsh beneath the mountain, but it always seemed to come at the same time, three weeks after the Rising. No man rules the weather, or so the saying went. Early snow was just that, he told himself. There was nothing sinister in a blizzard.

But though he could convince himself that the snow was just a coincidence, he could do nothing to make himself feel better about the next lines. He had heard the lone wolf make its call, mournful and solitary. Isk had managed to convince himself to feel sorrow for the beast, but that was before the cry was answered by a hundred voices. Isk had no doubts in his mind who the Dark Howlers were. He, and everyone else in the valley, had always thought the rhyme was about the Battle for the Light and the host the Darkness sent against Howl, or else the story of what happened to the sheep which strayed from the flock. Now, Isk could not help but think that it was a warning of days to come. He whispered the opening lines to himself over and over.

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

When he finished mumbling the rhyme for the umpteenth time, the stillness of the night was shattered by a long scrape at the door. Isk froze, the next utterance died on his lips. He sat bolt upright in bed and looked toward the door. There was something out there. A sniffing sound chilled him to the bone. The wolves had found them. There came a second scratch, no longer searching as the first had been, but hungry.

Isk looked for Holm and found her still curled up but watching the door intently. The appearance of her eyes was not frightening, but a comfort. They were the same eyes as the wolves, but with a gentleness which he did not see in the other.

There came another scratch at the door, long and hungry. Khazad shook himself awake and peered into the gloom. "What was that?" As if in answer the wolf began pawing at the door with speed, pausing only to sniff beneath the door. Khazad sprang up, heavy mattock in one hand. Sensing trouble, Holm joined him. She stalked to the door and let out a low growl.

At once the scratching stopped, and after a couple more sniffs, Isk heard the wolf pad off into the night. Holm did not let up. Khazad watched the door, but Isk knew that the wolf would not come back, at least not without reinforcements. It wanted an easy meal. He got out of bed and threw a couple of logs on the embers, stoking the fire. The light gave immediate relief to them, pushing the night to the edges of the cabin. Isk heard Khazad let out a small sigh and Holm stop her growling. Isk did not turn to face them, but gazed into the fire, reveling in the joyful flames. Here was the Light, the goodness. This was what he was meant to strive for, he was sure of it.

The warmth of the fire drove away his pains as the light drove away his fears. He was still hale, at least in a manner of speaking. The past year had put him through the mill, true, but he was still young. New found strength in his body kept him standing tall as all fell about him.

Khazad sat down beside him, his back to the wall that he might watch the door. It pulled Isk out of his thoughts and he looked to the dwarf. They sat in silence, both undoubtedly thinking about the wolves behind them. It was Khazad who broke it. "Trouble is coming." Isk grunted in agreement. It certainly was. "The wolf will get more and put siege to the cabin."

Isk leaned back and rested on his elbows. A shock of pain ran through him, but he fought through it. "They'll put siege to the village too, if they haven't done so already. There are no good options for us."

"No, there are. The mountain has been hunted clean, and there is no food in your cabin." Khazad's eyes flickered to Holm. She met his eyes steadily and when the dwarf looked back at Isk, there was shame writ plain in them. Revulsion coursed through Isk and his stomach churned violently. That thought was too awful to entertain. "But there is food in the village. Several flocks of it. If the wolves try to force their way into the valley, so much the better for the food stores."

Yes, that was a better option than waiting for wolves to find a way into the cabin. Isk could only hope that the Tyrant was set against the pack, and would sate its hunger on them. Of course, if they were working together, then Isk could not see victory in his future.

"And how do we get through the pack without getting torn to shreds?"

Khazad shrugged. "Luck."

It was a simple answer, one which made Isk's heart sink. Luck was not something to hang your life on. In Bredar, he had met men who swore by luck, holding it in a light that was near blasphemous. When confronted about it, they merely said that the Sword Hand had needed luck to defeat the Darkness. Isk had never felt that luck was particularly favorable of him. Certainly, this last year had not been lucky. Running through a forest ruled by wolves at night seemed like a foolish test of one's luck.

"When?" Isk tried not to look up from the fire, it may be the last light that he got in this life. The night's chill was seeping under the door.

"Now," came the answer. "Go now, before the wolf brings friends. Travel light and armed and get to the village before they come back."

Khazad did not wait for Isk to agree. He rose from his seat and picked up his pack. Isk saw the orange of his cassock peeking underneath Edred's coat. He had not brought his armor with him to the valley, not thinking that there would be any danger. Isk followed his lead, throwing all the clothes he could on and then grabbing his bow and donning the quiver. He strung his bow, fighting through the pains as the stave fought back. Khazad walked over and strung the bow in his first try.

Dressed in his own furs, and his grey shirt underneath, Isk was ready to face the darkness. At least this time he knew what he was walking out into. He put a hand on the door and was about to stride out into the snow when Khazad stopped him. "What about the Bow?"

Isk flashed his bow. "Right here, though how useful it will be in the dark and the snow, I don't know."

"No, no, bow," Khazad said, nodding to Howl's bow, still on the wall.

A twinge of uncertainty shot through Isk. It was an artefact of the Light, made to kill the beasts of Darkness. A weapon known across the world, but also large and cumbersome. It would slow them down as they descended the mountains. Beneath those thoughts were others, far more jealous that Isk could ever admit. The bow was the weapon of the third Vestige, the tool by which that piece of Howl enacted the Light. All of that had been striped from him less than a day prior. Highest would undoubtedly name a new wearer of the Bow from among her favorites. Bitter resentment welled up inside of Isk. Why should they get the bow when he should still be the wearer? Let them come up the mountain, if they are so worthy, and take it from its rightful place. They can brave the wolves and the Tyrant to gain it. If they can't, if they fail, then Highest was wrong.

Then what, came a thought. Then he would be restored and would have to climb the mountain himself for the bow, facing dangers he would be lucky to escape once. Perhaps the presence of the wolves would be enough for Highest to reinstate him. Dispelling the jealousy, Isk took the bow and slung it over his shoulder, a plan forming in his mind by which he might get both outcomes. Besides, he was in no position to shoot his bow, so carrying their supplies made no difference.

Khazad smiled at him as he took it off the walls. It was not a happy smile, but a set one. Isk had seen it once before, when he had received his task at the Mander. Without waiting further, Khazad opened the door and marched out into the night.

Cold assaulted them, driving the warmth from the cabin in a moment. It had stopped snowing, but the wind had returned. The fire flickered and died, plunging them into darkness. Khazad was not set upon by wolves, so Isk followed him out into the night, Holm bringing up the rear.

The forest was quiet save for the wind, which came screaming down from the mountain top and had brushed the snow off the leaves. Holm sniffed the air once and turned toward the mountain, growling. Isk followed her gaze and saw a darker bolt of night moving away towards the valley.

“A scout, keeping eyes on this place.” Isk looked back to see Khazad eyeing the shadow. “Best move fast before more come.”

“The falls,” Isk said. “They can’t follow us down the rock face.” Khazad grunted in agreement and started off for the woods. Before he set off he glanced back at the woods. The shadow was gone. Holm was watching him with worried eyes. “Don’t worry girl, I’ll carry you down the rocks.” He turned to follow Khazad and heard her set off after him.

Khazad did not know the forest as well as Isk, but he could at least defend them. Isk followed him, whispering directions. This part of the forest he knew well and he could see the path before them clear as day. The wind rushed through the trees, but nothing else made a sound. Isk wasn’t sure there was anything left living in the forest apart from themselves, the wolves, and the Tyrant. He kept his ears pricked for Holm’s growl. She would be the first to notice coming wolves.

They reached the river without a sign of the beasts. The river was frozen over, snow resting atop the ice. As Isk took a step onto the ice, testing the strength. It held him, so he took a second step. As he did, the wind died down and the new stillness brought the sound of many feet hurrying through snow. Holm turned back and watched the way they’d come, a low growl on her lips.

“They found us. Run,” Isk whispered to Khazad, and the pair of them set off pounding through the snow. Holm trailed after them, keeping an eye on the forest. Isk tried to watch the trees as they ran, but though he knew the area well, when running in the dark he could not keep track of the shadows. With every step he imagined their breath on his heels, their eyes on his back.

As they reached the falls, Isk drew an arrow out of his quiver and knocked it, scanning the shadows for their pursuers, but though he heard them moving through the trees, he could not see them. Khazad reached the edge just after him and looked down the rock face with a grimace. Holm began to whine.

“You first,” Isk said. Khazad shook his head, and when Isk began to protest, the dwarf ripped the bow from his hands and dropped it over the edge, the arrow tumbling against the stones. “What are you doing!”

“Too weak to shoot,” he said, gently tapping Isk’s bruised arms. Isk winced “Go. Throw the things over, the snow will cushion them. Follow after.” He pointed at himself and Isk understood his meaning.

There is no arguing with a dwarf, they are too headstrong to make way against. Isk threw his things over the ledge and tossed Khazad's pack down for good measure. Shadows were beginning to emerge from the forest. Isk counted five. The rock wall was not too difficult to climb, at least when dry. Regular lips jutted out from the face, some narrow, some large. Isk had climbed it in his youth, but never in winter.

He lowered himself onto the first ledge, which was near enough that he could still see the approaching shadows. Without needing command, Holm came to him and he lifted her down to the ledge, where she ran to the next drop. At the sight of their prey escaping a second time, the wolves began to bark, forming a semi-circle around Khazad.

They were worse than Isk had ever imagined. Up close it became easy to see the differences between them and Holm. The fear he'd had seeing her eyes on him seemed foolish now. It was still dark and overcast, the moon and stars hidden from sight, but Isk could see their eyes glowing in the night like the embers of hatred. Their teeth were white as the snow, their fur dark. He couldn't see anything to distinguish one wolf from another, they were hulking masses of fur and teeth.

Isk spared a glance for Khazad. The dwarf was staring down the pack, mattock set firmly in his hand. He was by no means a coward, but at every particularly vicious bark, Isk saw him tremor. Isk thought he knew why. Facing men was one thing, but facing a creature of the Darkness was another. He turned away and hurried to the next lip. The sooner he was down the rocks, the sooner Khazad could follow.

The next ledge was a body length away, so he grabbed Holm and jumped softly onto the snowy ledge. He landed safely and called up to Khazad to let him know to start climbing. There was no response but the barking of wolves. Isk could do nothing for him, so he continued to clamber down the rock face with Holm, calling for Khazad to join him. Suddenly there was a snarl and a yelp, and a large shadow fell down the falls just in front of him. A great raindrop landed on his head, and for a moment Isk thought it was rain come to dispel the unseasonable cold, but it was too warm for rain. He reached up and brought it to his nose. Blood.

Isk turned and shouted up the rock face, but all he heard were barks and grunts. Cursing himself for his cowardice, he turned to climb back up the mountain when a second shadow, much smaller than the first, tumbled past him. It landed in the snow below with a soft whump. Isk looked above and saw the golden eyes looking down at him. His stomach dropped.

Picking up Holm, he began bounding down the ledges, twice slipping and nearly falling off. He had to bite his tongue to stop himself from screaming Khazad's name into the darkness and attracting more wolves. When he reached ten feet above the ground, he threw himself off and into the snow, Holm yelping as they fell. The snow caught them, sending an icy shock through him. Leaving Holm, he scrambled up and hurried to the place where the small shadow landed. Even in the darkness he recognized Khazad.

He was groaning softly. Isk left out a sigh of relief and collapsed in the snow next to him. His body ached in protest of everything which had happened to him in the last day, and all Isk wanted was to curl into a ball and let the pain consume him, but they were not out of danger yet. To lay here would be to let the wolves consume him. Isk dragged himself to his feet and looked around. Holm was nearby, sniffing at the large shadow which was imprinted in the snow not far

from where they were. He gave her an order and she began collecting the things they had thrown together.

Isk went to lift Khazad up, but the dwarf let out a whimper of pain as he grabbed him and collapsed into the snow. “No more, no more,” the dwarf whispered. Somewhere out in the darkness a howl lifted through the dark. Isk knelt down at his side, running his hands over the coat. As his hands went over the left arm he paused. It was bent at a strange angle. A broken arm. He looked up the falls to check on their pursuers, but he couldn’t see that far. If they were coming, they would find an easy meal.

The clatter of wood jolted Isk, and he turned to see that Holm had brought all their things together. The bows, Khazad’s pack, and the mattock lay there. She watched him curiously, wondering what the next step was going to be. Khazad mumbled something which Isk did not catch. The snow began to soak his clothes.

“Holm, carry the pack,” he said, picking up the two bows and replacing the arrows in the quiver. Both bows were equally useless. The bow string was wet, ruining the bow. Holm’s bow string was dry, but it might as well be stone for all Isk could draw it. The mattock was their only weapon. Isk picked it up and nearly tumbled over. It was heavier than he had expected, weighing more than the draw of a great bow.

He had to bite his tongue to hold in a scream, warm blood in his mouth. What strength he had in his body seemed to leave him as the events of the last few hours came crashing down on him. Yesterday this would have been nothing to him. He would have been able to carry Khazad and his mattock on his back easily, while the drawing Howl’s bow and loosing it. Now, it was all he could do just to drag a bow to the village. Holm watched him worriedly, but he could not think of a single thing to get them out of it. When the Vestige had been in him, it was another voice who could give advice to him, telling him a plan for battle. He was cold and numb and empty inside.

Isk fell into the snow, giving up the battle to scream. He emptied his lungs into the packed snow, blood and spittle flew with his voice and stained the long-prophesied snow. In that voice he let go of all his anger and despair, all his fear and doubt. There was nothing left inside him. He screamed into the snow until his throat was raw.

When he finished, now with new pains, Isk rose and took Howl’s bow off of him and buried it deep in the snow below the waterfall. Then, he grabbed Khazad and gently placed him on his back, taking the mattock in his hands. It was straining his back. Holm stood near him, satchel in her mouth.

“Holm, if they find us, run to the village and stay with Edred. If they survive this winter, let him know where Howl’s bow is.” Her eyes never wavered from him, and he could see that she understood, though she did not agree with the command. Unsure of what she would do, Isk set off through the snow.

It was two miles from the base of the falls, two miles with a dwarf on his back and a mattock too heavy for him to swing. His own bow was in his other hand. Regardless of his orders, Holm walked just in front of him, watching the shadows. The forest was silent as the wind picked back up, covering the sound of his footsteps, but also the sounds of any nearby wolves. They went slowly, Isk weighed down and Holm taking her scouting seriously. It did not

matter that she was being thorough in checking the path in front of them, Isk was going so slowly in the snow that she was able to stay ahead of him though she checked every shadow.

A pale light began creeping through the forest, first in slivers and then in splotches. The high winds were moving the clouds away, and some light came to them. Had he still carried the Vestige inside of him, Isk would have been able to see clear to town. As it was, he could see well in the area around him, the snow carrying the moonbeams. There was nothing moving in the forest except for them, and hope began to grow even as his back began straining under the weight.

They moved in silence through the woods, Holm's scouting greatly aided by the light, until Isk was certain that he could go no further. Sagging, he rolled Khazad off his back and propped him against a tree before collapsing in the snow. Holm made no notice of this, walking back and forth to make sure they were still safe.

His lungs were on fire, his body shivering violently. The first moment he got rest, Isk was going to sleep for a week straight. Besides, there was little he could do against the wolves now. He dreamed of a warm bed, furnished by Edred's solid friendship. Lowest was never aloud to go to war, they weren't trusted with weapons. He could stand Masa's glares for a warm meal and time beside the fire. Let the others deal with the wolves and the Tyrant. The mutton was almost in his mouth.

Holm let out a low warning growl, faint enough that it jolted him from his dreams but did not leave their little hollow. Isk inched his way to Holm. She was staring back the way they had come, her eyes fixed and her ears flat against her skull. They were coming.

Isk scrambled back to where Khazad lay. He was awake, his eyes unfocused but he was present. "Where?" was all he asked. His breathing was steady, and Isk had hopes that he could at least walk into town. He cast a glance at Khazad's arm, now visible in the moonlight. It was bent at a bad angle, the clothes stained with something dark. Isk's stomach dropped. He had been able to take worse, but that was when he was wearing the Vestige. A wound like this and he would be dying.

"About a mile from town, but they are on our trail and we are moving slowly. They will catch us." He tried to keep his voice as reassuring as possible, but the dwarf always seemed to know more than he was letting on.

Khazad stood up, ignoring Isk's protests and his own unsteady legs. "Be fine in Edred's inn, just got to get there." With that, he seized the mattock with one hand and started off. Isk tried to persuade him otherwise, mentioning that he was going the wrong direction, but there is no changing the mind of a dwarf. Isk glanced over is should to see that Holm was following after, and then he set off after Khazad.

The dwarf's sense of direction needed correcting every so often, and because of it Isk could not lead him, afraid that he would be lost in the dark. The forests of Howl's Valley were all large trees free of brambles. In the moonlight, it all look pristine, like something out of a fable. Of course, the trees were still laden with leaves, and the winds had not brushed off the snow down here. Every so often a branch would break off, sending a snap that froze the forest. They were being pursued, but as their hunters did not know where they were. Isk felt it was

better to go slowly. Besides, it was hard to keep Khazad on the right path. Holm would let them know if their pursuers were closing in on them.

They were getting close when the clouds returned and threw them into darkness. Isk did not recognize the trees down in the valley as well as he knew those up the mountain, but they must be within a few hundred yards of the village. Isk began scanning the brush for lights. If luck cared even a little for them, the villagers would have made several watch fires and would be out and armed.

Holm began growling. Isk spun around. His heart sank as he saw a pair of glowing golden eyes watching them from the shadows. There was only that pair, so they were not dead yet. But if it should call in the pack, Isk didn't know if it was better to stand or run. His bow was still useless.

"Khazad, they found us," he whispered.

The dwarf turned, his eyes clouded over in pain and the mattock swinging easily in his one good hand. "Where?" he asked, peering into the shadows but not seeing anything.

Isk didn't point the eyes out, the dwarf wouldn't be able to see them anyway. "We're close to the village. There's only one, so I think we can make it."

Khazad growled. "Kill this one before it calls others to us. Then the walk into town without trouble following."

"And the two of us are going to catch a wolf in the dark? You can barely see straight, and I can hardly lift the mattock. The bow string is too wet to draw." Khazad listened to Isk without a word, and when he finished grunted by way of agreement.

They started off again, Isk and Holm both keeping a careful eye on their pursuer. The wolf followed them at a distance, never coming close enough for Isk to see more than a shadow and a pair of eyes. Slowly, Isk felt his fear ebb away, replaced only with a caution. The wolf was going to track their movements but let them go. Isk had learned from veterans that they didn't care if a city under siege got more people into it. They would let people through the lines so long as they did not have food with them. The more mouths to feed, the faster the siege was over. The wolves were going to let them through the lines, Isk was sure of it.

Isk looked over his shoulder as he walked backwards. There was an orange light in the trees. They were close. Oddly, he was no longer feeling much of anything, not fear, not caution. The wolf was pushing them to town, and that would be the end of it for him. He would be given less food through the winter than others, he knew that much, but he would not have to face the wolves again.

They stood less than fifty yards from the village. Isk could see the watch fires clearly. But wolves are not men, who set their siege lines carefully. They are beasts who think only of their hunger. As soon as Isk turned back from the fires to watch their solitary pursuer, Holm turned around in a panic and began barking wildly. The forest behind them exploded in barking and braying. He wheeled back around. They were surrounded by a pack. Isk counted fourteen shadows, dimly lit by the fire beyond and the moon above. Hulking figures of fur, the wolves had formed a circle around them, each one barring its teeth. The wolf which had been following

them all this time ran up and joined its fellows. It was dark, but with a streak of white fur on its haunches. Its eyes were fixed on Holm.

Holm was whimpering, shame in her eyes as she had led them into the waiting maw of the pack. But it had not been her fault. Isk had led them into this spot, foolishly thinking that the wolves would let them pass as though this were in a war between men. This was nothing so trivial. This was the War for the Light returned.

Khazad was unphased, staring down the wolves and growling back at them. The mattock was held tightly in one hand. Even though he was injured, a strike from that heavy blade would kill a wolf. It was the only weapon they had.

Just like at the top of the mountain, the wolves were content to encircle them and bark. They would come close, so close that Isk could see all their teeth. Just as Isk thought that they were charging in, the wolf would shy away and return to barking in the circle. Holm stood between Isk's legs, tail tucked between her legs and shivering. Isk muttered a quick prayer to Howl. Their judgement was soon.

Behind him, one of the beasts snarled. Isk turned to see it charge in and could see in its eyes that it was not going to run away. It ran with its head low, eyes fixed on Khazad's legs. Before Isk could shout out, Khazad turned just slightly and delivered a blow to the wolf's head with such force that the beast fell down and did not stir again. Blood and brains stained the snow.

With the beast lying dead, the others back up a few steps, but now instead of barking they were howling. Isk knew why. They had just proved themselves worthy of special attention, and these wolves were summoning others.

But as they did, there came shouts. Human shouts. They were so near the fires that the sound of their troubles were heard in the town. The wolves turned to the sound and then broke away, fleeing into the forest as ten men came charging into the forest, carrying bows and axes. They were skinny and cloaked in wools, the shepherds. At the sight of Isk and Khazad, they looked slightly crestfallen, but they gathered them together and took them out of the woods and into the warm light of the fire.

Once out of the woods, Isk could see the village before him. There were watchfires all around the village, and here and there were built up ramparts of snow, though whoever built them seemed to have given up rather quickly. Around some of the fires were guards watching the woods.

"Thank you for saving us," Isk said, but the men made no response until Isk remembered himself and added, "higher," dipping his head as he did so. The shepherds grunted in response and began to break apart, some going to other watch fires and the others into the village, where Isk could see a small gathering of men. "Please, higher," Isk said, turning to the one who stayed by the fire, "could you tell me what has been happening?"

The man gave Isk a look of disgust, but answered him. It was a look which he seemed well practiced at. "The army of wolves announced themselves at night fall. We've been up since then, watching the woods and trying to pull anyone people out of the forest."

"Have there been many villagers in the forest, higher?" Isk asked, adding the title hastily. There were two hundred souls in the valley, not counting the shepherds who should have been

gone by now. Most did not live in the village, but in homes dotting the woods of the lower mountain. If they had to struggle through the forest, Isk had no doubt that there would be dead; but it had been the Rising, and they would be visiting friends, and the sudden snow would have kept them in the village. Khazad began wandering into the village, following the fires. Isk would get him just as soon as he got answers.

The shepherd sneered at him. "There were a couple, most of you who went back to your homes didn't make it. We've found a lot of bloodied clothes." He gave an unpleasant laugh.

Sick to his stomach, Isk turned away and left him. He had never known the shepherds to be a cruel sort, only crude. The man seemed to revel in the wolves catching families out in the woods. There were men out there who liked to recount the stories of their war days, who reveled in the notches on their belt. Those stories had always revolted Isk more than they entertained, especially after the Mander. He had come away from that battle with a story that could defeat all others, but the thought of it still brought bile to his mouth.

Isk had gone several steps before he realized that Holm was not with him. Looking back, he saw her standing at the edge of the fire, shivering. He rushed back to her side and tried to prod her on, but she remained put. Ignoring the laughter of the cruel shepherd, Isk picked her up in his arms and carried her to the village.

"It's not your fault," he whispered in her ears. "They had me fooled too. I don't think these are dumb beasts. You did wonderfully." He kept up the encouragement all the way into town.

Together, Isk and Khazad stumbled into the village proper. Holm followed after, afraid. There were men milling about, huddled around a great roaring bonfire. Some were villagers, but most were shepherds. One or two were stamping their boots as others ran messages to the men at the perimeter. As they passed by Isk caught pieces of conversation which only made his heart sink.

"...but from the clothes it looks like three of them..."

"If she were not so high, I'd break her skull."

"Yeah. Accuses us and then begs us to save her. Filth."

Praying that the shepherds didn't decide that they were better off with the wolves than with the villagers, Isk walked past the assembled crowd and headed for Masa's inn. The night could not last much longer. Tired though he was, Isk began to smile. His part in all of this was over. He supposed that Highest had played some part in that, something which amused him immensely. It was just about the only thing that made him smile.

Covered in snow, the tavern was brightly lit, casting light into the darkness. Isk walked over to help Khazad make the last few steps to the door. Perhaps a bit numb from the cold, Khazad set down the mattock at the door and stumbled inside. Not wanting to leave weapon out for the shepherds to steal, Isk grabbed it and with great effort hauled it inside. Holm stood at the door, a look of shame on her face, but Isk would not hear it. He ordered her inside.

The tavern looked much the same as when he had left the day before. Vos was standing by the fire and Edred was looming over the bar, wearing a look of deep worry. Neither man

seemed to notice that the door had opened. Khazad was swaying slightly, the sleeve of his shirt was soaking red. Isk led him over to the fire and sat him down in a chair. Both men jumped, suddenly realizing that they were there. Vos quickly moved out of the way for them, spluttering apologies, and Edred hurried over to see what the trouble was. Holm settled down by the fire and curled into a ball, still shivering slightly.

Vos and Edred had noticed the worrying color of Khazad's coat, and began fussing over him, Vos offering poultices from his wagon and Edred trying to figure out the severity as best he could. Isk sat down beside Holm and watched them get on with it. The dwarf was in a bad way, but Isk had never known how to cure even minor injuries. Injury brought disease, which was the Darkness, and so all in the Order feared it. What learned men knew of disease was little, and far away in the great cities.

"No, no," Khazad said over the fussing. "A room, please, and what sage is in the inn. Rest is the best medicine." They disagreed, but the dwarf had made up his mind and there was no changing it. Edred followed him as he chose a room, still demanding that he be allowed to check the arm.

They disappeared from sight and a moment later a door was slammed somewhere in the back. Isk and Vos sat in silence. Isk was too tired to start a conversation, and Vos looked shocked at the behavior of the dwarf. Soon the sound of hurried feet came and Edred burst back into the main room, walking like a storm. He gave no word of acknowledgment but walked straight to the bar, where he clambered onto the table and pulled off one of the sage bouquets from the strings holding it and shuffled back without further ado.

Silence returned over the inn and Isk felt the hand of sleep creeping up him. The night's events had been enough to keep sleep from him, and when it returned Isk was certain that it would be plagued with the memory of the wolves. Before he found a bed for the night, Isk unslung the bow from his shoulder and set about taking off the string.

He managed to pull the first loop off when he realized that Vos was watching him, a sad look in his small eyes. Isk scrambled an apology. "I am sorry, higher. I did not ask for permission before setting about my work. Should I continue?"

"Stop it you idiot." The look of sorrow returned to Vos. Isk put away the bow immediately. "Not that. Stop play acting the Lower part. You were once a walking piece of the Light itself. Don't bow to me, I'm a merchant."

"I was placed here by the Highest of Howl's Valley," Isk said gently. "She stands third away from the Light itself. I cannot be angry at what has happened to me. It was the will of the Order. If the Darkness can infect the Order, then what hope is there for any of us?"

Vos snorted. "The Darkness has always been able to infiltrate the Order. Even in the War for the Light there were betrayals. Imagine facing an evil which twists flesh and gives order to the most heinous of beasts and choosing to stand side by side with it. The Darkness can do things we cannot imagine. Do not put your trust in men."

He was right, of course. The story every child learned about the true war was full of betrayals. Though nothing in the stories had frightened him as much as wolves, the thoughts that

people would turn their backs on him for the love of the Darkness had scared him. He would some times dream of the people he knew removing their faces to reveal nothing but darkness.

“A man must believe in something.” The words felt hollow to Isk, yet he felt there was something in there that he had faith in. Maybe all the doubt he felt was just because he was tired.

“Aye, he does. He does.” Vos slipped comfortably into a seat by the fire and surveyed Isk with his sharp eyes. “But he need not believe things only because he fear’s his fellow’s wrath. Goodness has no anger in it.”

Isk frowned. This conversation was straying too near heresy, as had a great many others in the last day. Perhaps it was because he had fallen so far and now he was hearing the words of the lowly, or he had strayed so far from the light that he could hear the meaning people put into their words for the first time. Neither thought was comforting. He changed the subject.

“I heard from the shepherds that a number of people didn’t make it back.”

Vos nodded sadly. “Yes. From What Edred has told me they left the feasts early to get out of the snow. When the wolves announced their siege, those on the periphery tried to come back. Last I heard fifteen were dead.”

More than fifteen people lived outside the village proper. Isk breathed a sigh of relief and felt terrible immediately. He offered a quick prayer to Howl and almost missed what Vos said next.

“Those shepherds are a rough lot. Nearly revolted when your Highest told them they were going to pay their penance by watching the town.”

“They are,” Isk agreed. “The one I talked to seemed to revel that some did not make it back to the village.”

Edred came storming back, cross as Isk had ever seen him. He sat down in his favorite chair and turned to Isk. “How’d he break it?”

Holm got up and shuffled over, laying down again on Isk’s feet, her eyes on the fire. “The wolves came to my cabin, so we made a run for it. We went to the falls because the wolves weren’t going to follow us down the rocks. Khazad tried to hold them off at the top, so they attacked and he fell off the falls. Had to carry him most the way back.”

Edred eyed Isk. Something close to doubt was in that look. Isk knew what he was thinking. He himself was wondering how he had the strength to stand, let alone carry the dwarf from the falls. The hope that he still held the Vestige welled up in him again.

“The dwarves are a hardy folk.” Vos said with the air of wisdom. They all nodded in agreement.

“It’s a miracle he can stand,” Edred said. “Now he’s locked up in one of the rooms with all of our sage and is muttering his chants.” Isk knew that Edred only wanted to help and was frustrated as usual with dwarven intransigence. He also knew that he was worried what Masa would say.

“I apologize for intruding on you like this,” Isk said, stopping himself from bowing his head and giving the honorific. “I don’t know who else would have taken us in.”

That, if anything, made Edred sourer. “Don’t you dare feel sorry, Isk. All this stuff going on, makes me feel as though it were the War again. Facing it, who cares where you stand in the eyes of the Order, so long as you stand against the Darkness. And I know you stand against it.”

“What will Masa say?” Vos looked to Edred curiously as Isk asked. The thought did nothing to improve Edred’s mood.

“She barricaded herself in our room after the discussion yesterday.” He gave Vos a sour look, and perhaps realizing it was his only customer at the moment, he softened it. “Not that I blame you. When we came back from the Mander, she fell right in my arms, like in my dreams. We were married within the week and began to live together as man and wife. I was around her before we left. She’s changed.”

He fell silent and Isk did not want to force him to go on. “War changes many things,” Vos said before joining their silence. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the crackling fire. Yes, war changes a great many things.

Sitting by Edred’s fire, safe at last, Isk let the fire burn the weariness from him. There were pains, his throat more than anywhere, but with each passing breath it seemed that they became lighter. Isk picked up his bow and finished taking the bow string off. Shouts were raised somewhere out in the village, but none of the three men got out of their chairs. Each was lost in their thoughts.

At length Edred clapped his hands together and rose from his chair. “Isk, get your dog and I’ll give you a room for what remains of the night. Masa will probably have something to say about it, but I’ll handle it.”

“Good man,” Vos said raising from his chair and stretching. “If you could gather up the third one tomorrow, then I will give the gifts meant for you.” He walked off with a wave.

Edred glowered at his back, but lead Isk to his room muted. Isk knew the man well enough not to bother him when his face was set like that. They went from the main room and into a long hallway which ran around the back of the inn. Isk knew that the rooms nearest the main room were the largest. They walked past these until they reached the end of the hallway. Edred pointed out Khazad’s room when they passed it. It was second to the end.

He opened the door to a good-sized room and looked sheepishly at Isk. “This will mollify her, and you can hear Khazad if he needs help. Take your rest, Isk.” Edred pulled him into a tight hug and then walked away without looking back.

Isk flopped into bed without removing his clothes. Masa would probably throw a fit, but she was going to anyway. Holm curled up on the bed beside him. Closing his eyes, Isk returned to his dreams about wolves.