

Chapter 7: War Stories

Isk woke when the sunlight crept through the window and onto his face. Because of the mountain, sunlight only shone down into the valley starting just before noon. Surprised at the strength he felt in himself, Isk sprang out of bed. His clothes were wet from sweat of his many nightmares, but Isk pushed them out of mind. They were dreams, and there were plenty of nightmares waiting for him in the waking world. He turned towards the door and saw Holm, her tail thumping steadily and her bright blue eyes still looking ashamed at the last night's events. Isk scratched her behind the ears and told her in no uncertain terms that she was the best dog.

After he had massaged the shame from her, Isk went to the window to check if there had been any change to the siege while he slept. Isk had remembered the first time he had come into the inn when he was a child. There was so much glass that he had sat on his father's knee in mute wonder at the stuff. Their home had no glass, and his cabin now had no glass. After that time, the village boys would sometimes gather together and watch the glass. Legend had it that a previous Highest ordered windows for their mansion from a glassmaker in the lowlands, but had died before they were delivered. The next Highest was a more austere sort and had been on the verge of smashing them when one of Masa's ancestors suggested using them for the inn.

Outside little had changed from the night. Snow lay heavy on the ground, and the not yet cool sun did nothing to melt it. The ringing fires were still burning and Isk could see a couple shepherds watching the woods. The snow-works remained in the sorry state that Isk had seen them in the night before. As he looked, Isk became aware there was a wolf in the forest, a hulking grey beast which watched the shepherds closely. They did not seem to notice that they were being watched.

Those were the siege lines. Isk felt no need to worry. He removed the coat he had slept in and went looking for Khazad. A knock on his door went unanswered, and when he tried to open the door it would not budge. Flustered, Isk went to find Edred, Holm following after him.

Isk opened the door into the main room and froze in his tracks. Highest occupied the table nearest the fire, her favorites sitting with her. The only person sitting at the table that he did not recognize as one of her pets was a man he had never seen before, though he was dressed in the furs of the shepherds. He was flanked by two of his number and had evidently been snarling a response to Highest when Isk came in.

In the highbacked chairs around the fire was Vos and a number of other villagers. Ammardain was among them. They seemed to constitute those who did not delight in playing village politics. Edred and Khazad were among them, both of whom shot Isk worried looks. Khazad was in his orange cassock, his arm was neither bloody nor broken. At the other side of the inn, Masa stood behind the bar with various women from town, Gillie among them. Masa looked like someone had just smeared dung on her bar, but Gillie gave him a weak sort of smile. Amazed and somewhat surprised at the gathered crowd, Isk stood in the doorway with his mouth agape.

“A solution presents itself.” Isk turned to the speaker. It was Highest, a slight smile on her lips and a cold fury in her eyes. Her gaze made Isk’s blood run cold. She looked away from Isk and to the shepherds.

Isk knew little of the situation unfolding before his eyes, but the way the chief shepherd looked at him in disgust filled him with nothing so much as fear. The shepherd’s face was covered in an irregular beard, his eyes were dark and angry.

“No, it doesn’t.” His voice was harsh and high.

Highest turned sharply towards him. “Are you contradicting me?” The inn grew tense, waiting for the answer.

The man scratched his beard. “I am not, Highest. But I am disagreeing with you.”

Isk thought the two were the same, and evidently most people in the inn agreed. There was a collective intake of breath. Isk saw Ammardain grip the armrests of his chair tightly.

Highest rose with a serenity, triumph on her face. “You have admitted to heresy. You shall be flayed and strung up from the ruins of my home, alongside any man who claims you as their own.”

The man did not rise but gave her a wolfish grin. “It has never been a crime against the Light to disagree with a man. Why, I recall a story in which the third son Howl disagreed with the Sword Hand himself when it came to his duties on that fateful day. Do you claim that Howl himself belonged to the Darkness?”

“Of course not.” It seemed to Isk that Highest deflated slightly, not ready for this skillful parry. “But I am the Highest of Howl’s Valley, knower of all good and all evil, and you stand far below me.”

The shepherd shrugged. “Howl stood so much further from the Light than his father, a greater distance than mine to yours, and still he was given this right and was not punished.” Highest fell silent, and Isk could see her try to find a way to brand the shepherd’s conduct as treasonous. The man interrupted her thoughts before she could. “This goes nowhere. Your village Lowest is not at fault for us being trapped up here. When the first reports came that something was in the forest, you told us that it was too dangerous to go down the mountain. We cannot be forced to defend this town.”

“Coward,” Highest erupted, spittle flying from her lips. “You would flee and leave us to be consumed by the Darkness?”

“Yes,” the shepherd said. His companions stood by him, but Isk could see that they were unnerved by the accusation. “We are shepherds, not warriors. The Light did not choose us for war. You have three warriors who could cleanse the valley swifter than we could ever hope to do.” Isk felt every eye move to him. Muttering began somewhere among the women.

“There is only one warrior,” Highest shrieked. The words echoed through the inn and Isk could see some of her favorites casting worried glances, as if the events of the last few days had finally caught up with them.

“Then that must be the will of the Light. Perhaps you were meant to be destroyed by wolves. A warning to all others.” The shepherd did not seem disturbed by the thought.

“Heresy,” Highest screamed.

“No, only guesswork. We reject taking your Lowest as compensation, there’s nothing we want from him anyway.” Without looking back, the man rose and left the inn, his companions with him.

At once, the inn exploded in conversation. The women gathered around Masa were outraged, calling the shepherds scoundrels and bandits. Some consoled Masa for having to serve men like that. The talk at the table was all about how outrageous their behavior was. Highest’s favorites tumbled over one another as they registered their disapproval for what was said. Highest did not move from where she stood, nor did she make any sign that she heard her favorites complain. A deep rage was etched in the bones of her face.

Beside the fire the conversation was different, and far more practical. Those gathered there spoke in hushed tones lest they be overheard by the others. Isk decided to join them, if only because their company would be far more reasonable. He made only a couple of steps toward them.

“Lowest,” came Highest’s harsh voice, and all the inn froze. Isk turned to face her. “All this is your fault. You walked out just in time to humiliate me. I bet you were listening in on the other side of the door for the right time to make an entrance.” Isk could feel hateful eyes falling on him.

“Highest.” Kesh spoke with a croon. She fixed him with a glare. “I thought I heard something on the other side of the door during your negotiations. I kept looking over there, remember?”

Highest’s scowl changed shape. “Yes, see. Evidence. You have committed many crimes since yesterday, petty vengeance for what has happened to you. I’m sure the great war hero never thought he would be humbled by the Highest of his village. That is why he burned down my home, that is why he has humiliated me. I wouldn’t be surprised if he summoned the wolves to this village. “Last night’s deaths are your work.”

Vos stood up behind her, his face purple with rage, and shouted at her “How dare you,” but Highest must have thought he was speaking to Isk, as she did not punish him.

“I thought you knew all things good and evil,” Isk whispered. He was heard by everyone in the inn. “Then surely you would know for certain.”

She grinned. “I am Highest in Howl’s Valley. I know all things god and all things evil. And I am looking at evil right now.” She moved for the first time since the shepherds left,

sweeping around the table in her long robes. “I shall give you a choice, evil thing. An ear, or the dog.”

Behind him, Holm began to growl. “Ear,” Isk said with no hesitation. He saw in her eyes what she would do to his dog. His ears began burning, as though they knew something was about to happen to one of them.

“Crawl to me, Lowest,” Highest said, her voice a hungry. She was standing at the end of the table where the shepherds had been, one hand outstretched. Her hand went beneath her shawl and grasped something tightly.

There was nothing for it. No matter how much Isk wished he could turn and run, there was nowhere to go. He could have been free had he run a day before. The people of the valley would have denounced him, but beyond the valley he would have been celebrated as a hero. He might even have been able to plead his case before the High Highest. His choice was made.

Lowest lowered himself onto the floor and began crawling towards her, his head hanging. An ear or his dog. Lowest had known his answer immediately, and would have given it a hundred times, yet he could not get past the feeling that it was not a proper question. In the army, there was a need for keeping order, and he had seen men punished for failing to keep to it. There was a need in villages for order, Lowest knew it just as well, but its laws need not be so harsh. He felt sick to his stomach for such thoughts, partially because he was crawling towards pain, and part because he thought those thoughts.

He reached her and knelt at her feet, not looking up. If this be the price for Holm’s life, then he would pay it. There was the sound of a blade being drawn from a sheath, and Lowest felt her fingers caressing his left ear.

“So we punish those who stand against the light,” Highest crooned. “All you shall bear witness to my justice.”

Pain wracked Lowest, such as he had only felt once in his life, when the boar had gored him. He found himself writhing on the floor, moaning in pain. Blood stained the wood beneath him, soaking the side of his face. He clutched the side of his head with both hands and felt the wrongness of the slick, warm, smooth skin. His ear was gone.

Men were talking, someone was shrieking, but none of it meant anything to him. It too all his strength not to howl at the rafters. Someone was pressing something against him, trying to get past his hands to the wound, but Lowest fought them off. This was his pain, they could not take it from him.

Strong hands reached him and pulled his own from the wound and someone pressed a softness against his ear. Lowest began sobbing. It hurt worse, so much worse with the softness at his ear. He wanted to thrash and scream and throw off those that would comfort him, but the strong hands kept him there.

“Is it enough, is your justice satisfied?” Lowest heard someone speak the words, but they felt like nothingness inside him.

“Yes,” came a second, “justice is satisfied.”

The strong hands let go of him, but just as he was about to throw off his helpers, they scooped him up and took him to in the arms. They carried him some ways, as Lowest muttered underneath his breath, begging them to take him outside and leave him for the wolves. But they did not do it, instead laying him down on something soft. There were shouts, arguments, and all the while someone was prodding at the wound. Lowest let them, the fight had left him and he tried to not drown in the pain.

Hands unknown fussed over him for what felt like hours. Lowest did not mark whose hands they were, when he had his eyes open. Most the time he shut his eyes, riding the pain. He knew that Holm was sitting beside him, who made no sound as they tended to him.

When the pain seemed to lessen to a throbbing, Lowest opened his eyes and looked about the room. It was dark, the light from the window had grown dim and there were no candles in his room. Khazad sat in the corner of the room, meditating. As Lowest rose, Holm sat upright and nuzzled gently against him. There was a sorrow in her eyes which Lowest had not been expecting to see there, a pain which seemed almost human. Lowest reached a hand up and gently stroked her behind the ears, which she responded to with a couple licks of his cheek. An ear was worth a life.

Khazad snorted and shook himself from his meditation, taking a quick glance at Lowest. Seeing that he was awake, he jumped up and clapped his hands together, a laugh on his lips. “Good to see that the loss of an ear is not deadly. Feeling alright?”

“No,” Lowest said, falling backwards into the pillows. He felt cold, numb to all the world except for a throbbing in his ear. Gingerly, he reached a hand for the spot, and found a bandage wrapped around his head. The dull aching turned sharp as he prodded it. “I feel like one large bruise.”

“This arm gave a similar feeling,” Khazad said, raising the arm which had been broken a night before. As he looked it over, Khazad seemed to find it shameful. He flushed and lowered it again.

“How did you fix your arm?” Lowest asked, trying to take his mind off the last day.

Khazad shrugged and walked around the bed, sitting at its foot. “Dwarven magic. Took three years off life to fix the arm. Figured it was more important to have two arms for all this wolf business.”

“You can do that?”

“Dwarven magic,” he answered simply.

Lowest lay in his bed, wishing that he had access to that power. No magic among the Order could fix wounds in a night. He was surprised that the villagers had bandaged his ear, knowing how fearful of disease those in the Order were. Holm whimpered and lay her head against his chest. “Who bandaged me?”

“The merchant, Vos. The blacksmith carried, but none were willing to touch the wound. Edred helped, but was afraid of touching the blood.”

All that sounded like the villagers of Howl. Lowest was thankful that someone had been willing to touch a wounded man, he was only surprised that it had been the merchant who did. As far as he knew, the people in the large cities of the world were as fearful of disease as those in Howl's Valley.

Lowest took some time thinking through that, and when he felt ready, he sat upright. “So, what's been going on with the rest of the village? Have the wolves attacked?”

Khazad shook his head. “No. The wolves have just been watching from the trees. Some say there will be no more fighting, that the wolves will stay in their positions and leave the village alone when the mountain has been hunted clean.”

“And you say?”

“The sheep are in the pen. Why run in for the slaughter before knowing there is nowhere for the sheep to run.” Lowest noticed only then that he was carrying his mattock, his fingers picking at the blade. Khazad's eyes were watching the window.

“Are we sheep in a pen?” Lowest turned to look out the window as well, not wanting to see Khazad's face as he answered.

“Seems so. The blacksmith was talking about taking wood and making walls between the buildings, that the entire clearing need not be defended. It would probably work better than the snow they keep piling up and then forgetting.”

A silence stretched between them as each got lost in their thoughts. Lowest knew that the snow was not going to save them. For a man who had never endured a siege before, Ammardain was acting like a veteran. Then again, the only things Lowest knew about sieges came to him from veterans in the host marching to the Mander, and what the Bow had told him of it.

“Where is Edred?” he asked after a while. Edred the Bold might not have helped him when his ear was being cut off, but the man had clearly managed to stand up to Masa and give him a room for the day. He deserved to be thanked.

“Perhaps its not the best idea to go walking around today. There are still a number of people in the inn. Further harm might come down by walking out the door.”

“Yes,” Lowest said, already standing. “That is the same risk that al men bear when they rise for the day.

“Most men are not Lowest.”

“Most men are not. But I still have a duty to my people. I must serve, and when men give to me gifts which I can no longer hope for, I must be grateful.”

Khazad gave no more resistance, but stood and followed Lowest to the door. The act of moving brought more pain to Lowest but he was not going to hide from it. His father had been

beaten with rocks regularly, and still stood tall in the village square, unbent though Lowest in all the valley.

Head held high, Lowest walked down the familiar corridor, flanked on one side by Khazad with his mattock and on the other by Holm. The hall was empty, allowing Lowest to practice walking with a straight face. When they reached the door that led to the main room, he paused to take a deep breath. He could hear a number of people moving about on the other side, though about what he could not hear.

Pushing open the door, Lowest strode out into the main room, meeting the eyes of each and every person who looked at him. There were fewer about now than earlier, and none of those that remained were Highest's favorites. The women were still gathered around Masa at the bar, all of them looking alarmed as Lowest came in. By the fire there was Vos and a couple others, but Lowest did not see Edred or Ammardain.

Lowest paused in his stride. Not seeing the man he was looking for, he did not know where to turn or who to address himself to. The pride he felt began deflating and he feared that all he had accomplished was making a fool of himself. Just as he was beginning to falter, one of the women shouted "Lowest," and came running.

It was Gillie, dressed in her warmest furs, snow in her hair. She ran the distance to him and threw her arms about his neck in a breathless hug. Behind her, at the bar, Lowest saw Masa watching him in disgust. Lowest hugged her back, but as gently as he could and with his hands at her shoulders.

After a moment, she broke from the hug and looked him square in the eye. "I'm so sorry about everything that's happened to you this last day. I brought some food for you." She pointed at a basket sitting on the bar. Masa backed away from the basket as though it were diseased. "Are you alright?"

There was a care in that question, a kindness, that Lowest had not known in the last day. All the weight of what had happened to him came crashing down on him and he broke down in her arms, weeping. The inn was silent, everyone watching him weep.

"I know, I know," she said in a low voice. "It's too much." Gently, Gillie led him to a chair beside the fire and sat him down. Holm curled up at his feet. Behind him, Lowest heard the women at the bar muttering about false tears. Seated, Lowest buried his head in his hands, careful not to touch his ear lest the pain break him further.

Lowest wept until the tears drowned the pain, and then beyond that. Only when he ran out of tears to cry did he sit up in his seat and look about. Gillie was sitting on the armrest, her hand on his back, sorrow on her face. The sight reminded Lowest of his mother. The men who were gathered around the fire remained, each of them somber at the sight. He did not see Khazad.

"Let it out, Lowest," Gillie said, running her hand over his. "Let it out and be done with it. Do not let the pain poison you."

But Lowest had nothing more in him. He was the smallest creature in all creation, despised by the people who sent him out into the wider world to guard their homes. Beaten and broken, a shadow of who he had been yesterday. There was an emptiness radiating out from his stomach, a cold hand gripping his insides. It was not anger and it was not indifference, it was nothing, and it would not be satisfied until it had all of him. Lowest searched himself to find where it came from, and what he found was the place where the Bow used to be. He could not tell if the numb nothing which reached for him came from that place, or if the Bow had been holding it at bay. What he did know was that its promise of sleep was proving tempting. He wished he could reach out and take it. Slumber. It frightened him.

Emptiness reached for him and he recoiled. Lowest searched for something to latch onto, something that might save him from the nothing inside. Holm looked up from the floor and gave him a curious look, as though she known what was going on inside of him. Those eyes, so understanding, had been spared from a death some hours ago at the price of an ear. An ear was more than fair for a life so closely intertwined with his own. Intelligent and loyal though she was, Lowest could not save himself with her. Holm was a piece of him, as natural to him as his arm. The nothing was rising in him.

He looked to the men sitting across from him, all but one he had known for near his entire life. These were at least willing to stand apart from Highest when they disagreed with what she did, but as his gaze went over them one by one, none of them looked at him. Vos met his eyes, and Lowest saw something hiding behind the pity.

Khazad would be near, and though he had proven himself a friend unlike any other in these last few months, Lowest knew that he would not find what he needed there. They would die for each other without word or hesitation, but the nothing did not begrudge death. It was death. It did not care why or how, only that they be soon. If all he had left to hold him together was Khazad, then he would be dead to the wolves within the week at the latest.

So Lowest placed his faith and his love in the only one he knew would accept it and treasure it, Gillie. She had no hate in her. Lowest remembered the days when she would follow the village boys around, eager to join in their games, envious of the way they all pined for Masa but never angry. She was the sibling he had never had, always there, knowing every way to make him laugh or irritate him.

A memory unbidden came to him, one he'd sooner forget. The boys had been bored on day, no work to be had, and so they gathered stones and went looking for Lowest, who had been his father. Lowest tried to shake the memory from his eyes, he did not want to remember the rocks and the blood and the bruises, but they were there all the same. Shame, an unbearable shame, burned through him. He hurried through the memory, hiding from his thoughts, until a young Gillie, only eight at the time, strode into them. She planted her feet before the beaten man, hands on her hips and a fire in her eye, and she shouted at them until her voice was hoarse, standing between them and their victim. The rocks ceased flying and the boys ran. Then Gillie turned around and comforted Lowest, just as she would do twenty years later for his son.

That was where he would lash himself, that fierce kindness, unwavering. Lowest would place himself there, knowing that he would not be abandoned callously. Gillie Algry could be kind to any man. Lowest placed himself in that love and the nothing inside him paused. He hugged Gillie fiercely, burying his face in her shoulder, thanking her over and over in a hoarse whisper. She did not move except to hug him back.

The silence of the inn was broken just then as the door swung open and a great stamping of boots began. Lowest did not break the hug to look, but he could see Vos rising from his chair with an eager look in his eye. He walked out of sight, rubbing his hands as he went. The door swung again and Gillie broke their hug, pulling away but not unkindly. She gave him a pat on the arm and went to get the food she had brought for him.

Lowest looked to the three men who were still sitting around the fire. Holsten Algry was the cousin of Gillie's husband, solid and well suited to work in the valley, if a bit dull. Lowest did not know why he was not one of Highest's favorites, he was the type for it, but he had never been one to follow her. Every year in the Rising he stood one step higher, never more. The other two, Maliek and Gresh Algren, came from the slightly disgraced branch of the family which lived on the northern wall of the valley. Their clothes were stained with blood.

The three of them were watching the door closely, so Lowest followed their lead, turning in the high-backed chair. Edred had returned and was watching the windows with interest. The women at the bar were ignoring his return, and Lowest could see why. Beside him, dressed in layers against the cold, his face lean and gaunt where it had once been slightly plump, stood the man who was not a man, bearer of the Spear Vestige. He paid no attention to the women, who, following Masa's lead, were furious that he was there but unable to make a mention of it because of the taboo. When he saw Lowest looking at him, he made the smallest of perceptible nods, one which Lowest could not return.

Vos came through the door, carrying three parcels under his arm. Stamping off the snow from his boots, he walked back to the fire. "This way, if you please, sir." He said it to both Edred and the other, but with care taken not to mention him. Edred followed, settling into his favorite chair. The other followed, curious, settling into the chair opposite Lowest, fixing him with a wry look. Lowest started, just then realizing that his seat had once been the favorite of Holm, back when they helped Edred watch the inn, and that the other was sat in the chair which had always been his favorite. Lowest rose from the chair, but the other did not rise from his, and so he sat back down, hoping that none noticed what he had done.

None seemed to, except the other, and he could shout and scream and they would not hear him. Everyone in the inn was watching Vos set himself up in front of the fire. His heavy winter coat was loosened, revealing a rich lining with embroidery along the lining. His shirt was nicer than any other in the valley, certainly better than anything Highest had. He was not dressed in the clothes he entered the valley in, but in finery meant only for a few days in the great city of Bredar. Lowest had seen the like, but not in the valley. Undoubtedly this was what had caught the attention of everyone else. To the three of them who had seen the world beyond the wooded

hills, it was uninteresting. They watched him carefully as he stood the three parcels out in front of him, each the same size.

Recognizing the sharpness of their gaze, he smiled slightly before launching into his speech. "I have come, great men three (though there are only two of you), with gifts prepared for you specially by the High Highest. Three gifts made and three gifts will be delivered, for I will not let it be said of me that I betrayed the faith of the High Highest." As he spoke, he paced in the small space before the fire, his coat swirling behind him. His light hair seemed to capture the fire.

"Of course, the events of the past year has made things difficult for me. One of you has been striped of the Vestige and the other has been...err...has not been seen since your return." Lowest looked to the other and found him smiling. "But the Light shall dim should I fail to award the men who served it so ably. The first gift is given to the bearer of the first Vestige, the Sword."

He took the parcel on his right and gave it the Edred, bowing his head sharply before retreating to the fire. Edred accepted it solemnly, inclining his head as a mark of respect, though not as severely as Vos had just done. The entire inn watched with bated breath as Edred undid the twine and pulled a long wooden box from the wrapping cloth. The box was dark, and three feet long, silver hinges at the back and an ornate sword clasp set in the front. As he placed his fingers on the clasp, Masa came round and placed herself behind her husband, a hand on his shoulder and fury forgotten.

Edred flipped the clasp and opened the box as everyone in the inn, including Vos, leaned in to see what the gift was. Masa, who had an unobstructed view of the contents, looked confused. Her husband pulled a sealed letter and a quilt from the box. The crowd was visibly disappointed. Edred looked over the quilt and then passed it to his wife, who held it up for a frank inspection. One side was a patchwork of cloth, but the other was a tapestry depicting a war scene. Lowest did not look closer, knowing which battle it was.

After a moment spent judging the quilt, Masa folded it up and rested it on the chair. Lowest could see her disappointment, though she tried to hide it. Being upset about a gift from the High Highest would be seen by many as heresy.

"What does the letter say?" she asked her husband, who was now tracing the wax seal of the letter with a finger.

"Perhaps it would be better for me to read this letter when we are alone," he said, not looking away from the letter.

"Nonsense." She reached over and snatched the letter from his hands, opening it before she was standing straight. Edred frown, but did not protest. Lowest knew why she wanted the letter read out loud. Reading her husband's praise by the High Highest would let everyone in the valley know his place, and hers by extension. She cleared her throat and read aloud in a voice often reserved for those who could not keep quiet in her inn.

“Edred the Bold, savior of two kings and our fortunes at the Mander, the High Highest salutes you on this day of Rising. I know, as the Light guides my sight, that you will have risen this year. I see you standing third in all the valley. A great honor. Though you have proven yourself to be a humble man, following the just example of the Light, I will tell you that both kings which you saved have had children this last year. Each asked me what to name their child, and I commanded each to use your name, which they readily agreed to.” There was a smattering of whoops and low, hushed conversation.

Masa continued. “I remember the celebrations in your honor, how the people cheered for you, and how you refused all riches in the world if only the High Highest would bless your union. I did bless it, and continue to do so. For this reason I have given you a quilt, made by my own hand.” The chatter became so loud that it was hard to hear the rest, though Lowest was mere feet from her. The listeners fell over each other to see the quilt, made by the one person closest to the Light. “It depicts the Mander, and your own heroic actions as the line of the Order faltered and two good kings were threatened. I hope that you will accept this gift despite your humble nature, and that the people of Howl’s Valley will see it and be brought to careful contemplation of the Light. I also hope that it will be an heirloom of your line, and that your first child, to be named Hielaire after myself, shall know it as a baby blanket, to keep them warm and teach them of the power of the Light.”

Masa fell silent, but the inn scarcely seemed to notice. They were talking over one another, endlessly babbling and trying to reach the quilt. Masa herself was reappraising the quilt, which at the moment was in Edred’s hands. The large man held the quilt close, his eyes devouring each thread. Lowest knew Edred well, and he would die rather than see such a gift soiled by another’s hand.

The commotion continued for some time, and as Edred kept fumbling over the quilt, Masa began patrolling around him, knocking away hands that got too close to her future children’s heirloom. People began pouring into the inn as word spread of the gifts. Eventually, the inn accepted that they were not going to have a chance to inspect the quilt to their own satisfaction, but also that there were two more gifts waiting to be given. They stopped speaking about how wonderful the gift was and started dreaming about the next, the gift to be given to the Spear. They looked from Vos, who stood beside the fire, expression unchanging, to the other, who was not afraid to stare back. They stood on the edge of heresy by acknowledging that he existed, but they did not seem to care.

When at last the inn had fallen silent again and all eyes waited on him, Vos began pacing before the fire again, pulling his hair as though grieving. Lowest knew otherwise, he was a showman working the crowd, hoping to entice them to buy his wears when the show was over. He had seen it many times in the great city of Bredar.

“Would that my journey went smoother,” Vos began, his voice capturing all the crowded inn. All except the three wearers of the Vestiges and Masa, who seemed to think that once her husband had been given his gift that all else was beneath her. What did she care if Lowest received a gift. “Three men set forth from this valley a year ago, and three returned. But since

that time the second has gone missing, and no man knows where he has gone to.” The man in question sat in Lowest’s favorite chair at that moment and watched Vos with a sneer on his face.

“What mistakes he made in his life were part of the struggle which the Light had ordained for its follower. Yet though the High Highest wished to see his errors corrected, she did not desire for him to be lost. Should he be found, she desired a gift be given to him.”

Vos took the second parcel, and, despite the many eager looks from the crowd of men who thought that the gift might be given to them instead, he laid it at the foot of the chair where the other sat. The other took the parcel and pulled out a second box from the wrappings and set it on his knees. The crowd leaned in, eager for him to open the identical box (excepting only the clasp, which was fashioned after a spear). But though the box was in his lap, he made no effort to open it, matching each stare and daring them to speak to him. Lowest could see the words on their lips, each desperate to know what the High Highest gave him.

The inn held its silence, and they slowly came to understand that the other would not open the box. Had the box been held by someone else, Lowest knew that the villagers would take it from their hands and open it to sate their curiosity. But to touch the box which the other held in his hands was to acknowledge that he exists and earn them the same shame which he lived under. They began to look away, back to Vos, their disappointment writ on their faces.

Vos too seemed disappointed not to know the contents of the box he had carried so far, but was contented when he had the attention of the inn again to lift the third parcel. As he did, butterflies erupted in Lowest’s stomach. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the merchant began pacing once more.

“I was there, good folk of Howl’s Valley. I was there at the battle of the Mander where the great host of the Order met with those heretics who believed they did not need the guidance of the High Highest came to throw her down. The great Edred the Bold saved two kings from certain death as the lines buckled under the weight of their darkness. They knew evil magics which gave them power, but we had the Light.

“Into the battle stepped the bearer of the third Vestige, wearer of the Bow. He could see, even from his far place, the king of the heretics, who had been ensnared by the darkness. He was three miles distant, and though such a shot against a target was nothing to the Bow, he knew that at such a distance the mad king could move and spoil the shot. So he needed to be nearer, that his great strength could send the arrow faster than a man could move.

“The royal guard of the Dwarves was all that was uncommitted, and they gave five to guard our hero as he drew near the striking place. In they ran, through the armies tangled, all the while fighting through mad hoards of the Darkness’s followers. When they reached the place, he took from his back the bow, the very same bow which had once been carried by Howl into battle in this very valley, and knocked it with an arrow fletched with the colors of the Third Son. That shot sailed a mile or more, and struck the heretic king straight in the eye. He fell, his followers broke, and the Light was delivered. He was the hero by which all of your homes were saved, and

though he suffered at your hands, he shall still be gifted what the High Highest has decided for him.”

With a flourish, Vos presented Lowest with the parcel. The excited inn did not care that they had been chastised for what they had done to him, they all wished to see what gift the High Highest of the Light could give their Lowest. The pain in Lowest’s ear was mounting and his hands trembled as he took the parcel and pull a third identical box out of the wrapping.

He took a moment tracing the silver clasp, shaped like a Bow with an arrow drawn. It was beautiful, raised against a back plate and intricate lines decorating the Bow. Lowest had seen such opulence, but only when he stood in the grand palace of the High Highest. That he was given a small piece of that vast treasure moved him to tears. They ran down his face silently, tracing the path of those wept in anguish just a few minutes ago.

Lowest looked away from the box for Edred and found that he and the everyone else in the inn was watching him closely. Lowest’s fingers began tracing the clasp again. He was eager to know what he had been given by the High Highest, if it was anything that could raise him in the eyes of the village. At the same time, a strange feeling that what he had been given was his and his alone. What right had they to know what the contents of the box. It was his, and his alone to discover. His hand moved away from the clasp.

At once the crowd erupted in jeers and calls. They had been denied one of the boxes and would not be denied a second. All around him they shouted insults and complained loudly to each other. Edred stayed silent, the other watched him with a vague sense of curiosity, Vos stood scandalized, but besides these three and Khazad, the inn was of one mind. Lowest heard Gillie behind him say she was disappointed that she could not see what he had been given, words which stung at him bitterly.

Holm rose from her seat and watched the crowd nervously. The commotion grew louder and the insults worse. Lowest realized that he was trembling.

“Darkness take him!”

“Highest said he brough the wolves here!”

“He dare not touch the gift of the High Highest because it will destroy him.”

“Lowest I order you to open the box.”

The insults switched to orders as the villagers used their position above him to command him, and Lowest knew that he could not refuse them. That was not his place anymore. He lifted the clasp and opened the box. At once, the crowd fell silent, leaning in to see what he had been given.

Inside, there was a rolled and sealed parchment, an arrow which Lowest recognized immediately, and a bow stave made of dark yew. It was unstrung and pressed curling such that its ends were pressed against one side of the box and the middle against the other. A bow string was curled at the bottom of the box.

The inn erupted into conversation as the contents were told to those who could not see. The inn was excited, but Lowest felt empty. The sight of the arrow brought memories swirling back to him, memories which he would forget if he had the chance, but came to his mind perfectly each time. He watched the arrow in its flight, the colored fletch waving in the wind, keeping the arrow on its course. Disgusted by the memory, Lowest closed the box and fastened the lid.

The inn roared, demanding that he read them the letter, giving him orders again. So again at the crowds demand, Lowest opened the box and pulled out the scroll. He held it in his hand, taking a brief moment to admire the wax seal of the radiant sun before breaking it and unfurling the scroll. As he did, a second piece of parchment fell out and landed on his lap. Lowest held it up and felt the crowd lean in.

Just like the arrow, Lowest recognized the parchment immediately, but instead of anger and shame, pride welled up inside him. It was his scored card from the Ordered Game of Bredar, the game of kings and the Light. He had come nearer the mark than the High Highest that day, but she had not chastised him, instead holding him as an example for all.

A hand swooped in from behind as he looked over the card and grabbed the letter from his lap. Lowest turned in his seat and found Kesh Algren standing behind him. The old man could not read, so he handed off the letter to the nearest person who could, which was Gillie Algry. She gave a glance to Lowest before she began reading. The inn was silent.

“To the Hero, the brave warrior who save all the Light from the hoards of heathens who would seek to destroy it. The name Iskander the Hero is known throughout all the lands of the world and is praised for being our great deliverer.” Gillie paused before reading the next sentence. “As the Rising comes, I know that you shall rise far. The Light will reward you for your efforts and I see you standing second in all of Howl’s Valley, below your Highest only.”

An angry muttering broke out through the inn as the village debated the words. The literate gathered around Gillie, grabbing at the letter. Suddenly, what Vos knew was known to all the valley. The High Highest wanted Lowest rewarded and stood above all others, and yet their Highest had him beaten twice and cut off his ear after throwing him down to become Lowest. There was dissonance in the Light. The other stood up, tucking the box under his arm, and walked out of the inn, escaping with the contents of his gift unpilfered.

Lowest did not rise from his seat, or shout at those gathered that he had been wronged at their hands. There was no reason for it. To tie himself to a distant pillar and set himself against the one nearby, it all seemed so foolish. He slumped back into his chair and waited for the arguments to die down so that Gillie would read the rest of the letter, watching the fire and refusing to make eye contact with anyone. As he waited, he scratched Holm behind the ears to calm her down.

The talk in the inn never died down. Instead, the letter fluttered into his lap, dropped there by an unknown hand. Lowest did not turn around to see who returned it, but read it as quickly as he could in case someone came to take it from him. Before he had worn the Bow, he

had not known how to read, but as soon as the Vestige had entered him, the scribblings began making sense. He began where Gillie had trailed off.

I have given to you three gifts, though it would be more proper to shower you in gold. There is not enough in the Order to match the greatness of your deed. You never asked for a reward, and in the days of celebration which followed were quiet except when pressed. These were the traits of the Beloved Son Howl. We can only grateful that you embodied these qualities so well.

The first gift I give to you was once yours. You will no doubt recognize it. It is the fateful bolt which you loosed and which killed the heretic king. The blood which once stained it has been removed, except in the haft. I held it as a relic of our victory, blessing it and its owner. The people of Bredar have taken to calling it the Blood Arrow, and you Isk of the Blood Arrow. I desire that when you become Highest, as I know you shall, that you will make the Arrow an heirloom for the Highests who follow you.

The second gift I give to you is a bow fashioned from the dark yew which grows here in Bredar. It is not a great bow such as you are accustomed to, but a short bow which shall aid you in your hunting. I have blessed both the bow stave and the string, and these blessings when combined with your talents, shall never miss their target. Not since the Breaking has a High Highest blessed a weapon, but this is the proper gift for a warrior such as you.

The third gift I give to you is a to be held up before everyone as a reminder of your talents. It is the scoring card which you filled out in the celebratory games, where you scored more accurately than myself. Never before had anyone come nearer to the official tally than myself. Carry this with you and show it to the people of Howl's Valley that they might be proud of themselves.

Go with peace in the Light.

V.O.E.M.

Lowest finished the letter. An odd sense of affection ran through him. This was the proper work of a Highest, ever moving all things to the Light. It was also dangerous, capable of inciting violence in men. Around him the arguments continued as the villagers tried to reconcile the words of the High Highest with those of their Highest. Lowest said nothing, anything he did say would only aggravate them further. When the Light shines so clearly on the path the goodness and everything in the twilight is held in the same fear as the darkness, a twist in the path or fork in the road is ruinous. A guide was needed to walk in the proper path, but then the followers place their travel in the guide and they surrender themselves to the whims of the guide.

The villagers had surrendered to their guide. Lowest had surrendered. They had all done so at their birth. Now two guides bickered along the path and no one knew which way to step. Lowest did not know which way to step, nor how to choose between the harsh guide he had known all his life and the gentle guide he met only a year ago. He had no answers, only worries.

The door was thrown open and the inn fell silent. Lowest turned from the fire to see what had finally silenced the gathered crowd and saw Highest stride in, still dressed in her ceremonial garb. She was surrounded by some of her favorites.

“What has been going on in here,” she said, her roving eye cowing the crowd. “The wolves surround us, and yet here you all are. What reason is there for this?” Lowest knew full well that she knew what was going on. Asking the question allowed her to chastise them.

“Highest, the merchant was giving out gifts from the High Highest.” Kesh quickly made his way to stand at her side. “He gave gifts to Edred and to Lowest. He had gifts for the third who left out valley, but he was not here.”

Highest’s gaze fell upon the merchant. “Do you not know that this man is Lowest and barred from any gifts. He has failed in the sight of the Light, which I know perfectly. To give him gifts now is to reward him for his failings.”

“And yet, I was commanded to give them by the High Highest.” Vos puffed out his chest. “I would not fail that task; I could not fail the Light.”

Highest was standing beside the bar now, standing tall among her favorites. The villagers fell away from her and crowded the sides of the inn, clearing the center of the room. She did not seem to register that Vos had spoken.

“Lowest is sick, terribly sick. The wound which the boar gave him made him even more so. I can see it, yet you do not. Why, pray tell, do you believe that you know the path of the Light better than I?”

The venom in her voice was unmistakable, but Vos did not recoil. Instead, he twirled his cape and ran his fingers through his hair once more. Lowest had seen street performers in Bredar do such things as they tried to get the attention of anyone who might be carrying coin with them.

“I claim no such distinction, Highest,” he said. “I am merely the servant of the High Highest, who stands closer to the Light than any other alive. She made me swear to deliver her gifts to the three wearers who went to the Mander. I will not let the Light diminish on my account.”

Highest smiled. “I understand now. You were mistaken. While Edred is one of these, Lowest is not. The wearer of the Bow is my nephew Lang, who I named to the position today. Soon we will have the ceremony and grant him the Vestige. Please, give the gift to me. I shall see that he receives it.”

Vos did not budge. “I know for a fact that this is not true, Highest. You see, my orders were not to give the gifts to the current wearer, but to the three who carried them to the Mander. Lowest was mentioned by name in the letter, so the gift is his.”

“What letter?” Highest said sharply. Kesh detached himself from the wall and ran to Lowest’s seat, ripping the letter from his hands, and trotted faithfully to Highest’s side. She took

it and read it quickly. As she did, her eyes narrowed and a fury came over her. Her favorites backed away, sensing a storm. Vos was triumphant.

“As you can see, Highest, I have done as was asked of me, and delivered the letter to its proper place.”

Furious, but unable to do anything about the letter, Highest threw it down to the ground and stalked away, followed by her nervous favorites. At the door, she spun around and shouted to the entire bar, “We are surrounded by beasts of the Darkness, and you all have work to do.”

With that, she left and the inn emptied after her, save for Edred and his wife, Lowest, Khazad, and Vos. They sat in silence for a long time, everyone but Masa was staring into the fire, each thinking their own thoughts. She left the seats for the bar, taking the quilt with her. Lowest looked over to her occasionally and saw her cleaning up and casting tender looks at it.

For Lowest the fire offered no solace from his thoughts. He saw the Mander churned by thousands of feet, blood in the water and blood on the land. The battle was the largest fought in three hundred years, and the thousands of men who died that day were etched in his mind. The arrow which had ended it now rested in a box on his lap. A constant reminder, an arrow stained by blood, and through all the world, he would be known by it, for it. He had no doubt in his mind that the High Highest would call for statues of Edred and himself, and his would be holding the arrow.

Khazad stood up and went out the door without a word, leaving three by the fire. They did not ask him where he was going. It didn't matter. Occasionally, one of them would get up and put another log on the fire, but otherwise they were silent. They were still silent as hours later the door opened and a number of villagers and shepherds came in. Night was falling fast outside the windows.

The motley collection ordered drinks from Masa before gathering around one of the larger tables. Lang was in that group, as was Meles, but there was also one of Ammardain's apprentices, and none of them ever had Highest's favor. Lowest also saw Sareth with them, who he had never seen mixing with the boys. Edred shifted in his chair and Lowest looked over to him. He was watching the crowd from the side of his eye, ready to step in and handle them should they start anything. Lowest tried to ignore them and returned his gaze to the fire. He tried to recall the fire he had burned into his memory, or the ever-changing waters of the stream, but it was no use, the Mander was before his eyes.

“Oi, congratulations of the gifts, Ed.” Lowest was pulled from his thoughts to see Lang and Meles walking toward the fire. Looking back at the fire, he realized that it had been some time since they had come in. Edred only grunted by way of acknowledgement, he hated being called Ed. The pair sat down in the seats closest to the fire.

“Meles was just saying how he wished we had been older so that my aunt would have selected us for the Vestiges.” Lang swung one leg over the arm rest. “Is it true that you turned down all the gold in the world for a blessing?” Meles flashed an ugly smile as Lang spoke, both of them incredulous.

“Nobody ever offered me all the gold in the world,” Edred said. “I saved two kings in battle and was wounded horribly for it. I didn’t want gold or silver for that. I knew, even then, that I would hate the sight of it, that every coin I held would only remind me of my pains. So instead I asked the High Highest if my love was real, and it was. I needed nothing more.”

The smirks washed off Lang and Meles’s faces as they had evidently come to tease him, but his answer had taken that from them. Unable to think of a retort of any substance, Lang said the first thing that came to his mind. “How did you know all that?”

“Because I carried the Sword inside of me. Wearing the Vestige changes you. The burning Light removes all Darkness, as it will in you.”

Lang frowned. “I have no Darkness in me. I am the nephew of the Highest of Howl’s Valley and her heir. I was raised properly in the Light.” Meles nodded along lamely.

Edred merely shrugged. “The Vestige in me sees through my eyes and whispers about the darkness it sees in you. No man is clean.”

To their credit, the boys did not retort. They grimaced, but those frowns did not last long. Faced with those words, from a man such as Edred, they looked inward, and found things they did not expect to find. Lowest watched them. His eyesight was not nearly as good as it had been a day passed, but he could see them searching their souls.

After a time, Meles looked up, and in a wavering voice asked a simple question. “Edred, what is war like?” That pulled Vos from his thoughts, and the merchant looked away from the fire from the first time in hours. Holm too was interested, raising her head as though sensing a storm.

“War was war,” Edred said, stoically. “I had never know its like, and I hope that I never see it again. Beautiful, terrible. I can close my eyes and feel men dying in my arms, the press of the shields against each other. The earth tremored beneath my feet as thousands of men threw themselves at each other. I can feel it to this day.”

“What does it feel like?” Lang asked.

“I have never known its equal.” He meant it as an ending, but the way those two looked at him drove him on. He spoke slowly, measured, with each word falling heavy over the inn until all the people inside fell silent and listened to him. “We left this valley, just the three of us, knowing that we were not the men we had been all our lives. There was something different in us. Highest had told us to make our way to the city of Bredar, where the army was gathering. Following the river until we reached the next village, we followed directions which others had given us. The towns grew larger, the world felt dirtier. When we reached the city, we were treated as heroes, though all he had ever done was ride horses from our village to the city.

“Within two days we were on the march again, onwards and onwards, step after step. Men died on the march; men fell by the wayside. It was the first I had ever seen of men dying outside of their beds. I would have ran even then, but it was on the road to the Mander that a

voice I had never known before spoke in my mind. Comforting me, telling me that it was alright. I can feel them marching to the Mander, men who would not ever return to their homes.”

The other men had left their place and gathered around the fire to listen. Masas had stopped tending bar and was watching her husband speak. Lowest assumed that like him, Edred had not spoken about the battle.

“I don’t remember much of the fight. It was flashes of silver on brown and red, not changing for hours. What I do remember is ever single sword stroke I took, and the shivers that ran through my arm as I struck true. When the day ended, I was a beast and covered in blood, much of it my own. I fell into the waters of the Mander as I chased the heretics from the river and woke a day later in the sick houses.”

The shepherds cheered as he finished his story, a pair walking over and clapping him on the back as the others returned to the bar to order themselves another round. Masa quickly busied herself behind the bar. The rest of the shepherds came over and spread the drinks around, though not to Lowest. Their enthusiasm brought Lang and Meles to a smile, and soon they were laughing and drinking alongside the shepherds, insulting the heretics they had never seen and celebrating the triumph of the Light. Lowest saw Masa pour herself a drink and give it to her husband. Even Vos raised his glass, a half-smile on his lips. Only Edred and himself did not raise the cheer.

Lowest had seen his friend in the morning after the Mander. The wound to his head had been so gruesome that he did not expect him to live. At the top of his head, the blow had cut bone, and Lowest had seen his brains, grey beneath the blood. Lowest had sat with him, expecting him to die at any moment, but that was when he learned the strength which Howl gave them. The bone had been healed by nightfall, growing like bark on a tree. Edred lay there, awake but in pain, and asked only a couple questions about the battle before drifting off into sleep. Within three days the wound had completely healed, and within a week it had faded. Now there was no trace of it, except for a thin line where his hair did not grow.

“And what about you?” Lowest turned away from his friend to see a shepherd leering at him, ale staining his shirt.

“Excuse me?” Lowest said.

“What did you do during the war?”

The question made Vos scoff and Edred laugh. Lang and Meles looked at each other confused, having heard of his deeds from others. Lowest did not react, matching the stare of the shepherd. Inside he felt a familiar dread as the memory once more came into his mind.

“I asked you a question, Lowest. Answer you dog.” It was said in gest, the shepherds all laughing as their friend drew closer, his eyes never blinking.

Lowest began, and as he spoke the inn fell quiet. None before had heard the story of the Hero of the Mander told by the man who had once been him.

“I remember it, I remember it all. When I close my eyes I can see every face on the road to Bredar, and in the crowd which welcomed us, and in host marching to the banks. I can see every sigil, every banner, the hands that held them. It is said that of all the Sword Hand’s sons, Howl was the keenest of sight. The Mander waits for me to close my eyes, and then that tapestry unrolls and I can see every face in it. I don’t feel them dying. I see them. I watch as over and over in my mind they live their last moments.”

Lowest left it there and returned to looking at the fire. The shepherd was unsatisfied to learn Lowest’s pains. He set his drink aside and came stalking to Lowest’s chair, grabbing the armrests in either hand and lowering his head until his eyes were even with Lowest.

“That’s not what I asked for, worm. Tell us how you killed him, Lowest, or you will know pain.”

For a moment, the thought that he did not yet know pain almost brought laughter to his lips, but he remembered who he was, who he had been made into, and the laugh was strangled in his throat. Instead, it was Vos who stood up.

“Drunk fool, you can’t speak to him like that.” He stood tall, the way he had when he gave the gifts and captured the imagination of the village. His face caught the color of the fire and Vos stared down the shepherd. “He saved the Light, swine.” Sensing a fight, Edred rose from his seat, a gentle reminder of who kept the peace in Masa’s inn.

The other shepherds backed away, but the one confronting Lowest was too far in his drink to recognize the threat. He whirled round to face Vos and spat at him. “He’s Lowest, he shouldn’t even be in a seat. He should grovel on the ground from his crimes. And seeing as I stand higher than him, he should tip his head when addressing me.”

“And I stand higher than you in the Light,” Vos retorted. “Tip your head before me and then leave the man alone.”

The shepherd bristled. “Like Darkness you’re higher than me. I was third in my village.” He puffed his chest up proudly.

“I was given my rank by the High Highest herself and am her personal messenger to this valley.”

“Prove it,” the shepherd spat. The accusation sent a chill through the inn. One of the shepherds shivered.

Before Vos could speak, Lowest stood up and took the conversation. “If the man objects, he objects. It is not my place to tell him how to act. I will tell you the story and everything which I remember, higher. One day a man has high fortunes, and the next day he serves as Lowest.” He nodded his head sharply to the man. There would be no saying it, but the accusation that Vos had not come on the High Highest’s request had frightened him badly. Reminiscing on darkness was not as bad as creating new evils.

The shepherd settled among his friends. Lang and Meles sat terrified in their seats. Like Lowest, they must not have ever seen men prepared to fight in the valley. All anger was always placed upon Lowest. Holm standing solidly at his feet, leaning against him for support, Lowest closed his eyes and began.

“The banners stood at either side of the river, both armies cheering and jeering across the river. They stood there until the sun had nearly finished its climb. Then the hoard of heretics crossed the river. I could see their faces from the hill where I stood, each of them as ordinary as your own. If there was Darkness in them, I could not see it.

“With the heretics in the midst of the river, the order to charge was suddenly given, and the warriors of the Light ran towards the Mander, but they were too far and did not reach the river in time. The heretics had a foothold on this side, and it only grew. I watched those first men die, and from my distant vantage point I shivered. It was more horrible than ever I imagined it, and as the battle drew on, I thought that I could see the hand of death move across the field and take what it desired.

“The battle waxed furious across the plain, and all the while I watched it. I watched thousands of men die, the faces of those who had died mixed in my eyes with those who were dying. I can still count how many teeth were missing from the armies who fought at the Mander. I know how many men died because I can see them all clearly in my mind as clearly as I see you before me. No, I see that better than I see you. It is burned in my mind by the power of Howl, and I can see them even as I fail to remember my father’s face. But you did not ask about the many thousands who died that day. You asked about the one which I killed, and so, higher, I will tell you.

“Guarded by the Light though they were, the Order began to crumble and fail. The line buckled and in desperation the High Highest called forth her guard. Three warriors armed with pieces of Howl’s soul and his weapons. One wavered and ran from the field, the second ran into battle and nearly died at the hand of a heretic. Despite his efforts the battle remained in doubt, the left about to break. She told me to find and kill the heretic king, and so I went, accompanied by five of the dwarven king’s guard.

“We ran, because I knew that I could not kill the man from such distance. I knew where he was, I could see the tent three miles from me. But the shot could not come from where I stood then. In the time it took the arrow to fly the distance he would have moved, and at the first missed shot he would flee to safety. This I knew as well as I knew my own heart, though how I knew it I did not know.

“We ran to the back of the lines, but we still were not near enough. A little further and I could deliver the blow. But there was no space further on. There was war, and death, and all of it I saw clearly, even as I kept my eyes set upon the distant tent where the heretic had made his lair. I told this to the dwarves who were with me, closing my eyes that I might have one single moment of peace in the horror. The dwarves, a race of being that I had only heard of in story and had not believed the existence of until I reached Bredar, promised on their lives to deliver me where I wanted to go. They formed around me and together we plunged into the melee.

“I had Howl’s bow with me, knocked with one of the arrows which had been made for the battle. The dwarves guarded me, plowing into the fray. They killed with ease, and I watched, until we stood near enough, on a small knoll. The battle crashed around us as I drew my bow. I could see him, the heretic king. The man was short, dressed in simple mail. He looked more like a sergeant than a king, but from the deference the others were paying him, I knew him to be their king, though how I knew I could not say. I watched him walk around his command tent, the bow drawn, until I knew where he would stand when my arrow reached him.

“I loosed, and watched the arrow as it flew, the feathers wavered back and forth in the wind. The heretic received a battle report and smiled, he stepped to the chair he had brought with him. I smiled. He turned to face the battle when my arrow reached him. The arrow pierced his eye, dead on, where I knew it would. The tip touched his eyes and for a bare moment I saw the water of the eye wet the head. The heretic king’s eyes widened in shock, as for the smallest time he knew what happened to him. The arrow plunged into his eye and blood covered the haft. He fell, and the heretics ran. That is my tale, higher.”

The shepherds cheered and the aggressive one joined his fellows, forgetting Lowest as soon as he wetted his lip. Edred sat back down and Vos turned back to the fire. Lang and Meles joined the shepherds. Lowest turned to the fire, but though he saw the flickering flames, the Mander was before his eyes.

Unable to shake his memories, Lowest stood up, Holm got up after him, and he gathered his gift under his arm and returned to his room, the past before his eyes. They could cheer, the army of the order had when they learned the story. They could never see the face of the man he had killed, nor each drop as it spilled from his eye.

Back in his room, he placed the box near the door and returned to the bed, an ear fewer than he had had the day before. As he lay in bed, the wounds of the day reminding him that they remained, he could only wonder what new pains would wrack him tomorrow.