

Chapter 8: Highest

Lowest woke from the pain in his ear. He had slept poorly, not troubled by dreams so much as by the memory of the Mander. Most of the night was spent tossing and turning in bed, muttering to himself as sleep failed to find him. When sleep did reach him, it was shallow and troubled. When he dreamed, the pain in his ear pulsed through him, sending him wild fever dreams. The last set of dreams involved drowning in a bloody river.

As the first light lifted the cloak of night, though the sun was still blocked by the mountain, he lay in bed. Holm slept soundly beneath the window, having paid no attention to his sleeping troubles. Lowest lay in bed, riding the waves of pain which racked him. The old familiar emptiness was welling up, but it had not consumed him as it had before. He could fight it off with memories of Gillie. The pain he could do nothing about.

He would have lain there happily, safe in the knowledge that no one would ask him to face the encircling wolves, but as he thought that a great howling began in the trees, carried up by hundreds of voices. Holm sprang up and began growling. Lowest lay in bed and let the terrible sound wash over him. It combined with his pain as it shook him, consumed him.

When souls were presented to be judged, the condemned were given to the Darkness as failures, freely offered to the evil that would twist and torment them forever. Lowest wondered if the Darkness could do any more to him than had been done to him in the last two days. He knew it could, it was the Darkness, and delighted only in destroying mortal forms. Whatever misery he experienced in this life, the Darkness could double it without a thought. Still, the pain and exhaustion, coupled with the sound of the wolves, made him think that he would never feel any worse. None of the dead of the Mander suffered very long, they were all dead before the sun fell.

There was no hiding in bed from the wolves, so Lowest stood up. He took his time in readying himself for the day, gathering a bowl of snow from the window sill and heating in into water over a lantern he found in the hall. When the water was lukewarm, he washed his face, unraveling the bandages and cleaning the wound. It was ugly, the crust of blood formed traced the outline of his ear. Wincing from the pain, he rewrapped the bandages and then got dressed.

Lowest went into the main room, which he found empty. The gift basket of food which Gillie had made for him was out on table and Lowest had a breakfast alone. When he was finished, he gave a roll to Holm and then walked out into the snow. He was not permitted to carry a weapon, so he did not, striding out into the snows with Holm.

At first glance the village had not changed, it looked as it always had in the depth of winter, but looking closer he could see that the main road was blocked up by wood, hastily thrown up and manned by the shepherds and Ammardain's folk. He could see Khazad standing among them, talking animatedly.

Not wanting to converse with anyone, he went the other way, tracing the outside of the inn along a snow bank that had been raised. He could hear the wolves howling in the forest, though he could not see them. At his side, Holm walked with her ears flat back against her skull. Unsure of where he was going, but not content to take no part in defending his home, Lowest

looked for a shepherd standing alone. He had no desire to speak to a group of them, not after the previous night.

He wandered like a ghost through the snow, none of the shepherds looked his way as he passed them. As the wolf-cry died down, they grew agitated. Lowest too felt nervous, many eyes were on him. Unhuman eyes. Holm began circling around him and letting off a soft growl.

His walk around the village let him see the defenses for the first time in full. If the Bow had still been with him, it would no doubt be pointing out who pointless it had been to dig the snow dike when surrounded by wolves, or places where the wooden barricade was sure to fail. The snow dike ran around the entire village, but the barricades were built in the heart of the village, the outer buildings abandoned. Around the dike the shepherds and villagers kept their watch, nervous. The wind brought the bleating of the sheep to him, their fear announced to all the world.

Lowest reached the furthest point of the dike, on the opposite side of town from the mountain and falls. The frozen river was to the right, the ice would be thick enough to walk on, though that normally took until the darkest days of winter. Below him, the road to the world twisted through the valley. Somewhere down that road was the great city of Bredar, and the wide flat tilled plains which fed it. Places where the snows had not yet fallen, where the wolves were not watching. The road looked open, free for them to run, but Lowest would not run. He knew he could never. And he knew he could never make it.

A single shepherd stood at his watch not far from Lowest, a man of lean muscle of the shepherd. His face was young but pox marked, scraggly whisks of hair on his chin. He had not seemed to notice Lowest as he came up. The light of dawn was clear above them, touching the high shoulders of the hills, but had not yet come down into the valley. Lowest walked beside the shepherd and joined him, keeping his silence. Beside him, Holm continued to watch the woods, worried.

The shepherd had made no sign that he noticed Lowest, apart from the pains he took not to see him. He would shuffle and look off into the distance, but he did not make a sound. Lowest looked around, hoping to see something which needed doing, but piling snow on the dike seemed pointless. What little he knew of wolves was enough to know that they would be slowed only momentarily by the dike.

“Higher,” he said after a time, “I came to your post to know if there was anything I might do to aid the defense. I cannot carry a weapon, but if you would need food brought to you, I would be glad to do so.” He spoke in language that was a bit too formal, but it was appropriate language for Lowest. Lowest had been far too informal with villagers in the last two days, and he had the scars to prove it.

The shepherd finally looked him in the eye, and it may have been his imagination but he thought he saw shame, though what the man had to be ashamed of Lowest did not know. “I need for nothing, Lowest. I only wish we had not been delayed in returning to our homes.” The shepherd spit into the snow. “If you have some way that could send me home by day’s end, I

would be grateful. This nightmare has worn thin for me.” As though to prove that he was not a man well suited for the task at hand, he twirled his spear in his hands and fumbled it. The spear landed in the snow without a sound.

“I am sorry,” Lowest said. “Men should not die far from their homes. Few men choose the path of war, it takes as it desires and leaves little in its wake.”

The shepherd glanced at him sideways. “Is this war?” Beyond him, the night seemed to cling to the ground, unwilling to leave just yet. Lowest thought he saw something move in the woods, but a second glance revealed nothing.

“It is,” Lowest said. “It is the only war; one we had forgotten.” Holm stopped circling and climbed the dike, staring out into the woods. The hairs on the back of Lowest’s neck began to rise. Something was coming for them, he knew it in his bones. The feeling was so strong that he searched himself for a moment, hoping to find the Vestige commanding him, but there was nothing else inside him. He had lived with the Bow for only a year, but living without it was like living in a dream, everything seemed slow and the colors wrong. Had he still worn the Vestige, he would have been able to see what it was in the woods. “Higher, I beg you to raise the alarm.”

The shepherd bent down and reached a hand toward the watchfire, before he thought about who he was talking to. He straightened and puffed out his chest. “Why?” he asked.

“Because I have seen war, Higher. Your enemy has just given their battle cry. Now they will test the defenses.” Lowest spoke with certainty, as though he were still at the Mander and the Bow could give him authority. He could not explain why he thought the attack was coming, there were times to sound the horns outside of a charge. But if he had learned one thing from the veterans he had met, it was that when under siege there was no danger in caution.

The shepherd nodded and picked a log which was half out of the fire. He waved it above his head and gave a cry. Though they were far from the other posts, sixty yards from the nearest, the cry was heard and carried to the other positions.

As they did, Holm began barking. Lowest turned around to see his fears stalking towards him. They were just at the eves of the woods, moving slowly and carefully. Half-shrouded in the darkness of the valley, their eyes glowed gold, hungry. Lowest looked back to the other posts, hoping to see reinforcements, but they were all pointing into the darkness and crying out. His stomach sank.

“They are coming all around,” the shepherd said, his voice breaking. Lowest began shaking.

There were five wolves opposite them, and already they were halfway between the forest and the dike. If he had his bow, if he was allowed to hold a bow, but those thoughts went nowhere. He was forbidden from carrying a weapon. Already shouts and screams were coming from the other posts. A bell was ringing somewhere in the village.

“Holm, with me.” Dutifully, she came to his side, never taking her eyes off the approaching wolves. The first of the wolves set a foot on the dike, sniffing cautiously. Lowest took the time to grab a log out of the fire. “We’ll be safe back at the wall.”

Lowest began to withdraw, one careful step at a time, but the shepherd did not seem to have heard him. He stood beside the fire, spear gripped firmly in his hands, watching as the wolves crested the snow bank with loping ease.

“Boy,” Lowest shouted. The shepherd looked back, and seeing Lowest back away from he quickly hurried to his side. The wolves did not run after him, but they did follow, coming down from the dike with easy grace. They spread out into a soft crescent and stalked after them. Lowest tried to keep them all in his eyeline as they retreated. Hoping that the old tales were true, and the beasts of the Darkness fired fire, Lowest held the burning log above him, ready to swing.

Step by step they back away from the wolves, the nearest of which Lowest could had reached out and touched. They seemed contented to snap and bark at them. Mindful of the trap they had set for him two nights earlier, Lowest ordered Holm to watch their path backwards and warn him if others joined.

Shouts and the occasional cry echoed out over the snow; the bell continued to ring. The village had awoken to the danger and there was a great din rising as they retreated. In all the noise and chaos, the three of them would go unnoticed.

The shepherd poked at the wolves with his spear, careful never to step out and chase them. The wolves snapped at the spear, but fell away as he probed. They would wheel around and return, and every time the shepherd prodded, the two nearest wolves closed in. Holm did not bark out, which left their path behind them open, but if they reached a part of the wall which was not being watched, the wolves would not need reinforcements.

“Holm,” he shouted over the din as he turned back to face the wolves, “is the way clear?”

She barked once.

“Can we get through the barricade?”

She barked again.

“Do you see anyone coming to help us?”

The silence was damning. Upon reaching the barricade, they would have to find a way to get over it without leaving an opening to the wolves. If they got that far. Lowest searched himself for the Bow once more, or any knowledge that it might have imparted in him before it left.

He was pulled from his thoughts as the shepherd gave a cry. Lowest spun around to see that the wolf he jabbed at had seized the haft of the spear and pulled him. Loosing his balance, the shepherd hit the snow. The pack pounced.

But they were not as fast as Lowest. He was missing the vigor he once had, but strength was still there. As the two wolves which flanked the pulling wolf jumped in to attack, Lowest was already standing over the shepherd. He swung the burning log into the snarling maw of the first attacker, sparks flying off the log as it struck. The wolf was shunted off to the side, ash coating its muzzle. Lowest whirled round to strike the second wolf only to find that Holm had launched herself onto it, catching it in the side and dragging it off to the side, her teeth on its throat.

He had no time to praise her, as the other four wolves closed in. The shepherd scrambled to his feet, hands set firmly on the spear, but the wolf had not let go of it. Stepping in, Lowest brought down the log hard on the snout clubbing the beast. It released and backed away, snarling.

Victory was short lived. The wolf he had left behind him bowled him over, a cold mouthful of snow silencing him. It clamped down on his foot, grabbing the leather of his boot tightly. He heard the shepherd scream, and Holm fighting not far from him. Lowest kicked with his free leg where he felt the wolf; the kick connecting and freeing him. He jumped out of the snow, log held as a club, and launched himself against the wolf.

He hit it hard and the two of the crashed into the snow. Fur and snow filled his vision. Bring down the club again and again, Lowest felt its claws and teeth cut at him. Charcoal broke off, yet even as it did the wolf's attacks grew weaker, then it stopped fighting at all.

Lowest disentangled himself from the beast and found himself slick with blood, much of it not his own. Beneath him, the wolf lay dead. Something whimpered beside him, and Lowest turned to find Holm standing at his side, her fur matted with blood. She was not looking at him, but where the three other wolves had gathered.

They were digging into the flesh of the shepherd, one wolf kept their jaws locked tight on his throat, the snow turning red beneath them. He was already dead. Lowest had not learned his name. There was nothing he could do for him, he was just another dead face that would live behind Lowest's eyelids.

The wall, such as it was, was not far from them, and so with one eye on the gorging wolves, Lowest motioned to Holm and began jogging to the barricade. He left the spear behind in the snow. He discarded the log as he reached the wall. A wagon had been upturned to block the path.

First raising Holm up onto the wagon and then lifting himself up and over, Lowest paused as he straddled the wagon wall and took one last look at the field. The wolves had tested their defenses, and the first wall had failed. The valley was full of the sounds of defeat, wails and shouts. Behind him, the bell was still ringing, its panicked voice only adding to the confusion. The three wolves which had survived the assault contented themselves with their meal. In the ever-brighter light of day, Lowest saw that one had been marked with soot on its muzzle. Unable to stomach the sight of his second battle, Lowest lowered himself off the wagon.

The wagon had seemed to have been added as an afterthought, no one stood on guard or watched the approach. There were gaps between the wagon and the walls of the buildings, large enough that he could have crawled under. Lowest placed his back against the wagon and surrendered himself to his fear.

A second time that he had faced wolves, but the first where he had fought them. Lowest felt hot even as he shivered in the shadow of the wagon. Bile rose to his mouth. At the Mander he had stood in the heart of the battle, but though swords and axes clashed all around him, he never fought with a man for his life. The only man he had killed had been a mile from where he stood, they had not fought each other. He had hunted, but he killed at a distance.

The retching began. Lowest was on all fours, shaking violently, blood and bile mixing in the snow. He was thankful in that moment that he did not have the Bow inside him. To remember that in perfect detail would mean never sleeping easily again. Not that he slept easily. When his stomach had emptied, Lowest curled up into the wagon. Holm lay down next to him and together they lay in silence, letting the noise of the village wash over them.

When he felt he could control himself once more, Lowest rose and began piling snow up in the gaps. It was a quick job, one which left his fingers numb and cleaned the blood from his hands. He packed the gaps with as much snow as he could manage. It would not stop the wolves for long, but it would slow them, enough to give a guard time to raise the alarm. If there was a guard.

He washed his face and arms with snow, and as he rubbed the snow he could find cuts and scrapes which the wolf had given him. They were many, but all thankfully shallow. Next to him, Holm found a fresh patch of snow and began rolling in it, mimicking him. When he was finished washing himself, he checked her wounds. A large hunting dog, Holm had caught her foe off guard and came out with only a single cut, high on her haunch. Relief swept through him. They had come out unscathed. Lowest uttered a quick prayer before rising and entering the village.

The village inside the walls was abuzz with activity. Here and there he saw shepherds gripping their spears, some bloody. Their eyes were wide and when they spoke it came in hushed whispers. Around them, the villagers ran back and forth, following whatever orders had been given to them. Lowest saw Ammardain outside his forge, unscathed and looking over his apprentices. Edred was walking about slowly, a sword at his hip that did not look like it had been drawn.

Lowest walked unnoticed through the crowd. Any of them could have called out and summoned him to do their tasks instead, but in the panic none called out to him. He did not know where he was going, but his feet knew the way even if he didn't. Ever his shadow, Holm walked beside him, licking her teeth clean as she went, not slowed by the cut.

He was standing at the door to the inn when he realized that it was where he wanted to go. There would be a mirror with which he could clean off the remaining blood, which he could

do in relative warmth. His coat was still stained with blood, and should someone ask questions of him, he knew that no answer he could give would free him from doubt.

Thankfully, Masa was not in when he entered, nor was anyone else. Lowest did not stay to enjoy the fire, quickly crossing the main room to the hallway behind. He held the door to the hallway open just long enough for Holm to pass him, then he hurried down the hall for his room. Edred had given it to him out of friendship, but Masa would surely be rid of him at her first chance. It was not prestigious to give a room to Lowest. Perhaps that room would never be rented again, villagers and merchants avoiding it as though it had a curse.

As they entered his room, Lowest gave a start. Sitting beneath the window, stained with blood, Khazad sat cross-legged on the floor. In his hands was the heavy mattock, which he held closely, the blade perfectly clean. He looked up as Lowest came in and a smile lit up his face.

“Out for a stroll?” he asked in good humor.

Lowest returned his smile as he stepped in, before turning away from him and facing the mirror and washbasin. His weary, lopsided reflection was watching him. The strangeness of his missing ear made his reflection hard to look at. Flecks of blood dotted his face, crusted around his dark hair. The face which he had once hoped would be handsome had long since sunken into a thin and sallow face. His eyes seemed over-large for his face, his stare harsh but aimless. The empty faces of the Mander. That’s what he looked like. Taking off his clothes, Lowest began cleaning off the blood. Where he came across one of his own wounds, he cleaned it off, but having nothing to cover them in, he left them.

“It was a good fight,” Khazad said.

“It was a loss,” Lowest muttered. He winced as he looked over his ankle. There was a bruise growing over it, though it was not broken.

“It was a fun loss. Wild beasts make for a good enemy.” Lowest looked at the dwarf, and found that he had closed his eyes, resting for the first time in a day. He was sat underneath the window, which Lowest noticed for the first time was boarded over. It was facing the woods, the thought of wolves watching him as he slept made him tremble. Lowest turned his attention to his clothes, washing them in the already bloodied water.

“How many died?” he asked. He did not want to know the answer, but the Vestige had thought in terms of casualties, and after a year of thinking with it he could not stop himself.

“Not sure. The count is still going on, probably. There is much confusion. The number is not high.” The dwarf spoke it matter-of-factly. Lowest knew him well enough not to think him cold for the way he said it. It was how he was. After the Mander he had mentioned the dwarven dead once before going off to drink. The screams of his own battle echoed in his mind briefly, but not as strongly as the Mander still did. He muttered thanks that he was allowed to forget it. The face of the shepherd floated briefly before his eyes.

The coat looked little cleaner than it had, so Lowest gave it up as a bad job and hung it in the wardrobe. He did the same with his trousers. He sat down on the bed, the numbness in his

fingers lifting. The throbs and aches he felt piled on each other, but they were nothing compared to the exhaustion he felt, a weariness as deep as his bones. It was not the that emptiness which welled up inside him the day before, that tired despair. He did not want to stop caring, but if sleep took him and never let him go, he would not object. As he sat down on the bed, staring at his hands, so recently cleaned of blood, what he prayed for was only rest. Rest in a bed far away from the wolves, and the villagers.

“Khazad?” He called for the dwarf, still looking at his hands. Khazad grunted in response. “Do you think that peace will ever come?”

Khazad grunted again. “What is the question?”

“I was just thinking, the Order has been at war often in these times of peace. The Darkness was destroyed by the victorious Sword Hand, and yet we do not live in the peace that was promised. Did we win against the Darkness when we wage war against others, when thieving and murder are common place throughout the Order. Do you think the peace we were promised will ever come to us?”

Khazad sat in silence. Lowest did not know how the dwarves thought of heresy. They were allies to the Order, having fought along side with the Sword Hand in those desperate battles at the beginning of time. They had their own laws to fight the Darkness. Lowest did not feel his question was heresy, but though the dwarf had never called anything heretical, the line had to be somewhere.

“There will never be peace, old friend.” Khazad answered eventually. “The Shadow of the Mountains was defeated, true, but not destroyed. Always the Shadow will worm into the world. The work of sealing the Shadow will never end, and the wars which are started will have to be fought.”

As he spoke, Lowest felt his exhaustion seize him, and at the end he collapsed in the bed. War, endless war to maintain the Light. It sounded so tiring. After fighting one battle in that war, Lowest had wanted nothing to do with war again. Now stuck inside another, he could only hope to sleep through it all. How was he to fight when he was not able to carry weapons? Why should he fight when the villagers would punish him for the remainder of this year at the least? His father had been Lowest for five years. He had died as Lowest, and had been buried as such.

Lowest lay down on the bed and surrendered himself to his exhaustion. He wished for sleep, but it did not take him. Instead, he watched the ceiling, his mind's eye running between the Mander and the battle he had just fought in the snow. There would never be a song to remember their fight the way there had been at the Mander. The heroes who marched into the low river valley did not cut as glorious a figure. They were broken men, forgotten. The names that were remembered in song elsewhere did not belong to them any longer. Men would not know them if they came across the three heroes. Lowest could not weep for the loss, he was too weary. Khazad was quiet as Lowest rested, and Holm made herself small somewhere in the room. Silence ruled over the room. Silence increasingly ruled over his life. He did not mind; it was as though the world was as exhausted as he was.

Sometime into his rest, a snuffling sound of a wolf came from the window. It was searching, searching for a way into the inn. It had once been a sound that would haunt his nightmares, but now it was the least of the horrors he had known in the last days. He did not raise his head as it padded around. If Khazad had been the one to board up the window then there would be no need to worry. If he hadn't been, then there was no reason to worry long. Holm made no noise, though Lowest was certain that she was watching carefully. After a time, the wolf moved on.

The silence returned over the inn, but it did not last long. Muffled sounds soon came to them, sounds of a large party entering. They pulled Lowest from his thoughts, but he was not grateful for them. It took little imagination to know who it was. The shepherds would come, ready to celebrate their survival and mourn their dead. So long as they were there, Lowest would not leave his room.

But as so often happened these days, others had plans for him. The noise grew louder, until with a great crash, the door to his room burst open. Khazad jumped to his feet, mattock raised. Lowest only turned his head to see who had come to torture him now. Following his lead, Holm did not jump up or bark.

The intruder was Kesh, the bent old man with a twisted face. Every gnarled feature of that face had been burned into his memory during his time with the Bow, and though the face he saw now was like a mask, flat and undetailed, he could see the same small malice in his eyes. He was wet, his hair slick from sweat. There was blood on his face, but it did not seem to be his own. He was smiling, which only served to twist his face more.

"So," the old man said. "While we were fighting for our lives, Lowest was taking a lazy day. Get out of the bed, wolf-caller, Highest has work for you. Oh, and I will be taking this." He picked up the gift-box and tucked it under his arm.

Gingerly, Lowest left the bed. Khazad gave him a look, but he waved him off. As soon as when he was on his feet he wished for nothing so much as the comfort of his bed. The soft touch of the bed let go of him as a lover's last caress. He immediately felt cold and naked, though he was still wearing his trousers. Throwing on a shirt, and feeling like he was walking to the gallows, he followed Kesh out of the room and up the hall. The back of the inn was dark, lit only by lanterns. There were no windows in the hall, which spared them from the sight of wolves gorging themselves on the dead. Khazad and Holm followed after him, both subdued.

The previous two days had been full of humiliations, and Lowest thought ruefully about how he thought the wolves would be the worst of it today. Every day it was worse, every day full of fresh pains. His father had accepted his place on the very first day he had fallen, and suffered the beatings and shame stoically. Lowest had not, not so far. He had tried to fight his fall, tried to stand proudly through all the degradations.

Kesh opened the door to the main room, and Lowest followed after without breaking his pace. The sight which greeted him was unlike anything he had known. Highest sat beside the fire in Edred's favorite seat, but she had turned it so that it faced the inn and not the fire. At her feet,

bloodied and weeping, was Vos. He lay curled, his clothes torn from his body. About Highest were her favorites, their faces all bearing a savage pride. She sat like the cruel kings in the stories, a smile on her lips.

“Welcome, Lowest. You have come just in time to see an error corrected.” Her voice was oily, soaked in triumph. Lowest looked at her favorites. Thaan had wounds and his clothes were soaked from the snow. Highest might have been sitting by the fire for hours for all it looked like she had been outside.

When she finished, Lowest knelt down and touched his head to the floor in the deepest sign of respect. “What error was made will now be corrected in your sight.”

The flattery seemed to please her, and though Lowest could not see her face from his position, he could hear the joy in her voice. “Yes, all things will be set to their proper course under my sight. Does something bother you, dwarf?”

Lowest heard Khazad shuffle. “Many things do, Distinguished One.” He spoke with the same calmness he had in the thick of the Mander.

“My name is Highest, dwarf. That name deserves respect. I fight the Darkness and guide the Order. Address me properly.”

“Distinguished One is the proper name which the sages command be said. Do not forget that the Dwarves fought beside the Sword Hand against the Shadow, and have many rituals for fighting that evil, rituals which cannot be broken. The great Distinguished One did not refuse the title.” Out of the corner of his eye, Lowest could see the dwarf standing at his side.

Highest did not pursue the line of inquiry, instead turning to her prey. “The great Distinguished One. I’m sure she would like that. But that is why we are here. A man comes into town hours before the wolves and offers gifts to those blighted in the eyes of the Light. So many were willing to believe his tale, that gifts could be given to Lowest and a man who has vanished. I know all things good and all things evil, and this was an evil.”

“I’ve told you, witch,” Vos spat, “the gifts come from the High Highest. If you doubt me, send a runner to Bredar.” Lowest lifted his head, shocked to hear an insult to a Highest. He had known men to whisper disagreements, his father had been Lowered for repeating a rumor, but never had he heard of someone insulting one out loud. Doubt came to him, stealing over him as a cold which left him shivering on the floor.

Highest kept her smile, watching the merchant with hungry eyes. “And so the Darkness reveals itself. You have all heard him. This trial is over. Throw him in the stockade and feed him once a day. When we chase off the wolves, we will have him flayed. Such is the proper punishment for the champions of the Darkness.”

Thaan lifted the merchant from the ground and carried him out. Vos shouted, ranted, laughed, and then the door closed and he was lost. Lowest watched Kesh fumble the gift under his arm as he spoke to the shepherd Sareth. Highest watched the man be dragged out to his fate with a look of supreme confidence. Lowest continued to shake.

“How do you feel about my justice, dwarf?”

“Saddened,” he answered.

Highest frowned, but did not pursue the issue. She turned from the challenging prey to the one laying prostrate on the floor. Lowest quickly lowered his head back down and stared at the floor. “Do not be afraid Lowest. You were always susceptible to the wiles of the Darkness, why else do you think that you have fallen so far. I do not doubt that you have strayed so far from the proper path”

Hate surged through Lowest as he touched his head to the floor, but to his surprise the hate he felt was not aimed at Highest but at himself. He had led himself to believe that Vos came with gifts, gifts that absolved him. There could be no absolution, he had decided that when he stood his ground at the Rising. When walking down a road after a forking path, it does no good to complain about the chosen road. It can only be walked until it ends.

“You must be punished, of course.” The words were like ice in his veins. He felt his missing ear throbbing, even though it had been removed. Highest saw him shivering. “No, I will not take another piece of your body. I am going to take the entire thing. You see, because of your failures, the valley is without one of its protectors. I have named Lang the next holder of the Vestige, and it shall be your duty to take him to Howl’s Tomb, past the wolves.”

“But Highest, I am not able to carry a weapon. How am I to get him to the tomb?” Lowest touched his head to the ground in respect.

“Hold a weapon? You are Lowest, that would be a crime. I do not intend for you to defend Lang, I want you to distract them.” An icy hand grabbed Lowest and did not let go. He was to be bait, something to feed the wolves as Lang ran to don the Vestige that had been his. The unknown shepherd’s bloodied face swam before his eyes. “Be at the ruins of my home in ten minutes.”

She rose and walked away, her favorites forming a procession after her. They left the inn empty behind them, save for Lowest and Khazad. Still shaking from the cold which would not let go of him, Lowest stood up. His eyes fell on the bloody spot where Vos had lain a moment before.

“Such terrible things this day had.” Khazad stood next to him, his eyes fixed on the same spot.

“I can’t believe Vos was a servant of the Darkness.” The pride he had held the day before evaporated. His mouth was dry.

“There are many things which are hard to understand. What good will come from running into the maw of a wolf is hard to see. But it will not be done alone.” Holm barked as Khazad finished speaking, her tail thumping on the floor.

“Khazad, there is no reason to be eaten alongside me. Let me pay my price.”

The dwarf shook his head, woven beard swaying back and forth. “The price is unfairly set. Besides, were it the proper punishment it would be wrong to watch it carried out. Friends walk into the gallows together.” Without another word, Khazad walked for the door. He paused as he opened it, looking out into the village in turmoil. Lowest thought for a moment that he was going to speak, but then he strode out and let the door slam behind him.