

Chapter 9: The Wolf King

Lowest reached the ruins of Highest's mansion, the charred ribs hanging in the air above him. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, strong enough to hide the scent of blood. Khazad was waiting for him, mattock in hand. Holm had followed after Lowest, and lay down beside the ruins. There was no one else there, and the site seemed to be avoided as the villagers went about their tasks. They stood in silence, watching the chaotic scene unfold, waiting for Highest to approach. His coat mostly dry but still stained by blood, and his trousers were not in a better state.

The village was still in a frenzy, men, women, and children scurrying around. Here and there men stood on the roof tops, bows in hand, watching the clearing around the village. As Lowest crossed the bridge, one of them gave a shout and loosed an arrow. He did not give a cheer, nor did his fellows. Lowest knew the shot had erred. The men of the village knew hunting, it was how they ate in the winter, but not every arrow hits its target.

The faces were all nervous and no songs were sung. Men were gathered outside of Thaan's home, bloody and shaken. They were the ones with the misfortune to have been manning the dike when the wolves attacked. Bloodied, but most were still on their feet. Elsewhere, villagers tried to serve the many orders given to them. There was no order which Lowest could see, and had the Bow still been inside of him it would be screaming for order. He could only wonder what Edred was feeling.

At the edge of the enclosed village gathered a small crowd, mostly children who had managed to finish their work. They seemed eager, savagely so. Lowest knew why, and turned away.

Highest approached, followed only by Lang. She was dressed in a heavy coat, purple ribbons streaming in the wind. There was gold inlaid with gemstones. It was the ceremonial robe of the Highest which she wore on every Rising. As boys, Edred had once told him he dreamed of becoming Highest for the robe alone. Lowest had taken that dream and tried it on, but had discarded it long before he wore the Vestige. A robe would not feed him. Besides, in Bredar there had been pieces far more beautiful worn by people other than the High Highest. Lang wore clothes nicer than any other in the valley, but that was only because it was new. On his shoulder was a bow, made from dark yew. Lowest knew it at once, it was the bow from Vos' box.

"Ah, good. You will not have to be taught punctuality." Highest pulled up beside him and looked over the ruins of her home. Lang stopped at her side and looked at her expectantly. "Does the dwarf plan to come with you?"

"He does, Highest." Lowest fell to his knees and touched his head to the snow. "And he will not be turned from his course. Dwarves are a stubborn people."

It did not displease Highest. On the contrary, her voice brightened noticeably. "What a noble people, who would fight beside us in our hour of need; but I need assurance from him. Will you give yourself to see that Lang reaches the Tomb of Howl?"

“The Tomb shall be reached. Have no doubts.”

Highest turned toward Lowest, a smile on her lips. Behind her a wail was lifted in the village. “And you, Lowest, do I have your word that you will take Lang to the Tomb that he might wear the Bow and deliver the village?”

Lowest touched his head to the snow. “Yes Highest.” What else was there to say?

“Excellent, then it is best to be off, while the wolves are still full.” She left them without another word, walking back into the crowd and toward the inn.

With his great aunt gone, the confident sneer which Lang wore began to slide. He was some eight years younger than Lowest, and despite his boasting the evening before, had barely any muscle on his frame. He looked like the levy which had been called up to fight at the Mander. Khazad frowned at him, and that was enough to ruin his confidence. The boy, Lowest could only see him as a boy even though he was a man by right, stood waiting for them.

Khazad continued to stare, unafraid of what would happen if they did not get moving. Lowest knew the look. The dwarf was angry. In their year together, Lowest had known rarely seen it, but each time it had been something to see. Knowing that delay meant punishment, Lowest began moving and the others followed.

They left the charred ruin behind and into the small square where the villagers ran. The snow was churned and dirtied with the dirt of many feet and blood. The space that Ammardain and Edred had managed to wall off was not large, a short wall built between the walls of the nearest homes. Four hundred people were too many for the space, sharing the space with the flocks of sheep which they had not made it to the lowlands in time this year. Far too many mouths.

To reach Howl’s Tomb, they needed to reach the path which went south into one of the great arms of the mountain, into the dell where Howl himself had died. This meant walking through most of town. The wounded were scattered through the village, most with light injuries. The wolves had taken the ones who had not gotten away quickly.

“Isk!” a voice cried out. Lowest froze in his steps and the others with him. He turned, and saw Min running through the crowd. She was dressed for the cold, sweat on her brow from running about. “Auntie asked me to check on you, but you were not at the inn. Are you alright?” She came to a stop beside Holm and gave her scratches as she looked up to him. Holm accepted them with her tongue lolling.

The kindness of the act pierced through him like a knife, or a tooth. Lowest fought the tears that formed in his eyes. Carefully, he knelt to the ground and touched his forehead to the snow. “You must call me Lowest, higher, otherwise you will fall in the Rising.”

A snowball hit him in the side of the face, the coldness less stinging than the surprise. The shock of it made him raise his head. Min was standing over him, a smile on her face. “Auntie said to throw a snowball at you if you were being stubborn. I was really hoping you

would be.” She laughed, which sounded strange in the subdued town. Behind him, Khazad was laughing too.

The snow melted against his skin, a heat burning from within. Min was acting on Gillie’s orders, and without a cruelty that would delight in throwing the snowball. Even still, she would know that Lowest was often pelted with snowballs and rocks. His father had been pelted so often that Lowest began to dread the approaching winter. The joke only served to remind him of his place.

“I am well,” he said, touching his head to the ground. “But Highest has given me a task and I must do it as quickly as possible.”

“Oh yes,” Min said, packing a second snowball. “I’m supposed to bring arrows to Sareth as soon as I can, but Auntie said this had to come first.” She dropped the snowball and placed a hand on Lowest’s shoulder. “She says to keep smiling, even when you feel like you can’t. She’s wise.”

Without further word she turned and ran off, leaving the three of them wordless in the snow. The crowd did not seem to notice them, walking around as they went about their tasks. Throughout the village, the shouts and screams seemed to be dying out as the fear of the moment was replaced with a heavy blanket of panic. Work kept them from thinking about the wolves, but there was no such relief for him. The wolves were his work.

“The child is right,” Khazad said, watching the crowd.

“Perhaps, but there is not much time left for us to smile in. Wolves eat a man smile or not.”

“All the more reason to do it.”

“Look are we going or not.” Lang had stepped up, his face screwed up in a nervous frown. Lowest knew he would be more than happy to call it a day, so long as he could blame the failure on someone else.

“Going,” Khazad said gruffly. He slung the mattock over a shoulder and lifted Lowest out of the snow, brushing it off as Lowest stood.

Once again Lowest lead the way through town. The rooftops were patrolled by sentries, armed with bows and spears. The wall was formed by the long home of the Algry’s, where three generations of cousins lived. About forty feet from the front door were the three stockades which had always stood but were seldom filled. Being placed in the stocks was a shame that never went away. Being placed in them was a guarantee to fall far, almost a certainty of becoming Lowest for a year. They had not held anyone for some years. Vos was there, bloodied and broken, his hair a tangled mat. As he passed, Vos’ eyes locked on Lowest.

“Isk...Isk...you must let me out, let me out. It was all true. I was sent from the High Highest, I never lied.” He shouted over and over as Lowest looked for a way over the wall. The

crowd stopped as Vos shouted, watching him rave. Eyes soon fell on Lowest, wondering what he would do. Replying to him would have guaranteed that he would join him in the stocks.

Lowest ignored the man, though he had been a rare kindness in the dark days he had had since the Rising. He did not raise his head, and fixed his eyes on the wall. The section here was made of three tables wedged between the Algry home and the stable belonging to one of Kesh's cousins. It was held in place with nails, though more attention seemed to have been given this segment of the wall as down low there was no gap for the wolves to get through. Three guards huddled on the Algry roof to watch the approach.

Vos' shouts still in his ear, Lowest scrambled over the barricade. Behind him there were shouts and as he reached the top one of the guards came over to him. By the time the guard, a shepherd Lowest recognized from the night before, reached the wall, Lowest was already falling to the other side.

Many voices joined the shouting and the shepherd unslung his bow, the other guards running along the roof. Lowest could hear Khazad shouting, but couldn't make out the words. An arrow was notched into the bow. Maybe they would shoot Lowest and spare him the trouble of having to face the wolves.

The shepherd did not draw his bow, leaving the arrow notched on the string. Whatever was being said on the other side of the wall was swaying them, or maybe they just didn't want to waste an arrow on Lowest. The shouting began to die down.

As it did, Lowest heard the wooden wall groan as someone jumped on it. After a minute, the red hair of Khazad peeked over the wall, and the dwarf pulled himself over the wall, falling in a great puff of snow. A new groaning meant that Lang was climbing. As he did, Holm began to bark, he had forgotten her on the other side.

Since returning to the valley, she had been at his side at all times, except for the hunt which had seen him gored. He suddenly felt naked. The wolves were out there, waiting for him, and he was supposed to walk into their forest to distract them from Lang. Their golden eyes would be on him now, and there was comfort in having Holm with him, watching his back. Plus, he was banned from holding weapons, but there was no such prohibition on Holm.

But the comfort that Holm brought was outweighed by Highest's command. He was to be bait, and though Khazad knew the task and what he was being told, there was no way for Lowest to communicate that to Holm. Even if he could, he would not bring her, he realized. He did not want to see her die, certainly not for his sake.

Lowest approached the wall, stepping over Khazad as he caught his breath in the snow. He ignored the sounds of Lang struggling with the wall and spoke softly into the wall. "Holm, I want you to stay and watch over Edred. This is something I cannot take you on. I am sorry."

On the other side of the barricade Holm whimpered and there was a great deal of scratching. Lowest forced himself to turn away. Stepping back, he lifted Khazad to his feet and waited for Lang to summit the barricade. Instead, there was a shout, and a great clattering of

claws as Holm's head and most of her body appeared above the wall. She stalled just as she reached the top and hung over the wall, her eyes fixed on Lowest. There was sadness in them.

"Holm, go to Edred and watch him until I return," Lowest said sternly. She whined, but could not get over the wall, and so with a last look, she turned from him and jumped, vanishing from view.

Lowest turned to Khazad, expecting to find him watching the scene with a wry smile. Instead, he found that the dwarf was not looking back into town at all, but was watching the forest, mattock held tightly in his hands. Though the tree line held no wolves, the clearing was full of signs of their presence. The snow was churned and bloodied, tattered clothes and a discarded spear lay in between the village and the path to the tomb. The wind seemed to have a bite to it on this side of the wall.

Casually, Khazad pointed to a bloodied patch which lay forty yards from where they stood. "Saw that this morning. A shepherd about thirty. Wolves bit the throat to stop the screaming."

"I don't even know the name of the boy I watched die this morning," Lowest answered. "He was standing guard alone so I thought I would keep him company. Knew him for less than five minutes."

Khazad grunted and they stood watching the woods for a moment, each thinking about the morning's violence as they waited for Lang. The boy's face was already blurring in his memory. A small mercy. "Are the golden eyes watching right now?"

"I can't see them, but I'm sure they are. They'd be foolish not to."

There was a groan behind them and the sound of something large hitting the snow. Lowest turned around to see Lang rolling over in the snow. Lowest did not go to his aid. Lang brushed himself off, red in the face, and huffed over to them. The embarrassment in his eye was reminiscent of his great-aunt.

"Why did neither of you come to assist me over the wall? I had to wait for the shepherds to push me over."

His haughty rage earned him only a raised eyebrow from Khazad, and so it fell to Lowest to answer him. "Forgive me higher, we had thought that you would vault the barricade with the same ease as us. We thought that the new wearer of the Bow would be lithier. It shall not happen again."

Even as he spoke he heard the tone of his voice and knew that if he survived to return to town, he had earned a thrashing. He might be thrashed here, if Lang was an idiot. Reminding himself to act more humbly as befitted Lowest, he nodded his head sharply, not giving the full bend for fear of wolves.

Lang's brow furrowed as Lowest spoke, and he could see the boy doing calculations in his mind. He would no doubt gather Meles and humiliate Lowest later, but if he spoke to loudly

about why then he would shame himself before the entire village. Those higher in the Light were supposed to be exemplars, and yet the second highest of the village struggled to get over a fence. Instead he turned from them, frown still on his face, and set off for the path. Khazad gave a suffering look before trudging after him, Lowest bringing up the rear.

The forest loomed over them, attaining a frightful air which they had not had for Lowest since he had been a boy. The wolves were waiting there, somewhere, and their food was walking toward them with a bow and a mattock. It shouldn't be too difficult for them.

At the edge of the forest, where the path to Howl's Tomb began, Lang's newfound courage failed him and he stopped dead in his tracks. He unslung the bow and notched an arrow, before ordering Lowest to go first.

Feeling secure that Khazad was behind him, at least, Lowest began walking down the path. The forest looked the same as it had once the snow had begun to fall, though a few branches which could no longer support the weight now littered the ground. He could see no signs of the wolves save for footprints in the snow, and there were so many of these that tracking them all was useless. There were few on the path itself, and then only on the edges. Probably didn't want to walk where they could easily be spotted, Lowest told himself as he set off.

As far as he could see the path was empty, so Lowest instead focused on the forest. If the wolves were watching, they would be there. It was a mile to the tomb, the best Lowest could hope for was that their passing was watched with disinterest.

He set a quick pace, cutting through virgin snow at a clip which forced Khazad to jog. Lang could keep up well enough, though he was slowed by looked into the forest, not trusting his guide.

They were halfway to the tomb when Lowest became aware of eyes on him. He paused and scanned the forest, finding golden eyes watching them. They were resting in a bush not far from the path. The eyes and snout was all he saw, sticking out of the bush. There was blood on that snout. Lowest shivered.

"Wolf," he said, pointing out the beast. At once there was the twang of a bowstring as Lang loosed.

The arrow flew true, at least until it reached the bush, where it was deflected by a branch and sent into the woods. The wolf, rose, barked once, and then slunk off into the trees, beyond Lowest's vision. Lang sent a second arrow off into the trees, but it was wasted among the trees.

"Gone to warn the pack," Khazad spoke heavily. Lowest nodded. They had been content to watch unseen before, but that wolf was going to raise the alarm. Sure enough, before they had gone more than thirty yards, a solitary howl was raised in the forest beyond. It was swiftly answered.

"Run," Lowest and Khazad said together. They set off running without checking to see if the others were following. Something inside of him said that if they could just make it to the tomb they would be safe, though what was giving him the idea he could not say.

They hurried through the snow, the howls coming nearer and nearer. Though shorter than him, Khazad was soon running level with him, more powerfully built than he was. Together they pushed through the snow, knee deep for Lowest but nearly at Khazad's waist. He could feel the hot breath of the wolves on him, see their teeth in his mind's eye. If the wolves came down on them, it would fall to him to face them so that Lang could reach the tomb. His heart was pounding, counting out the remaining beats.

Highest had commanded him to lay down his life so that Lang would succeed, but now that the wolves were coming, he was unsure if he would be able to. The veterans at the Mander had told him that they were unafraid of death, puffing out their chests as they said it. Lowest had known better, though. His eyes could see the lie as they said it, and when he walked into the soft valley where so many were destined to die, he knew that everyone was afraid. He had been, and he was now. The feeling of wanting to run away and off into the world beyond, which he had felt on the day of the Raising, returned, though how he was going to get anywhere was beyond him.

Suddenly he became aware of a heavy panting. It wasn't the steady breathing of Khazad, nor the distant sound of Lang. This was new, fresh, eager. Lowest looked over his shoulder and found himself tailed by a long dark shadow. The first of the wolves had found them. Lowest looked back to Lang. He wasn't as far back as Lowest had thought, some twenty feet back, but he was slowing, the bow held tight in his hands.

"Khazad, hold up." The dwarf stopped in his tracks as Lowest spun around and ran to Lang. Lang's face, wracked with fear, brightened as he saw Lowest returning. As Lowest reached him, he opened his mouth to speak, but Lowest didn't give him the chance. He grabbed Lang roughly under the arms and lifted him onto his back. Lowest would not have been able to lift him before gaining the Vestige, but now after losing it seemed trivial.

He turned around, Lang over his shoulders, and saw the black wolves rushing at Khazad, who stood ready with his heavy mattock. Before Lowest could shout, the beast lunged. A loud crack echoed through the forest as Khazad brought the mattock down and crushed the beast's skull. It fell limply at his side, dark blood staining the snow.

Lowest reached the dwarf moments later, but before he could congratulate him, three more wolves came charging in, circling. Lang writhed and rolled himself off Lowest's shoulders, landing heavily in the snow, his arrows scattering out of the quiver. Three wolves had formed a circle around them, and the longer they waited the worse things would become for them.

"Go." He turned to Khazad and the rising Lang. "Go. They will stay and eat the one that remains." It was a kind of peace, one which he had never known in himself, that managed to calm the terror. He could face them. Howl had, all those years ago. He did not want to die, that old terror was still burning in him, but he could look past it for once. If the difference was dying to wolves now or later, it was of no consequence.

Khazad looked at him, torn, and was about to say something when Lang began running toward the tomb. Lowest saw a choice being made in those small, beetle black eyes. Lang was ten feet away already. If he stayed, then it would be Lang who separated from the herd and

become prey. Khazad was searching for something in his eyes, though what he did not know. The seconds stretched, every moment giving the wolves a chance to pounce. Then Khazad nodded to him and hurried off through the snow.

Lowest turned to face the wolves, feeling peace for the first time in long months. Now that he was facing his death, there was no doubt in his mind that it was the right thing to do. The Light often extorted sacrifice for others, Highest had commanded him to give himself to distract the wolves, but all of that to one side, Lowest felt a goodness in what he was doing. When all the artifice of living in such a burdened world fell away, and all the rules of the Light with it, he found that there was a simple truth to life, and he did not mind living the last moments given to him under it.

As he looked at the three wolves surrounding him, he found that they were not nearly as frightening as he had thought. Their eyes were golden and they were much larger than any dog he had ever seen, though Holm made up for it with a reserved ferocity. They were beasts, mindless, and whatever had brought them to the valley would see them gone once they had had their fill. He could see blood on their muzzles, but he had seen blood before, rivers of the stuff. He had seen it on the blade of his dearest friend. There would be more before this day was done.

The important thing was that the three wolves kept on him, and brought all the coming reinforcements to him. He could see the wolves watching the retreating backs of Khazad and Lang, thinking. So Lowest shuddered and fell to the ground, resting on the still warm body of the downed wolf. Predators always went to the weak, that he had learned quickly in these hills. He had learned how to identify the weakest doe in the herd. Falling to the ground, he clutched his leg and made himself look helpless, going so far as to raise his head and show them his neck.

They stopped looking down the trail and fixed their hungry eyes on him. The one in front of him, a grey wolf with blood stained down its front, took an eager step towards him. Maybe, if they lowered their guard enough, he could strike the first one to come too close. The placid lake of peace which had descended on him was disturbed as though by a large stone, waves rippling out. He was not quite ready to go. Besides, every moment counted, Land and Khazad still had about half a mile to run.

Lowest did not know how to fight with just his fists, though he had seen men training in the camps. The Bow certainly would know how to face them, unarmed though he was. Instead, all he had was what ferocity lived in him. It would have to do.

Lowest turned his head to see the others. Following the lead of the grey wolf, the other two had taken their first steps toward him, each step careful. The circle began to close as the wolves stepped in. Lowest could not see anyway he could escape, even if he was still standing, but he was grateful that they were taking their time to finish him, though he supposed that perhaps they were not quite as hungry as they had been beforehand.

The wolves closed the circle even tighter. The grey stood at his foot, its eyes never leaving Lowest's. Cautiously, it licked his boot. Lowest whimpered, acting the part. He was calm. It was easy to be. There was nothing left for him to do except maybe take one of them with

him. He could hear the other two come up behind him. Their breath felt warm on his skin. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

As he waited for the killing blow, the wolves turned and raised their heads as one. Their tails dropped as they watched the forest nervously. Fear entered Lowest, as for the first time he did not understand what was happening to him. The wolves were supposed to eat him, but there he was, uneaten.

Lowest craned his neck to look behind him, hoping to see what had given the wolves pause. The treetops shivered and the snow fell from the leave with a mighty crash. The grey wolf whimpered. The fear grew to full-blown panic. Lowest brought his legs in close, bracing them beneath him, ready to run. He would climb a tree and wait out the wolves. Sweat trickling down his brow, he waited for his moment.

The trees shivered again and the grey wolf lay down on all fours, Lowest broke for the trees. He got all of three steps before falling hard in the snow, On the second step he had looked over his shoulder at whatever it was that was that could cow the wolves, and the sight of it sent him stumbling into the snow.

It was the Tyrant, all but forgotten these last two days. It could be nothing else. Ten feet tall at the haunch, standing just off the trail under the shade of the trees, was the largest wolf Lowest had ever seen. This was truly the stuff of his nightmares. Soft grey that blended into the forest, the wolf watched him through eyes red and bright as blood, its pupil alone large as his head. All Lowest could see in that eye was hate.

Blood was on its maw, and though Lowest could tell that it had eaten more than the others, it was so large that it looked like scurvy on the lips. The Tyrant snarled, revealing its teeth, the canines long and sharp as swords. Its claws could run through him from head to hip and still leave a foot unbloodied. Something inside him knew that this was no dumb beast, no animal. He could see the intelligence in its eyes, the thinking monster of the Darkness.

The old stories had told of battle against the wolves, and this beast had walked from the War for the Light and into his waking nightmare. There was nothing he could do, not even shiver. There was no strength in his body, no anymore. All he could do was lay in the snow and wait for the Darkness to consume him. It was not the peace which he had known, giving his life for the Light. He was a candle, small and flickering, as the cold maw of the Darkness reached out and snapped shut.

With a grace unnatural to its size, it paced the tree line until it drew level with him. Walking a careful circle around the trees, it lay down and watched him with those hateful eyes. It was almost curious wondering what such a small man was doing all alone in the woods. They flickered toward the dead dark wolf and then back to him, the question obvious. But Lowest couldn't answer it, he couldn't even remember how to speak. Breathing seemed like something long forgotten. There was no running from this monster, by the time that Lowest turned around it would be on him.

But instead of rushing at him it merely watched, cocking its head occasionally, its breathing calm. Its nostrils were so large that Lowest could crawl into them, and its breathing was so powerful that it made snow swirl. The breath was like some enormous bellows as though Ammardain's entire workshop was sitting opposite him. Through it all, Lowest dared not move, soaking in the snow.

His thoughts came to him few and far between, his mind blank, waiting for the Tyrant to move. The moments stretched on. The three wolves kept in place, submissive, not meeting the eyes of the Tyrant. Lowest could not look away, though he wished he could close his eyes. Now he understood the deer which had inhabited the forest. Those great hungry eyes were still trying to understand why he was there, burning their way into his memory. So long as he lived, Lowest was going to see those red eyes, clearer than the dead at the Mander.

The great wolf suddenly lifted its head, sniffing the air in violent puffs that made the boughs shake loose from the snow. It made Lowest shiver, which was just about the only thing he had done since the great beast appeared. The life wavered through him; it was not over yet.

Gingerly, still testing the air, the Tyrant stood up, looking down the path towards where Khazad and Lang had run. Sweat beaded on his brow. How long had it been since they set off? He looked to the sky but could not tell because of the clouds. Five minutes would not be enough, but ten might be. The Tyrant looked back at Lowest, a look of comprehension in those large eyes.

It stood and turned toward the tomb, a growl deep in its chest rumbling the earth. It set off through the forest with that same easy grace, the other wolves springing up and following dutifully. As it turned, Lowest felt the pressure which had held him in place vanish, and he was in control of himself again. In the wake of that fear came a funny feeling, one which might have been called bravery, or perhaps foolishness. Having failed to get eaten by the wolves and distract them long enough, a desperation filled him.

He felt hot. Running, he found a large branch which had fallen and he broke off a stick. It was the second time that day that he faced down the wolves with only a piece of wood, but this time it was not a weapon. He hurled the stick at the Tyrant, and though it fell far short it clattered against the trees, the only sound in the forest. "Come take me you coward," he shouted after it.

The Tyrant looked over its shoulder, locking eyes with him, turned away, and disappeared about the trees. Lowest was alone in the forest.

Behind him was the path back to town, unguarded, open. He could turn and run, get help, or hid away. But then he had been commanded to give his life before the others, coming back without them could only have one end. It was not a pleasant thought. So he took a step into the forest, knowing that he was not doing to out of bravery. Lowest walked toward the tomb, knowing he was following after them only because he had to, because death and humiliation waited behind him. Lowest walked into the forest knowing that he was a coward.

He ran with what speed he could muster, which wasn't much in the snow. The body he had been left with was able to do things it could not before. Lowest gave thanks to the Light as

he ran on, its lingering touch carrying him on. He followed the path unable to see where the wolves had gone. The tracks left the path quickly, and Lowest was left running in the footsteps which Lang and Khazad had left in the snow minutes before. The forest was silent except for his panting and the crunch of snow under his feet. Even in winter, there should be the fluttering of crows or ravens, or the mournful cry of the elk, but there was nothing but him.

The forest loomed over him as he ran, boughs laden heavy with snow bending down toward him like fingers of a thousand hands, reaching for him, to take him and seal him away in the land which knows no sound. His heart was pounding in his ears, suddenly remembering its duty once the terror of the Tyrant had been lifted. Breath came to him slowly and haltingly.

He didn't know how long it took him to run the remaining distance to the clearing, reaching it at the end of his strength. Clutching at his side, Lowest stumbled into the clearing. He had expected to see wolves surrounding Khazad and Lang, or circling the clearing, but he found neither. Instead, he saw Khazad standing at the bottom step of the dais and Lang touching the great glowing ruby. At the sound of his coming, Khazad turned, mattock raised.

It fell from his hands when he saw Lowest. Carried on by his stumbling legs, Lowest continued into the clearing, coming to a stop at Khazad's side, where he collapsed onto the Lowest step. His throat was burning and his lungs felt like fire. He lost control of his hands as they began to convulse from the panic.

"How?" Khazad asked. Lowest looked up at him and found tracks of tears under his eyes.

Lowest did not answer immediately, his body was not answering to him. So he lay there, Khazad watching him intently and Lang trying to absorb the Vestige, having not noticed Lowest's arrival. Time rolled on until Lowest could control his breathing, his hands clenched into fists to stop their shaking.

"I don't know," Lowest answered when he could control himself. "The wolves surrounded me as you left. But as they closed in on me, it came."

Khazad gave a question look.

"I saw it, Khazad. I saw the Tyrant which hunted the hills clean. It was a wolf, ten feet high with eyes like blood. It watched me, curious, and it stopped the wolves from taking me. It wanted to know why I was there."

Khazad lifted up the mattock as Lowest spoke, his skin pale and worry in his eyes. "A Kwizdartch..." he said, mumbling to himself.

"A what?" Lowest asked. Behind them, Lang mumbled something, but Lowest paid him no mind.

"A direwolf, a true wolf. There are legends of such beasts." A cold wind came from the forest, shaking snow from the tree tops.

"A direwolf..." It felt like there were eyes on them, but Lowest could not see them.

He had never heard of a direwolf before, all the old stories just called them wolves, but if anything deserved that evil name, it was the beast that presented itself to him. Those eyes knew, and they hated. Lowest had often imagined what the War of the Light had been like, at least before he had gone to the Mander. He could picture them before the armies of the Darkness, those great red eyes moving unheard through the night, eating all they could as the cancerous host followed after. This valley had known them at one time, as the Darkness poured into Howl's trap. His clothes did not feel warm.

"Where is the beast?" Khazad asked.

Lowest sat upright and scanned the forest. The forest seemed empty, though he knew they were out there. If he still had the Vestige he was certain he could see them. Though, he had had the Bow when he first saw the Tyrant's eye. The rest of the beast had been hidden from him, though how he could not understand.

He turned and looked up the tomb to Lang. The boy was still prodding the ruby trying to uncover its secrets. Lowest frowned. When he had received the Vestige, Highest had been there, muttering something that he had not understood. She had been there too when he had been stripped, though he had been in so much pain that he hardly noticed if she said anything or not.

Highest had always carried herself as one with great understanding, and when he had been a boy he had certainly believed that she held all the answers. If there was something which was placed upon the Highest when they assumed their place, something like a Vestige, Lowest did not know of it. He doubted that anyone knew of it, save the Highests, and they would not speak of it because it would strip them of their mystery.

"I don't know. I don't know what it is or why its here, I don't know how to fight a beast that size. I know that its keeping an eye on us right now. There is something here that it wants, or maybe fears. Nothing makes much sense to me anymore. I keep waiting for the lingering hand of death to finally swoop down and take me. I can feel it hovering over me, and the wait as taken all the terror from death."

"Death is easy and life is hard," Khazad growled. He was watching the forest around them with a mistrustful eye.

Lowest sighed. It was the truth, and not much more.

The clearing was quiet and calm, a mournful wind blowing through. It was the calm of a waiting knife, but the knife was not yet falling. Lowest took the time to rest as Khazad watched over them and Lang muttered uselessly behind them. Tired, though there was a lingering strength in him, Lowest watched the sky and prayed for a glimpse of the sun, but it was not forthcoming. If the War for the Light was anything like this gloom, it would be a misery he could not live through. How could a man fight for the Light when it was hidden behind the clouds, and all he could see for himself was the dark. Gillie would not be so down over the clouds. No, she would carry on her duty with a smile.

Raising himself up, he looked away from the sky and scanned the forest. Again he saw nothing. The forest stared back at him. Rising, he clasped a hand on Khazad's shoulder. "When it comes, I think Edred is the only one who can take it. He has to know."

The forest shivered.

"What about the other?" Khazad asked.

"I don't know. I wish I could ask him. Nobody was meant to be alone. What Highest did to him is enough to drive a man mad. I think he burned down her home, and I fear that the Darkness would claim him as his own, though he has Howl inside him still." He frowned as he watched the quivering forest. "I don't know what is going to come."

Behind them, Lang let out a scream. Together, Lowest and Khazad whorled around to aid him. The boy was on the dais just below the tomb, laying in the snow which still held Lowest's blood. One hand was touching the great ruby which housed the Vestige. It was only after turning that Lowest realized the shout had not been one of pain, but pleasure. The ruby was dim but not yet dun, and Lang's cries grew increasingly pleasurable, bordering on ecstasy. A stab of jealousy ran through Lowest as he remembered the feeling of the Bow coursing through him. It was a long distant memory now, replaced by a year's worth of pains.

There was a distant sound of thunder, a crash deep inside the forest and Lowest turned away from Lang. The trees were swaying dangerously above him on the mountain's arm, and Lowest got the feeling that something large was moving towards them. Thunder on the mountainside.

Khazad noticed too, watching the trees shake and shiver as the noise grew louder and louder. The rumble joined the crashing and soon a large swath of the forest began to vanish behind the tree line. As the woods above them came crashing down, Lowest became aware of another note. The wolves were howling.

Fearing whatever was coming down the mountain and an attack from the wolves, Lowest looked back at Lang. The ruby still had some color in it, and the boy was still shaking in pleasure which could drown all sorrows. To remove him now would have consequences which could not be anticipated. It might break the bestowing, or leave him with only half the Vestige inside him.

Lowest turned back to Khazad. "Guard us against whatever comes. I'll pull him away as soon as the ritual is completed." The dwarf nodded and climbed the steps of the tomb in order to get a better vantage.

Lowest climbed the steps as well, stopping just behind Lang. He had been weak for three days after the Bow had been placed upon him. Whatever advantage Lang would give them would require the Tyrant to be patient in his siege.

The crashing of trees came to an end just as they would have toppled into the forest, a flood of snow and splinters rolled into the clearing. An avalanche, started on the high hill above them. The wolves continued to Howl off in the distance, but both Lowest and Khazad relaxed. A

quick look around the clearing revealed no wolves. There was no a clear path to the top of the mountain's arm.

As quickly as it had come, the forest fell silent again as the howling died off. The stillness lay like a blanket over the world. Khazad relaxed his grip on the mattock and walked back down the steps. Lang had fallen silent, the ruby dark. It was done, the Bow lived inside another. Gingerly, Lowest carried Lang down the steps. Would the Bow remember that it had once been his? The Vestige had been a presence inside him, an awareness, a knowing. It had only once seized control of his body. It probably couldn't recognize him, Lowest told himself as he reached the bottom step. It had not told him anything about the lives of the various wearers through time, only about Howl in his life.

Gently he set Lang down on the bottom step, clearing out a space in the snow. A delirious smile was etched on the boy's face, and he was mumbling nonsense. His eyes were open, but he wasn't seeing anything. Lowest vaguely remembered the feeling. Turning away from him lest the jealousy return, he looked back down the path, the mile of forest which lay between them and town.

"How are we ever going to get him to town?" Lowest said, asking the question of the wind, though he expected Khazad to answer. He never liked an unanswered question. But his answer didn't come. Lowest looked at the dwarf. He was staring off into the tree line. "Khazad?"

Khazad lifted the mattock and pointed its blade towards the trees. There, just to the left of the cleft in the trees, watching them with a sort of bored expression which was clear ever over the distance, was the Tyrant. The massive wolf was laying down, its tongue lolling.

"The direwolf?" came Khazad's gruff question.

"Yeah, that's it."

Satisfied that the pair of them had noticed, the great wolf stood up and loped off into the forest, leaving the two of them in the emptiness. Khazad turned abruptly, fixing his eyes on Lowest.

"Time to return." He walked up to Lang and threw him over his shoulder without a second thought. Then he turned and began trudging toward the path.

Lowest looked at those looming trees, burden boughs bending downward. The veterans said that when you died all you would see was a tunnel. The hairs on the back of his neck pricked up.

"Wait, Khazad." The dwarf stopped in his footsteps and looked back at him. "There's no coming out of that tunnel. I know it. The wolf king knows what this place is. It will not allow us to return with a Vestige."

Khazad glanced back at the path. "Is the ambush a certainty?"

Lowest nodded. He could feel it in his bones. Khazad returned the nod, trusting in him. A knot of nerves balled in Lowest's stomach, he had three lives in his hands.

“So what now?” the dwarf asked.

“We follow the direwolf. Its so large that it won’t be looking back, not for the three of us. We trust our safety to the forest. If we are lucky, we can make it to the edge of the woods before they notice us.”

Khazad gave one look back at the path, then nodded. Together, they set off towards the woods.