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SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

A Gift, Not a Kill

A tale from the Western Reaches

Aodhàn Mac-Talla



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About this tale

The Western Reaches is a world written week by week by the players of *The Flood Chronicles*, a strategy game played by letter. Each player rules a realm that survived a great Flood. Once a week they write what their ruler does, and a Game Master reads every letter and answers with what the world did in return.

A Gift, Not a Kill grew out of that play. Its people are the ones the season's decisions and disasters landed on.

Reading time: about 40 minutes.

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A Gift, Not a Kill

Aodhàn Mac-Talla

I

Uzkul crouched where the track forked and laid two fingers in the ash.

'Yesterday,' he said. 'Before the ash.'

Foss wrote it down before he knew what it meant. He was the ranking officer of the joint party, and he wrote it down first.

The old orc brushed the grey aside. Underneath, the print stood sharp-edged in a darker layer, and the night's fall lay over it like flour on a board. Under the fall, so older than the fall. Simple, once it had been shown. Most things were.

Foss kept the field book the way his father had kept the House's accounts: what he had seen on the left, what he had been told on the right. His father had never once confused the two. He entered 'made yesterday' on the right. Then he cleared a second print with his own fingers, found the same sharp edges under the same grey, and moved the entry across. Nobody remarked on it.

They had been walking since before light, five of them, a day ahead of the main camp. The other twenty-five waited where the ashfields began, counted out head by head, Castell and Coromar, so that afterwards neither realm could be said to have brought more. The counting had taken longer than the breakfast.

Four of the five answered to Castell.

The fifth had the rank.

They kept the order they had kept since the camp: Uzkul ahead, Rethka and Tav behind him, then Foss, and Serjeant Kell last with the crossbow, where he could see all three orcs at once. A man could draw conclusions from an order of march. Foss drew none, yet.

The ash lay shin-deep in the drifts and rose at every step in a fine grey smoke that worked its way into the orcs' pelts and the men's boot-seams. They wore wet cloths over their mouths and had grit between their teeth anyway. The air smelled of struck matches. Ahead, the mountain filled the east, where four weeks ago there had been no mountain at all; Foss's maps still said so. They had come in from the west so the wind would carry the summit's steam away from them, and the westerly was cold on one side of his face. Now and then something deep in the mountain gave way, and the news came up through the soles of his boots before it reached his ears.

He had begun counting his own glances at it, to shame himself out of them. It had not worked. The count stood at forty-one.

The orcs had not looked up once.

The dead orc lay at the side of the track, some days dead, half under the ash. Uzkul turned it with his foot and looked first at the left shoulder. His own people wore three lines shaved through the fur there: Tav's so new the skin showed green through the stubble, Uzkul's gone wide and ragged with years of the knife. The dead one had nothing. Uzkul looked at the rest of the body for longer.

'Not ours,' he said. 'Not theirs.'

'Theirs?' said Foss.

Uzkul tipped his chin towards the mountain without looking at it. 'Hunted.'

Kell's face did the small arithmetic of a man finding one figure fewer in a column. Foss had kept books for twenty years. He knew subtraction when he saw it.

He wrote 'hunted' on the right-hand side, and nothing else.

Tav stared too long. His hand had gone to his own shoulder. Uzkul said a word in their tongue, short and not unkind, and Tav came away.

The track tipped over a lip of black new rock and the valley opened below them.

It had been forest. The trees still stood, grey trunks without bark or needles, and the ash lay between them in drifts. At the valley's head, where it ran up under the mountain, the ground fell away into a hollow: out of the wind, a stream along one side, dead wood for a month of fires.

'There,' Kell said.

He was a hill man, and he had it worked out: shelter, water, wood. Cold nights on high ground were Castell knowledge too.

'No,' said Uzkul.

'No?'

Uzkul pointed with his chin. Below the hollow's lip, small grey shapes lay on grey ash as if set down by hand. Foss counted eleven birds. A fox lay curled at the stream's edge. None of them had a mark on it.

'Bad air lies low,' Uzkul said.

'Air is air,' said Kell.

Uzkul did not answer that. He went down onto the valley floor, crouched, and did the thing with two fingers. Then in three other places. Then he came back up.

'This is a road,' he said. 'Many have used it. Some this morning.'

'Whose road?'

Uzkul looked at the mountain then. It was the first time Foss had seen him do it.

Rethka had gone down to the stream, well below the hollow. She scooped up a handful, tasted it, spat. 'It's warm,' she said. 'It tastes of metal.' She wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist, where the fur had grown back pale in old crescents, and stood coiling and uncoiling the hound-lead at her belt.

Foss had counted every animal in the party at the main camp. There was no hound.

Both reasons went on the right-hand side of the page. He could think of one way to test the first, and did not mean to use it.

'Captain.' Kell had not raised his voice all day, and he did not raise it now. 'We have walked since before light. It will freeze up there tonight.'

True, and not the point. Kell did not mind the ridge. He minded who had chosen it.

Foss had the rank, the one thing he had out here that the other four had not, and he knew its price on a mountain to the penny. But no House he had ever served paid for knowledge in order to argue with it.

'The ridge,' he said.

'They answer to Castell, Captain.' Kell said it quietly, and not to the orcs.

'Then Castell should listen to them.'

Kell looked at him a moment longer than was polite. Then he ran his thumb along the crossbow string, as he had every hour since the camp, and followed the others up the slope. Last, with all three orcs in front of him.

The ridge was a spine of older ground, bare to the westerly: a long view down into the valley on one side, a longer one down the far slope on the other, and a way off the back. Kell walked it once, end to end, looked down both sides, and said nothing at all.

Foss had seen Ledger auditors go quiet in just that way, on finding the books in better order than they had hoped.

He measured while the light held. The marked rod went a finger and a half into the ash before it found stone. Wind westerly and steady, off the lake. When he laid his palm flat on the ground, the ground was warm, and he kept it there longer than the measurement needed. Frost would come down tonight, and the heat would rise to meet it.

We will sleep between the two.

Uzkul sat on his heels by the fire-pit and watched him, with the patience of a grown man watching a child count stones. Foss knew the look. He measured anyway.

When the fire was lit, Uzkul took out his knife and began to shave his left shoulder. The three old lines had been cut so often over the years that the skin beneath had ridged. A fourth crossed them, fainter, where the fur was coming back. It was the fourth he was cutting now, in small exact strokes, without a mirror, without looking.

Foss brushed the ash off the page with the side of his hand and entered it on the left. 'U. shaves shoulder. Purpose unknown.'

Tav had settled on a rock at his elbow, as close as he could come without touching, and was watching the pencil.

'What does it say?'

'What I saw today.'

Tav thought about that. 'All of it?'

'The parts that could be counted.'

Tav nodded, as if that were an answer, and scratched at his shoulder.

West, past the mouth of the valley, the Sunder Lake took the last of the light: new water over old country, with the tops of drowned trees standing out of it in rows. Foss put it at eleven miles across, and knew that he was wrong.

Last of all, he entered the camp. 'The ridge. Ground chosen by Uzkul.'

He looked at the name for some time.

Then he left it standing.

2

The crossbow string caught with a small, hard click.

Uzkul looked up from his pelt. He had been combing the ash out of it with his fingers, working against the lay of the fur, and the fire had burned

low, and nobody had been saying anything. Now Kell was on his feet with the crossbow half raised, and Foss stood beside him with a hand on his sword, and both men were staring past Uzkul's head at the sky above the summit.

Tav had got down from his rock. He was standing with his mouth open.

Uzkul turned to see what had found them.

Over the mountain the steam stood up red, lit from below, and dark shapes were crossing in front of it, turning in wide circles, high up. More than a man could take in at one look. When they banked, the red light came up off their wings.

Calls drifted down, thin with distance, short and harsh.

'Like hounds,' Rethka said. 'A long way off.'

There were no hounds here.

'Dragons,' Kell said. He said it the way a man says a word he has only ever heard in stories.

Foss's lips moved, stopped, and moved again. Uzkul left him to it and watched the sky.

They turned the way carrion birds turn over a carcass, but there was no carcass up there, and carrion birds did not do this. The shapes chased one another, broke off, tumbled half a turn and climbed again. Not one of them stooped. Not one of them so much as looked down. Hunting things went quiet, and kept low, and minded the wind. These were loud, and cared for nothing below them.

'They are not hunting,' Uzkul said.

'How do you know?' Kell had not lowered the crossbow.

Uzkul did not answer. He sat down with his back to the sky, and to the two men, and took up his bowl. The meat had gone cold. He ate it anyway, while behind him a man held a weapon up at the sky and waited to see what the sky would do about it. A bolt shot upwards came down again. That was the way of bolts.

Rethka sat down beside him and ate. She had not looked at the sky twice.

Kell kept the crossbow up a long time. When Uzkul finally heard the lever working again, slow and careful, he was pleased, and did not show it. A spanned bow could not be set down like a cup. The man knew his tool, even with his blood up.

'Not hunting,' Foss said, half to himself, in the voice he used for numbers, and wrote it in the book. The book would believe it when he had seen it for himself. That was fair. Uzkul would not have believed it from a book either.

The light went. The shapes did not stop. They were still turning when the dark came on, black against the red, and now and again the calls came down, like hounds on some other mountain.

The sky was theirs, the ground was ours. The elders had said it in the winters, when Uzkul was small, and he had always taken it for a way of speaking: the world shared out, each thing to its place. In the old stories the winged ones were large, but old stories made things large. That was their habit.

He looked up. The shapes went on turning.

These had come large on their own.

When the dark was full, the fires showed: below them, on the lower slopes, three clusters with dark ground between.

Uzkul had read war-camps since before Tav was born. Fires kept to their own. Where two hosts lay close, the dark between them was not empty. That was where they met.

Foss came and stood at his shoulder. His lips moved, counting, and after a while Uzkul heard the pencil.

'Three,' Uzkul said. 'Three hosts. Not one.'

'How many sit at one fire?'

'Twenty. Thirty.'

Foss was quiet, doing the sum. 'Call it thirty to a fire,' he said at last. 'It comes to thousands, all three together.' A pause. 'It's a guess.'

'A guess is honest,' Uzkul said. 'A number says you know.'

Foss did not write the sum down. Uzkul approved of that more than he would have of the number. The fires could be counted. What sat at them could not.

Foss went back to his blankets. Uzkul stayed.

Once, the orcs had moved across the world in their thousands, as one. The elders' word for it was Noi. Here were thousands, in three, and the dark between their fires was where they killed one another.

There was no word for that.

They kept a watch. Kell took the first of it, sitting up with the crossbow across his knees. Tav would not sleep. He kept sitting up to look at the sky, where the shapes turned on, black against the red, until Uzkul spoke to him in their own tongue.

'Lie down.'

'I am not tired,' Tav said, and yawned in the middle of it.

'Then lie down and practise.'

Tav lay down.

The humans slept badly. Frost settled on the blankets and heat came up through the ash beneath them, and the two men turned and turned again, like meat on a spit. Uzkul found the warm ground pleasant enough. It was like sleeping beside a banked fire.

In the small hours the wind dropped.

Uzkul had the last watch. He felt the westerly go, that had leaned on them all day, and the cold came down properly then. The mountain muttered underfoot, felt more than heard. With the air lying still, the valley's own smells came up to the ridge, the ones the wind had been carrying off all night: ash, the warm metal of the stream, the sulphur that never left.

Under them, something new.

Sweat, and old fur, and iron, and blood that was not old. Many bodies, moving, coming up the valley. He smelled them a long while before he heard them, and what he heard then was only the soft hiss of feet in ash, more feet than he could have counted, had he tried.

Orcs. Many of them.

He woke Rethka first, then Tav: a hand on the shoulder, and they came up out of sleep without a sound.

Then he crossed to where Kell lay, crouched down beside him, and put his hand over the man's mouth.



3

Kell woke with a hand over his mouth.

His own hand went for the knife at his hip and had it half out before the rest of him was awake. Fur against his lips. The smell of orc, close and warm. Then Uzkul's eyes, a hand's breadth from his own, and a single finger raised between them.

Kell let the knife back down.

Uzkul took the hand away and pointed with it, past the dead fire, to where the crest of the ridge cut the grey. Rethka and Tav were already flat there, two shapes against the light. Foss was crawling to join them with the field book under one arm.

Kell rolled out of the blanket and left the frost on it. The crossbow lay beside him where he had set it down, the string let down by hand at the end of his watch. He took it and the lever and went up the slope on his elbows.

The valley lay grey under grey. The light had not yet decided what colour anything was. Down on the floor, among the dead trunks, something was moving that he took at first for the ash itself, stirring in a wind that had not come back.

Orcs. Running.

Thirty, perhaps forty. They ran the way people run who have been running for a long time, bunched and strung out at once, and some of them ran badly. Two were being carried. The rest carried what they had: bundles, spears, a pot swinging on a strap.

'Not a tribe,' Uzkul said, so low it was hardly more than breath. 'A piece of one.'

Then, behind them, the valley moved.

The war-band came out of the dead forest in a line that was not a line. Kell's eye did what it had been taught and counted by tens. Two hundred. More. They ran in a crescent with the horns forward, and the horns were

fast and the centre slow, and the whole shape came up the valley like a hand closing.

He knew it. He had done it himself, on a smaller scale, with sheep-thieves on the high pastures behind Castell. You did not chase. You drove.

The quarry were being driven up the valley, towards the hollow at its head.

Towards the place where he had wanted to sleep.

The hunters' pelts were pale from brow to shoulder, a grey that was the ash's own grey, so that when they stood still they were not there and when they moved they were everywhere. 'One of the three,' Uzkul breathed. 'Whitened.' He did not say which.

The end came where the valley narrowed between two banks of drift. Ten of the hunted turned there and stood.

It was not a stand. Kell had seen stands. It was ten who had decided that the others should have a hundred more paces. They met the horns of the crescent with spears out, and the horns did not slow. Kell saw it as he would have seen it drawn on a slate: the line, the shock, the line gone. The centre of the crescent arrived and walked over the place.

The sound came up after. A thin cry, a clatter, then nothing.

The hunters did not stop. Some knelt over the dead and rose again with spears and knives that had not been theirs, and the crescent went on up the valley with barely a bend in it.

Kell had the crossbow under his hand. He had not spanned it. At this range it would have been a gesture, and he did not make gestures.

The last of the hunted reached the lip of the hollow. Twenty now. Fewer. They went over the edge and down, out of the wind, into shelter, and Kell felt the thing in his chest that a man feels when someone else reaches cover.

The war-band stopped.

They stopped on the lip, in a long curve, and did not go down. They stood with their spears grounded and looked into the hollow like men at the edge of a pit. Nobody threw anything. Nobody went in.

Kell waited for the hunted to come up the far side.

They did not come up.

He waited longer. The light strengthened, and the ash in the hollow lay still, and the whitened orcs stood on the lip and waited with him. Then, one by one, they turned. The crescent unmade itself into a column, and the column went away up the valley towards the mountain.

Nobody had touched the last of them. Nobody had needed to.

Bad air lies low.

He had said, air is air. Twelve hours ago, in good light, with the stream running and the wood stacked there for the taking, he had said it, and he had meant it.

Kell took his eyes off the valley and put them on the three beside him.

Rethka lay with one hand flat on Tav's shoulder, pressing. Not holding him down; he was not trying to rise. Pressing the way you press a hound that is shaking, so that it knows where it is. Tav breathed through his teeth, in and out, in and out, with his eyes on the hollow.

Uzkul had not moved at all. Not a finger. He might have been part of the ridge.

The three lines on his shoulder showed even in this light, and the bar across them, re-cut last night at the fire, showed sharpest of all.

Kell knew what the bar was. Every serjeant in Castell knew. It had been cut into every Ordruk shoulder in the yard below the keep, with the King's officers watching, and the fur had begun growing back the same week, and the Ordruk had been re-cutting it by hand ever since. He had taken that for pride.

A small tribe. A large one behind it.

The band that had fallen on the Ordruk within sight of Castell's walls had not come from these hosts, or not that anyone knew. It had been smaller and nearer. But it had said the same thing, and the record had written down what it said, and he had read it on a day when the refused tribe was still camped outside the north gate.

Small tribes are not welcome.

He had read it as a threat to Castell. It was that. It was also a sentence about the people it had been said to, and he had not read it that way once.

That was why they had sworn. Not to a king, or not first. To a wall.

Not the first of many. The last of few.

Below, the valley was quiet. The dead lay where the drift narrowed, ten shapes the ash had already begun to claim, and no wind had come yet to move the grey over them. It would. By tonight they would be part of the road.

Beside him Foss had the book open on the ash. The pencil was moving. Kell watched it and understood that the man was counting the dead, and felt his stomach turn.

Then he saw the pencil stop, and go back a page, and draw two short lines from the right-hand side of a column to the left.

He did not know what that meant. He knew it was not indifference. It was a man who could not look away, and had been raised to hold something in his hand while he looked.

Uzkul came up onto his knees. 'They will not come back this way today.' He did not say how he knew. He stood.

They all stood, stiff with cold, and shook the frost off, and Kell found himself first at the place where the path went down off the crest. He went over without thinking. The others came behind him, and he heard Uzkul's tread at his back, and knew whose it was.

He noticed it the way you notice a stone in your boot: an hour later, on the flat, with the mountain in front of him and the tread still there.

He did not change it.



4

'That one,' Tav said.

The sky had been full since mid-morning, the same shapes turning over the summit in the same wide circles. He had watched them until his neck ached. Then one of them broke away, lower than the rest, and slid out of the crowd the way a pebble slips out of a handful.

'It is coming down,' said Rethka.

It did not come down the way Tav had thought it would. It fell in long turns, wings spread and still, riding the heat that rose off the mountain the way a leaf swims on a current. Twice it dropped and caught itself. Then it crossed the ridge-line, and the turn became a tumble, and it landed badly on a spur of black new rock two hundred paces along the ridge.

For a moment it looked wrong all over: wings out, head up, haunches too low. Then it gathered itself in with one movement, the way a person rises after slipping on ice, and sat looking out over the valley below it.

Nobody spoke. Foss had stopped with the book open and the pencil still. Kell's crossbow had come up on its own.

The dragon looked at them.

It was the size of a pony, or a large dog grown past its proper measure, and the colour of smoke. Its head cocked, then the other way. Its nostrils worked at the air between them, and Tav felt the westerly on his own face and understood with a jolt that they were upwind, and that the question was whether they were food.

'Is it hunting?' Kell said.

'It is curious,' said Uzkul.

Tav's heart was beating the way it beat when the hunting parties came home and the first drum started. The thing up on the rock was not large, not from here. But it had dropped out of a sky full of its own kind, and he could not make the two fit together. The morning lay only hours behind them, grey and full of the ash of the valley floor, and what he felt now had no room for that. Then it did, and the two sat in his chest with the heartbeat between them.

The dragon came closer.

It did not come straight. It came in loops: out over the valley, round, in towards the camp, and back, each circuit shorter than the last. It watched

them the whole time. Sometimes it skittered sideways as if a stone had moved under its foot, though the rock was bare.

'Nice dog,' Rethka said, under her breath. 'Tail loose. Weight back. Good.'

'Good?' said Foss.

'Mouth shut, eyes soft, no hackle. It's not afraid.'

'It should be afraid,' Kell said. 'We're armed.'

Rethka did not look at him. 'It knows we are armed. It can see where you point.'

The dragon had stopped at a place in its loop where the rock ended and the ash began, perhaps forty paces out. It sat. Then it stretched its neck towards them without moving its feet, and sniffed, head high, and the first calls from above came down over the ridge like hounds a long way off.

Tav was not aware of getting up. Later he would not be able to say how he had come to be standing, only that he had been squatting with his hands on his knees and then he was walking, not fast, straight at it, with his heart pounding at the back of his teeth and nothing in his head but the shape of it, the way the neck set into the body, the way the tail lay still along the rock.

It had been close enough to see.

Then it was gone.

There was a scuff, a clatter of wings, and the rock was empty, and Rethka's hand was in his belt and she was hauling him backwards with a grip he knew from his childhood, the one you did not argue with.

'Not like that,' she said. 'Never straight at it. Not like that.'

Her voice was flat. She was the only one of the three of them who had not moved, except Uzkul, who had not looked away from the sky.

'It will come back,' Tav said. His own voice sounded strange to him, thin and far off.

'It hasn't decided about us yet.'

She let go of the belt. Had not, he noticed, looked at him.

'Sit,' she said. He sat.

She told him then. Sideways, she said. Slow. Eyes on its feet, not its eyes. You let it come to you. That is the whole thing. You wait, sideways, slow, and let it come.

'It is a young hound meeting strangers,' she said, and she was looking at the empty rock now, and for a moment there was something in her voice that was not instruction. 'It wants to know what we are. It doesn't know if we're something to run from, and it's going to keep asking until it knows.'

'It knows we are not food,' Tav said.

'It knows we have hands,' said Rethka. 'That is not the same thing.'

Behind them, Kell had not lowered the crossbow. He was standing as he had stood the night before, tracking nothing, with the stock against his cheek.

'It can see where you look,' Rethka said, without turning.

'It's gone,' Kell said.

'So are you,' she said, 'when you point at me like that.'

The crossbow came down. Not quickly. But it came down, and Kell looked at the ground.

On the spur the dragon had found the edge. It turned once, the way a big animal does in a small space, then it ran for the drop, and opened its wings at the last breath, and fell out of sight beyond the ridge-line. A long moment later Tav saw it rise beyond the valley, winging out, growing smaller, and the shapes above opened to let it back in among them.

'It'll come back,' he said.

Nobody answered.

He found that he had been smiling, and that he could not remember when it had begun. The morning rose in him then, grey and orderly, and he set it down again carefully, the way you set down a bowl you do not want to spill. Not now. Not yet.

He watched the sky until the one shape among the rest was gone, and the wind came back cold on one side of his face, and Rethka sat down beside him with the hound-lead coiled in her lap.

She did not say anything. After a while she handed him a strip of dried meat, and he took it, and they sat with their backs to the ridge and watched the mountain breathe steam away from them, and the two men watched the orcs watch the sky.

5

'A calf,' Uzkul said.

Foss could see the dragon. He could not yet see what it carried. It was a long way down the slope on the valley side, a smoke-coloured shape against the ash, and it moved wrong: on its feet, head low, in a walk instead of a glide, with something red-brown hanging from its jaws.

He had the book open already. He wrote 'a calf' on the right.

It climbed. The afternoon was well on, and the light lay flat across the slope, and the dragon came up through it a step at a time, dragging its burden. Twice it set the thing down and stood over it, breathing. Then it took a new grip and came on.

It was slow. Foss timed it by his own pulse, and stopped when the number began to matter to him more than the animal.

Kell had the crossbow up. He had spanned it when the shape first showed below; Foss had heard the lever go, and the string catch, and had not looked round. Now the stock sat against the serjeant's cheek and the point of the bolt moved as the dragon moved, a little ahead of it, the way a man leads a bird.

Foss made his own assessment, because it was the one thing he could do. Meat, carried up a slope, to a place where the animal had spent the morning watching five creatures of two other kinds. Predators cached. Predators

carried meat home. A dragon that had studied them since mid-morning and then gone to fetch dinner: he could follow that sum as well as anyone.

Are we the larder?

Uzkul, crouched at the edge of the camp, had his elbows on his knees and his hands loose between them. Rethka had the hound-lead out and was running the loop through her fingers, over and over. Neither had a weapon in hand. It was not proof. Foss wrote it on the left anyway: 'U. and R. do not arm.'

The dragon came up over the shoulder of the ridge with the calf dragging behind it, stopped twenty paces off, and dropped it.

Then it backed away. Five paces, six, watching them. It settled onto its haunches with its wings folded and its tail laid along the ash, and waited.

Nobody moved. Foss moved 'a calf' across.

It was red-brown, a few weeks old, and half-eaten. The hide was gone along one flank and the neck hung wrong. Where the jaws had held it the hide was black, not with blood but blackened, the way leather goes when it has been in a fire. And the grass beneath it, the few grey-green blades that had come up through the ash since the fall, was going dark in a ring that Foss could watch widen.

The smell reached them. Sharp, like the lye vats in the dyers' quarter at home.

'Where does a calf come from,' Kell said, 'out here?'

'Down the valley,' said Uzkul. 'There were farms before the mountain. The cattle are still there. Nobody owns them now.'

Foss thought of the farmers, and stopped. He wrote 'unowned cattle in the valley' on the right, where it belonged.

The rod was in his hand. He had picked it up without deciding to, out of long habit: a thing had arrived in front of him, and things were for measuring. He was two steps towards the calf when Rethka said, 'No.'

One word, not raised. He stopped.

She got up and went to the calf, not straight but round, and crouched a little way from it with a length of dead branch from the firewood. She touched the branch to the wet along the flank where the jaws had been. Held it. Drew it back.

The wood where it had touched was darkening. By the time she had walked it over to Foss the tip was black and the black was creeping up the grain.

'Poison to touch,' she said. 'Poison to eat.'

Foss looked at the rod in his hand. Six marks to the finger, his father's marks, worn smooth. He laid it down on the ground behind him.

'Half a calf,' Kell said.

He had not lowered the bow. But he was looking at the meat, and Foss understood the look, because he had been fighting the same arithmetic: they were on three-quarter rations, the main camp on two-thirds, and Coromar had been short of grain since the sea rose and stayed. Fresh meat, twenty paces away. Half a calf.

'It eats it,' Kell said.

'It's a dragon,' said Rethka.

Kell was silent.

The dragon watched them. Its head was low and cocked. Now and then its nostrils flared and it looked from one of them to the next, as if it were counting.

'It is not a kill,' Rethka said.

'It looks like one to me.'

'A kill you keep.' She had gone back to her place and sat, with the black-tipped branch beside her in the ash and the hound-lead still in her fingers. 'You stand over it. You eat what you can and drag the rest off where nobody will find it. You do not carry it up a hill and set it down in front of five strangers and step back.' She nodded at it, once. 'It leaves a gift, not a kill.'

'A gift,' Foss said.

'A young hound will do it. Something it caught. It brings it to you and puts it down and waits.'

'For what?'

'To see what you do.'

Foss looked at the calf, and at the ring in the grass, wider now, and at the dragon sitting on its haunches with its tail still.

'We can't eat it,' he said.

'No.'

'Can we refuse it?'

Rethka considered that. 'You can kick it away,' she said. 'You can shout at the dog and shut the door. Then it knows what you are.'

Kell said something under his breath about Flood and ruin. Nobody answered him.

They talked it through, briefly and in low voices, while the dragon sat and the smell of lye thickened and the light came round to the west. Nobody could take it. Nobody could send it back. Uzkul said, 'Leave it,' and Rethka said, 'Leave it where it was put,' and Kell said nothing, and in the end that was the whole of the decision. The calf lay where it had been dropped. Nobody went near it, nobody turned a back on it, and the dragon watched.

Foss found the House rising in him, unasked. A thing given and not answered was not a gift. It was a debt, and it sat on the books until it was paid. His father had taught him that before he had taught him to add.

He did not write it down. He would come back to it.

Instead he wrote, on the left, in the space under the name of the camp: 'One calf. Not for eating.'

He looked at the line. It was correct. It was complete. There was nothing in it that had been counted.

The dragon waited. The five of them waited. The wind moved the ash a little and laid a thin skin of it over the calf's hide, and the ring in the grass stopped growing.

Then Tav stood up.

6

Tav stood up, and unbuckled his knife, and held it out to Rethka without looking at her.

'Sit down,' Kell said.

Tav didn't.

Rethka took the knife and said nothing. Uzkul, crouched at the edge of the camp, said nothing. Foss had shut the book. The boy was going out to the dragon with empty hands, and the only person on the ridge who had spoken against it was Kell, and he had been ignored by all four of the others without a word between them.

He looked at Rethka. She was watching Tav, and there was nothing in her face that wanted him stopped.

The crossbow had been spanned since the calf came up the slope. The bolt lay in the groove, broad-headed, and its point had been on the dragon the better part of an hour. Kell settled the stock into his cheek and looked along it.

The dragon had come to its feet when Tav stood. It stood with its weight back and its head cocked, watching the boy and nobody else, its nostrils working. Its tail lay along the ash behind it and did not move at all, and Kell understood that the rest of them had ceased to exist for it.

Tav walked. Not at it — on a long slant, sideways on, slow, his eyes down near its feet. He did it exactly as he had been taught. Kell had seen grown soldiers fail at less, under less.

The boy talked as he went, low and without a break, in his own tongue. Kell did not know a word of it. He knew the tone. Any man who had gentled a horse knew it: you talked so the beast could learn the sound of you, and you did not stop, and your hands stayed where it could see them.

Tav crossed the line of the bolt. Kell moved his feet without being told, two short steps to the left, and opened the angle again. The boy kept walking, and crossed it a second time, and Kell shifted once more, and the angle closed anyway, the way it had to, because the boy was walking straight into the middle of everything.

Ten paces short of the dragon, Tav crouched down onto his heels. The talking went on, softer.

Then a word came clear out of it. The same word again.

'Kâsh.'

It was said the way a name is said. To it, not at it. The boy had given it a name. That was what the afternoon had been for.

The dragon looked at him for a long moment. Then it folded its legs beneath it and sat, the way a dog sits, and laid its tail along the ash, and was still.

Tav's hands had not moved. There had been no sign, no command. The thing had chosen.

Behind Kell, Foss had not opened the book.

Kell's eye kept the tally it was trained to keep. Twenty-odd paces. A spanned bow and a broad-headed bolt. Through the eye, perhaps, if the eye would hold still for it. Through the hide anywhere else, a wound. Either way a hurt dragon on the ridge among the five of them, and over the summit the sky still full of its kind, turning and turning, and the boy kneeling out in the open with nothing in his hands.

The only dangerous thing on the ridge was in his own.

He put his thumb against the bolt, the way he had put it against the string every hour of the march, and drew the bolt back out of the groove

and set it in the quiver, point down, without looking. The bow hung cocked and empty in his grip. It would have to be let down by hand, later, slowly, against the lever.

There was time.

Uzkul was watching him. Not the dragon — Kell's hands. Their eyes met across the ash, and the old orc said nothing, and after a moment looked back at the boy.

Nobody said anything.

The dragon yawned.

Its jaws opened the length of a man's forearm, pale inside, and it had a great many teeth.

Kell flinched. Beside him Rethka's shoulders came up, and even Uzkul moved, a small thing, quickly mastered.

Tav didn't. He was grinning like a boy at a fair.



7

Foss came out to him on his knees.

That was the first thing Tav noticed, and he nearly laughed: the ranking officer of the joint party crawling across the ash on all fours because he had seen an orc do it sideways and slow, and did not know which part of it mattered. He arrived at Tav's elbow and stayed low, and the dragon watched him come and did not move.

'What does it want?' Foss whispered.

'Nothing,' said Tav. 'It gave.'

Foss was quiet. Ten paces off, Kâsh shifted its weight from one foot to the other and back and settled again.

'Then it's owed,' Foss said.

He said it the way Uzkul said *bad air lies low*: not an opinion, a fact about the world. Tav looked at him sideways. The man's face was grey with ash and quite serious, and there was a pencil behind his ear that he had forgotten.

'Rethka,' Foss said, without raising his voice. 'How?'

Behind them Rethka took a moment. When she spoke it was in the flat voice she had used on Tav that morning, and Tav found he did not mind hearing it used on somebody else.

'Put it down between you and it. Step back. Do not look straight at it while you do it.'

'That's all?'

'That is all there is.'

Foss reached into his coat and brought out his ration bag and untied it with fingers that were not steady. He took out a strip of the dried meat, dark and hard, the same stuff they had all been chewing since the main camp. Tav had watched him eat the day before. He had cut his strip in half and put one half back.

He looked at the strip for a moment, then took a second one and laid it beside the first. Then he put the second one back.

Tav bit the inside of his cheek.

There was a flat stone in the ash between them and the dragon, a hand's breadth across, grey on grey. Foss went to it sideways, on his knees, with his eyes down, and set the strip of meat on it, and straightened it with one finger so that it lay square to the edge. He did it the way a man lays out coins on a counter, one by one, so that the other party can count them

without touching. Then he backed away, still on his knees, still not looking, and stopped beside Tav.

It was funny. It was also not, and Tav could not have said where the one turned into the other. A human, on his knees in the ash, paying a debt to an animal in the only manner he knew, because he had been told it was owed. Tav had not known they could be like that.

Kâsh looked at the stone.

Then at Foss. Then at Tav, longest.

Its neck went out. The feet stayed planted where they were, four smoke-grey feet in the grey, and the neck stretched and stretched towards the stone like a dog that has decided how close it will come and will not come one step nearer than that. The nostrils worked over the meat. The mouth opened, and Tav saw the teeth again and did not flinch this time, and the strip was gone.

It chewed twice, if that. Swallowed. Looked at them.

Nobody breathed.

Then it turned, all at once, the way it had turned on the spur that morning, and ran for the edge of the ridge with its wings half open and its feet throwing ash. At the drop it went over. Tav's stomach went with it. A long moment; then the wings opened wide below the ridge-line and it was up, gliding out over the valley in the last light, turning towards the mountain.

Beside him Foss had the book open. Tav had not seen him take it out. The pencil moved once across the page, a single line from the right-hand side to the left, and stopped. Foss looked at what he had drawn and shut the book.

Tav had no idea what it meant. He did not ask.

He watched the shape climb. It rode the heat off the mountain in long slow circles, higher each time, growing smaller, until it slid in among the others turning there against the red.

He could not tell which one it was any more.

The calf lay where it had been put, with its skin of ash. The ring in the grass had stopped growing and gone black. In the half-dark the smell of lye was worse than in daylight.

'Burn it,' Kell said.

'No,' said Uzkul. 'Smoke carries. There are three hosts below.'

Kell said nothing to that. He had the crossbow across his knees and the lever on it, and Tav heard the ratchet go, click by click, as he let the string down by hand, slow, the way you let a heavy thing down a rope. When it was done he set the bow aside and stood up.

'Then dig,' he said.

They dug. The ash came away easily; it had not had time to settle into anything. Rethka and Uzkul scraped the hollow a little way off from the camp, a body's length long and half that deep, and Kell went to the firewood and came back with two dead poles, each as long as a man, and gave one to Tav without a word.

They put the poles against the calf's flank, Kell on one and Tav on the other, and leaned. It slid. It was heavier than it looked and softer, and it rolled into the hollow with a sound Tav did not want to hear again. Rethka pushed the ash back over it with the side of her foot. Nobody touched it. Nobody had, since it came up the slope in a mouth.

They stood a moment at the edge, the two of them, with the poles still in their hands.

'A dead calf becomes a new calf,' Tav said. It was what you said. He had said it over goats and once over a dog and once over his mother's brother, and it came out of him now without his deciding.

Kell looked at the grave. 'The soul is a traveller,' he said.

Neither of them explained. Tav turned the human's words over and could not make them fit anything he knew, and could not make them fit nothing either. Perhaps it was the same thing in a different mouth. Perhaps

it was a different thing that only sounded the same. He did not decide. Kell laid his pole down beside the grave and went back to the fire, and Tav laid his beside it.

The flat stone was still out on the ash where Foss had left it. Tav went out to it sideways, from habit, though there was nothing there to be sideways for. Where the dragon's mouth had been the stone was stained dark, a wet-looking patch the size of a palm, and when he bent close the smell came up sharp.

He turned it over with his foot, stained side down, so that nobody would set a hand on it in the dark.

Then he stood a while longer with his back to the fire and looked up at the summit, where the steam stood red and the shapes went round and round, and tried to find the one that was his.

8

'A dog,' said the Castell commander.

He said it flat, the way a man says a figure he does not believe but cannot fault. He sat on the far side of the fire with his gauntlets off, rolling a ring round and round on one finger, and the firelight came and went on it.

'A dog, sir,' Foss said. 'In its manners. Not in its teeth.'

They had come down off the mountain that morning, five where five had gone up, and the march back had taken the rest of the day through the drifts with wet cloths over their mouths. The main camp lay where they had left it at the edge of the ashfields: twenty-five men, a week's supplies, and a fire a man could sit at without first counting who stood behind him. The Coromar factor sat beside the commander, a small neat man with a cord of counters in his lap.

'From the beginning,' the factor said. 'If you please, Captain.'

Foss gave it in the order he had set down. The tribes first: three great hosts at war in the ash, in the thousands, hunting the smaller groups. He told the valley in the fewest words he had. The words did not improve it. He told the hollow: the dead birds, the fox, the bad air that lay low and killed without a mark, and the hunters who had known it and used it. Then the dragons, turning in the mountain's heat by day and by night.

'How many?' the commander asked.

'Not counted, sir.'

He heard himself say it, and heard no apology in his own voice. He had counted what could be counted.

'Where did they come from?' the factor asked.

'I could not learn.'

The factor slid a counter along the cord, which Foss had not expected; apparently an honest ignorance counted for something, in a ledger.

'And the young one,' the commander said. 'The dog.'

'It came to us three times. The third time it brought a calf and set it down in front of us and stepped back.' Foss gave them the blackened hide, and the grass dying in a ring, and the stick gone dark at the tip. 'Poison to touch and to eat. We left it where it was put. It watched us leave it.'

'What did it want?'

'Nothing, sir. It gave.'

'And what did you give it?'

'A strip of ration meat.'

The factor slid another counter. Foss had served Houses all his life. He knew a closed account when he saw one approved.

Then the commander turned his head.

'Serjeant. The Ordruk.'

Three words, and everything that hung on them hung in the air over the fire. The three orcs sat a little back from the light. None of them had spoken during the report. Nobody had asked them to.

Kell got to his feet. He looked at the commander, and not at the orcs, and said what he had to say in the fewest words he had.

'They chose the ground.'

The commander waited.

'We'd be lying in that valley,' Kell said, and sat down.

The ring had stopped turning. Nobody said anything for a moment. Then the two leaders drew apart from the fire and spoke together, low, with the night around them, and came back, and the factor said the expedition would decide in the morning.

Later, when the camp had gone quiet, Foss opened the field book at the fire and worked backwards through it.

He turned each page and checked the right-hand column. 'Made yesterday.' Crossed. 'Not hunting.' Crossed. 'A road.' 'Bad air.' 'Hunted.' Crossed and crossed and crossed. Page after page of the orcs' knowledge, each entry with its single line drawn across to the left, each one paid off by his own eyes. He reached the first page, and the right-hand column of the whole book stood empty.

He dipped the pen and wrote, in the report: 'The statements of the Ordruk guides are entered throughout as observed. They were confirmed in every particular.'

The House his father had kept would have written it shorter. *Their credit is good.*

He did not write that. It was not a House.

'What does it say?'

Tav had come up without a sound and was perched on a pack at his elbow, watching the pencil the way he had watched it since the first evening.

'It says what I saw.'

'All of it?'

'The parts that could be counted.' Foss found the line and read it aloud. 'One young dragon, which the scout Tav named Kash — ash-pup.'

'Kâsh,' said Tav. 'Ash. Aash. Long.'

Foss looked at the word. Then he dipped the pen and corrected the ink, and the circumflex arrived on the page, small and exact, and the name sat properly in the report of the joint expedition of Castell and Coromar, between the calf and the meat.

Tav read it over his shoulder, though Foss did not know whether he could read. He seemed satisfied. He went away to his blanket as quietly as he had come.

Foss dipped the pen once more and wrote the last of it.

'Recommend the advance continue. Recommend the same guides.'

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Armidion

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