MIRACLES OF
# SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

# The Far Side of the Pass

*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.

*The Far Side of the Pass* grew out of that play. Its people are the ones the season's decisions and disasters landed on.

Reading time: about 35 minutes.

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# The Far Side of the Pass

Aodhàn Mac-Talla

The noise had been weather for two days before it became something else.

Kharai had followed it the way a thirsty animal follows the smell of water: without deciding to, and then without being able to stop. It came up through the broken passes as a sound without a shape—a low, grinding surf that never turned to breakers, never rolled away. Sometimes the wind carried screaming in it. Sometimes the screaming carried the wind.

He had told himself the usual things. That the bare ones were old stories, warnings folded into the den-songs when the fires burned low. That no orc with any sense walked towards a sound like that. That he was hungry, and hunger made the ears lie.

He kept walking anyway.

Now he lay flat behind a slab of stone that had not been there six weeks ago—the raw side of it still shedding dust, the cracks unweathered, the whole great block tipped against its neighbour like a headstone for something no one had buried. The noise was no longer weather. It was a valley. It was a valley full of the bare ones, and he had run out of mountains to pretend he was not looking at them.

He parted the dead grass with two fingers, slowly, the way One-Ear had taught him: *never disturb the picture, only open the eye.* The grass was brown and brittle and it cracked under his touch, but the sound below ate the smaller sound whole.

There were more of them than his den had ever held.

More than every orc he had ever seen, and every orc he had heard of beyond the passes, all standing in the same churned earth at the same mo-

ment. His mind tried to count them the way it counted herds—a Raude of forty, a gathering of two hundred—and gave up somewhere before the first rank ended.

It was not that there were too many. It was that they kept *coming*: streaming from the valley's far mouth, gathering at its narrow end, breaking against a line of grey like weather against a cliff. Kharai watched the surf and the cliff and felt his stomach drop, and he flattened himself lower into the stone, and the sound came up through the rock and into the hollow of his chest.

The fur along his spine had risen. He could feel it where the old chevrons had gone soft, grown out over six weeks of walking—the pattern blurring, the edges of him losing their shape. He pressed himself down until the stone ground against his ribs and listened.

Every story he had ever heard said to run.

He settled behind the rock instead.

The noise was terrible. He could not stop listening to it.

And because the listening was unbearable, and because he had been six weeks alone and the silence behind him was worse, his mind went back—the way it always did, these days, between one breath and the next—to the cave, and the mountain, and the day the world had begun to breathe.

* * *

The mountain had been breathing for weeks before the day it blew up.

Small breaths, at first. Dust sifting down in air that had been still for a hundred years. Water standing black in passages dry for ten generations. At night, far under the den, a sound like something enormous turning in its sleep.

The old ones read the signs and argued. One-Ear said the mountains had walked before—the songs were full of it—and that a den of forty-odd souls was only ever a guest in the rock. He had been whelped over the

passes himself, in a den long gone, and he had the walking in him like weather in old bones. It was One-Ear who had answered, once, when Kharai was young and asked where the herd lived—meaning the great herd of the songs, the lost one, the herd that had once been all herds. *A herd is not a place,* One-Ear had said. *A herd is the walking.*

The den's high door looked out over the place where the mountains gave up. Beyond it the grass began and did not stop: a dry ocean of it, pale, moving under the wind, running out past anywhere the eye could hold. The young ones were taken up to see it in their first spring. Nobody had ever gone into it. It was the edge of the world, and the songs had nothing more to say about it than that.

Kharai had other things to think about that season. He had come to his cutting. His dam had shaved the ladder of chevrons into him, nape to hip, and given him the knife with it—orcbone, den-marked, her own. Days later, the breathing stopped being small.

He kept the day itself in pieces, the way a fall is kept: flashes, and the order of them gone.

A crack like the world's biggest knuckle, felt through the soles of his feet before it reached his ears. The floor of the upper gallery shearing sideways—stone that had been one thing becoming two things, with a step between them as tall as an orc. Dust falling upward. Of all of it, that was the thing his mind refused longest: the floor's dust rising in sheets and drifting up past his face, as if the world had turned quietly over and not told anyone.

One-Ear had gathered the young ones and taken them down the long gallery, the old way to the lower door. It was the one mistake Kharai ever knew him make. The young went in front and the grown behind—that was the rule—and Kharai, new-cut, walked last of all, which was what saved him. The gallery came apart ahead of him, and the two den-kin of his year were simply elsewhere, on the far side of new stone. For a while he could

hear them calling, and One-Ear's voice under theirs, steady, giving orders to the mountain. Then the mountain moved again, and he could not.

He went back up to find the others.

He found a hand.

It lay under the edge of the fallen roof in the den-hall, fingers curled around nothing. It was hers—he knew it by the cutting-callus on the thumb, the old burn—and there was no more of her to reach. He sat with it a while. He did not say her name. His people did not keep the names of the dead in their mouths; the dead had gone on ahead, and the herd does not wait for the fallen. A dead orc became a new orc, somewhere. Grief was logistics: so many mouths fewer, so much carrying to redistribute. The teaching had a file for the dying, and no file at all for the left-behind.

A den was a body—that was the other teaching. Forty souls were one animal that happened to live in forty skins, and a piece cut off a body does not die at once. It twitches. It crawls about. It does not understand yet what has happened to it.

He was the piece.

The days after were dark and tasted of stone; he never counted them. He followed air. He followed the taste of moving water. He slept in cracks with the knife in his fist. When he climbed out at last, the light was wrong, on wrong mountains: a peak gone that had stood over the den all his life; a raw ridge where no ridge had been; and below, where a hanging valley had held its trees, water—still and shining in a bowl of new scree, no river running in, none running out.

Everything he knew of the world beyond the Accursed Mountains came from the songs, and the songs were warnings. The bare ones lived that way: the skin-showing people, who killed from far off and never stopped multiplying. How many of them there were, the songs did not say. No one had ever thought to count.

So when the sound came up through the passes—the grinding surf, the screaming—he had walked towards it, because it was the only thing left in the world that was many.

He had told himself all of it many times now. It did not get smaller. A body carried a thing like that, and the carrying wore a groove, and the groove went deeper, and nothing got lighter.

Under his ribs, the rock hummed with the noise. The dead grass ticked against his knuckles. Kharai opened his eyes, parted the grass again with two fingers, and made himself look.



* * *

The nearer tribe came to him first as a smell.

The wind was moving up the valley and over his rock, and it brought them with it: ash, old and cold, the kind that lives in cloth long after the fire is out; tallow; sweat that had dried and been sweated through again, days of it, layered like bark. Under that, thinner, iron. He knew iron. It was the smell of a kill before you reached it.

He made himself look at the ones the smell belonged to.

They filled the valley's wide end and poured towards its narrow one, and they were loud in a way he had no rule for. Everything he knew of hunting said: silence until the moment, and then the moment. These ones screamed from the start. All of them, not just the leaders—a single flat roar that rose and fell without ever stopping, as if the noise itself were a thing they were throwing at the grey line. Above them swayed poles topped with shapes he could not read at first, and then could: flame, cut in metal, tongues of it catching the low sun. They carried fire on sticks into a fight. He turned that over and put it down again.

At the back of them, where a Raude would keep its old and its young and its carrying, there was no carrying. There were figures with shaven heads and long robes, walking slowly along the rear ranks with their arms raised, and when their voices lifted—he could pick the pitch of it out of the roar, higher, chopped into pieces like a chant—the ranks in front went at the grey line harder. Not braver. Harder, the way something in a snare goes at the snare: the same place, again, with the strength that should have been spent on anything else.

He watched a rush break against the grey and come back. Those who fell stayed where they fell. Those who could crawl crawled, dragging themselves out of the trampling by their elbows, and nobody came for them. Nobody turned. The living stepped over the wounded to get forward, and stepped on them coming back, and the shaven-heads walked on behind with their arms up as if the ground were only ground.

That was the first thing that made his skin move on his bones. A pack keeps its wounded. Even a bad pack—even the sour ones in the songs, the dens that ate their own name—dragged their hurt back to the fire, because a Raude with a gap in it is a Raude with a wound, and a wound is where the world gets in. These ones did not seem to know they had gaps. Or knew, and did not count it.

Their horses were thin. He saw that before he saw the men were thin, because he read horses first and always had: the hollow behind the shoulder, the hip-bones standing up like tent-poles under the hide, the way they stood when they were not being made to move—heads low, not grazing, because there was nothing there to graze. Then he looked at the men the same way and found the same shape. Wrists too big for the arms. Faces cut close to the bone.

When a knot of them dragged down one of the grey ones—a lucky spear, a foot slipped in the mud—they were on the body before it had finished moving. Not to kill it. To open it. Straps, boots, a pouch at the belt, the shirt from under the mail, six pairs of hands working fast and without looking at each other, and the dead one still kicking under them while they did it. A fallen horse further back drew a crowd the same way, and the crowd fought over it, and two of them were left in the mud when the rest moved on.

He knew hunger. He had six weeks of it in his belly. But he had never seen it worn as a shape by a thousand bodies at once.

Some of them were whelps. He was slow to believe that, too—the bare ones were hard to age, all that skin, no cutting to read—but there was no mistaking it in the end: the necks too thin for the helmets, the way they held their spears too high and ran a step behind the grown ones, the way one of them stopped dead in the open with his mouth working and had to be shoved forward from behind. Whelps in the front rank. His people would not have believed it if he had sung it to them.

And at the edges, where the valley sent side-gullies up into the new scree, the mass was not quite whole. Small groups were coming loose from it—five here, a dozen there—with packs on their backs and their heads down, walking uphill into the broken ground, not looking back. No one called after them. The roar did not change. The herd did not notice it was shedding.

He made his judgement the way he had been taught to make it about any herd: not on what it looked like, but on what it did. These were not a pack. A pack keeps its wounded, keeps its young at the back, keeps its eyes on the ones who walk away. This was a thing being eaten from the inside and running at the nearest wall to make the eating stop. The mad ones, the songs would have called them. He had a place to put that.

What he had no place for was the rest.

Because they were keen. He watched them go at the grey again, screaming, thin as winter deer, stepping over their own dying, and he felt something in his chest that was not fear and was not disgust and was very nearly respect. They had chosen this. Every one of them, every rush, all the way in with nothing held back—no half-measures, no watching from behind a rock. Whatever was wrong with them, and everything was, they meant it with their whole bodies.

It was the only thing about them that was almost orcish.

* * *

The far tribe he found by the hole it made in the noise.

There was no silence anywhere in that valley. But at the narrow end the roar came up against something and did not get in, and the shape of the not-getting-in held steady. Whatever stood there was making almost nothing, and making it without pause. It was worse to listen to than the screaming.

The slopes pinched together where they stood, steepening into cliffs on both sides, and someone long dead had seen the use of it. Stone lay across the gap: blocks cut and set so close that at half a mile the joins were guesswork, older than the new scree, older than anything he had a song for. Dwarf-work, perhaps. Or the leavings of some herd that had stopped walking and built instead. Whoever had laid it was gone, and the holes they had

left in it had been stuffed and braced with raw timber, pale at the cuts, felled inside the week. Old bone, new sinew.

What stood behind the timber was a wall that walked.

They did not scream. That was the first thing, and he could not put it down: men going into a killing with their mouths shut. They worked to a beat instead, a slow one, and he found it in his own chest before he found it with his eyes. Shields down. Step. Weight. Back.

When a man in the front took a wound, or simply emptied, the rank turned over. The hurt one went backwards through the line and a fresh one came forward into his place, and the line did not thin while it happened, and nothing was dropped. It was the way a body draws breath. It was the way a den empties a flooded gallery, hand to hand, nobody shouting.

They kept their wounded. A lane opened for one of them and closed behind him, and the fur went down along Kharai's spine for the first time since dawn.

They answered signals he could not hear. Something went along the line and the line did something, and the two were not far enough apart in time to have been shouting. They killed the way a man splits wood he has split all his life: no anger in it, no waste, the same stroke and the same stroke and the same stroke.

The mad ones came at that, and came apart on it.

He watched the arithmetic of it. Spear and shield, weight and balance, and under the balance the ground doing half the work: the uphill, the pinch, the timber. A rush went in and shortened and stopped, and was pushed back down the slope by men walking forward at the speed of men walking.

Then the fire ones got through. A gap opened where the new timber met the old stone, three or four spears wide, and Kharai's belly pulled tight, because he knew what a gap in a body was.

Before the mad ones could pour into it, the grey did something he had seen before.

Not with his eyes. In the low gallery under the den, slowly, with One-Ear's hand on his hip correcting the turn.

It was Arte Pankration, or the nearest the bare ones had ever come to it. The rank at the shoulder of the gap did not push. It turned from its centre and let the weight coming at it keep coming, and went with it, and folded, and the gap was behind them and full of grey again, and the men who had poured in were inside a closed mouth. It took less time than it took him to understand it. He hissed through his teeth before he knew he had.

At the worst of it stood one of their alphas, a strip of red cloth tied round his arm.

He did not stand behind and shout. He was in the crush, where the line bent furthest, and Kharai watched the ranks steady wherever he came, the way a herd steadies when the lead mare puts her head up. That was pack. He had not expected to find pack down there, and finding it did not make him easier.

Then he did what One-Ear would have cuffed him for not doing sooner. He stopped watching the teeth and looked at the whole beast.

Behind the wall, where the next rank should have been standing and waiting to be needed, there was nobody. Ground, churned and empty, with cook-fires on it that had gone cold, and the emptiness ran back a long way. Every den keeps something behind. You do not send all your souls at a thing and leave a hole where the rest of you should be. The grey had put everything they had into the wall, and everything they had did not fill the space they had cut for it.

Further back were the wagons, and the wagons were wrong. Men were working at them and carrying nothing to the line. They stood over what was inside—and there was not much inside—with their arms going, in the middle of a fight, arguing about which of them was going to have it.

Ground and no meat. He filed that, and it sat no better than the rest.

Behind the wagons, in under the gate-works where the alphas were, two runners came in at a dead sprint. Whatever they brought started a noise that reached him with edges still on it. Arms went out. A finger went into a chest. Then hands went down to hilts, and stayed there.

In the middle of their own fight. Inside their own wall.

Kharai became aware that his hands hurt. He had been gripping the slab hard enough to flake the edges of his claws, and had not noticed doing it, and there was grit under the quick.

Neither of these herds knew he existed. Two great animals in one valley, and he was a stone on the hill above them. And watching them—the mad ones bleeding themselves out against the timber, the grey rotting quietly behind their own wall—something went cold and certain in his stomach and stayed there.

Both of them were already losing. Not to each other.

* * *

He tried to prove it, because a reading that made no sense was usually a track read wrong. So he read it again, the way One-Ear had taught him to read a herd: numbers, ground, meat, and the mind over it all.

The mad ones had the numbers—three for one, and the wide end still filling. The grey had the ground: the gate, the uphill, the walls. Either should have settled it by midday, and neither had. Neither had meat, and a herd with no meat moves or dies; that was the oldest rule there was, and both of these were breaking it by standing still. And over neither of them was there a mind. Two herds in one valley, and no herd-mind over either. His people did not have a word for that. They had never needed one, because it could not be.

On every count he could run, one tribe or the other should have been running by now.

Neither ran. That was the wrongest thing in a morning full of wrong things.

None of it was orcish. But by the walking, they went at it.

The sound changed first.

He had listened to the roar so long he had stopped hearing it, the way an ear stops hearing a river. What reached him now was a thinning—a stutter, like surf catching on a new rock. Then the shadow crossed the valley.

He was flat against the stone before he knew he had moved, pressed down into the dead grass, some part of him older than the songs deciding for him: *be small, be stone.* Above the valley went a shape with wings wider than the gate-works, unhurried, the slowest thing in the sky that morning. It made no sound. A thing that size should have made a sound. It turned one slow circle over the battlefield—not looking down, the way a hunter does not look at ground it has already judged—and then it slid over the far ridge, and beyond the ridge he saw the long line of it fold and drop, the way a hawk folds over a vole, onto something deer-sized that had been minding its own business.

It had passed over more meat than the world should hold, and had not wanted any of it.

Below him, two armies had flinched as one animal. He saw it whole, from above: the roar cut off at the root, the churned ground gone still, thousands of bare faces turned up to the sky. For one breath they were not fire and not grey, not the mad ones and not the wall. They were meat that had looked up.

The old songs said the sky had had masters once, before the herds, and that the first herd had eaten their eggs. He had always taken that for a boasting-song—the kind the old ones told to explain why the sky was empty. Nobody alive had seen one awake.

The sky had not been empty. It had been asleep. He thought of the sound far under the den, in the last weeks: something enormous, turning in its sleep.

The roar came back up the valley—the chanting of the shaven-heads first, rising to seize the omen and make it theirs—and the two tribes went back to their killing as if the sky had not just told them what they were. Kharai lay behind his rock with his heart hammering, and found, underneath the hammering, that he was steadier than he had been all morning. The bare ones killed from far off and never stopped multiplying, and they had flattened like rabbits under a hawk, every one of them, red cloth and shaven-head alike.

They were not the masters of this world either. He did not know why that helped. It did.



It was some time after—his heart had only just come down out of his ears—that he saw the thing at the grey's rear.

Behind the gate-line, in the trampled ground where the wagons stood, a line of the fire ones knelt in the mud: stripped and bound, grey spears

around them. Twelve—small enough to count, so he counted. And two of the twelve were whelps. There was no mistaking it, now that he had learned to read them: the thin necks, the heads too big for the shoulders, the way they tried to make themselves small and did not know how.

Over them stood a grey one who was old—old past mistaking, even among the bare ones. There was white in the hair on his face, and a stillness in him that the spear-men stood careful of, the way pack members stand careful of an elder whose teeth are still good. And in front of the old one, another grey was shouting. This one had red cloth at his arm—not the one from the line; that one was still where the fighting bent worst. A lesser one, then, with the same mark. His blade was out, and the shouting came up the slope to Kharai as sound with edges in it. No words. None were needed; the intent of it was plain at half a mile.

The old one did not move.

That was all, and it was everything. He stood over the kneeling meat and did not move, and the shouting beat against his stillness the way the fire rushes had beaten against the wall, and wore itself out the same way. The blade went back into its place. The lesser one went with it. The twelve were not killed. He watched a water-skin go down the line of them, watched the whelps drink with their bound hands shaking, watched them left breathing.

Kharai lay behind his rock and tried to file it.

Madness. It had to be madness: meat that had tried to kill you, caught and bound and paid for in grey blood—and you gave it water. The mad ones, for all their screaming, at least made the sense a snared thing makes. This made no sense at all.

It would not stay filed.

That was the trouble. He had watched frenzy all morning, and he had watched arithmetic, and he knew both when he saw them—and this was neither. The old one had stood against his own pack's teeth for meat that

could not fight back. There was no profit in it anywhere that Kharai could find, and a thing done without profit was madness, or it was meant.

He looked one last time at the two of them—the mad ones and the wall, the valley churned to mud and meat between them—and found that something had gone out of him, somewhere between the shadow and the waterskin. He was not afraid of them any more. He could not have said when that had happened. They were terrible, both of them, and he was one orc with a bone knife; none of that had changed.

But what had come in place of the fear was worse.

They reminded him of nothing so much as a den with the scent gone wrong, turning on itself in the dark.

* * *

He left while the noise was still at its height.

It was not a decision, or not the kind he knew how to make. One moment he lay behind the slab, cataloguing the scent of old ash and iron; the next his body was already leaving, moving backwards down the scree with the slow patience of a stone that had been growing there all morning. He did not let himself think about it. Thinking was for dens and councils; a lone orc with a bone knife did things the way a body does: because the body had had enough.

The going took him an hour on his belly. The scree was unreliable—new rock, not yet ridden down by weather—and every shift of his weight wanted to send a stone skipping down into the valley where the battle roared. He learned its language inch by inch, testing each hold the way One-Ear had taught him to test a trail: put no more than half your weight where the stone has not already promised. Behind him, the noise fell away by degrees. First it was battle again, with edges—a voice rising separate, the crack of something heavy on something hollow. Then it was weather, a long surf that no longer had screams in it. Then wind. Then nothing.

He reached the far ridge as the light began to shear long and gold across the raw scarps. Below and behind him, the valley still held its two tribes, but he did not turn around. He had seen enough of them to know the rest. The mad ones would go on shedding at the back, and it would not be a rout. It would be a wasting. And at the narrow end the grey line would still be standing, thinner than it had stood at dawn, but standing. That was all he needed to know. The wall would hold a little longer. The mad ones would be fewer by dark. Neither fact belonged to him.

On the far ridge he stopped, and could not remember which direction the noise had been.

The silence was enormous. It came up out of the broken ground and pressed against the inside of his ears, and for the first time since the mountain broke he was alone without the sound of others anywhere in it. There was wind. There was the tick of loose stone somewhere below. There was his breath.

None of it was enough.

A pack that tears at itself is the opposite of the thing his people had lost. He had known that all day. Watching it did not make him less alone; it made him more, by the exact measure of every grey rank closing shoulder to shoulder, every fire whelp shoved forward into the arithmetic. He was the only piece of his den left upright in the world, and the world went on killing without him.

He walked into the silence. It did not get smaller.

* * *

The week after was hunger, and he let it be hunger.

He found water by the old rules. At first light he watched the insects: where they hovered low and crossed and recrossed a patch of ground, there was water under the stone, and he dug for it with his hands. He ate roots the colour of old blood, the ones that gave no taste but filled the belly the

way clay fills a crack. He stalked a marmot for half a day across a slope of loose slide, moving only when the wind moved, and missed it by the width of a hand; he sat with the miss while the sun climbed, then got up and went looking for beetles under the bark of the blown-down pines. The beetles were small and bitter and alive, and he ate them anyway.

A raven-crowded carcass gave him a meal on the third evening. It was a mountain goat, or what was left of one, and the birds rose up at his coming like a black cloth shaken out. He took the ribs they had not split and the soft part under the shoulder, and he ate it standing, watching the ravens watch him from the rocks. They understood. A carcass was not a place; it was a dispute, and the dispute was only ever about who was still hungry.

The breath-work was the only thing that kept his centre from going. He did it while he walked, the old pattern: three steps to the breath in, three to the breath out, then the long hold where the blood moved without him. Arte Pankration was called truth in movement, but it was also truth in stillness, and the stillness was what he needed. He was not a fighter—had known that since his first cut—but he had been taught the first forms as every den-cub was: how to find the middle of the body and not lose it. The hungry week tested that teaching more than any sparring ever had. The middle held. Just.

He searched for orc-sign everywhere and found none.

No cairns. No trail-marks cut into the new soft stone. No shaved-fur offerings at the high places, left for the dead-who-are-coming-back. In country that should have held orcs, the land was empty of them. It was the wrongest kind of empty, worse than the absence of game. If there were orcs left anywhere, they were gone ahead, or gone aside, or gone under the moving mountains—and he could not tell which.

The Burning was everywhere. Scarp-lines still bright where the rock had torn, shedding pebbles at a touch. A whole slope of forest combed flat in one direction, tree after tree laid over like wet fur, the white splinters of

their trunks aimed all one way. Once, following a new shoreline that had not been there when old songs were made, he came to a place where the water stood cloudy over cut stones—walls, a doorway, a step going down into green murk. Hands had built it. The water had not finished taking it. He stood above the drowned steps for a long time, trying to remember what the songs said about the ones who built in stone. They had not been orcs. They had been before.

He crossed the signs of the bare ones too, always going the same way, over the passes. A dropped wooden toy, too small for a man's hand and too shaped for a stone. Cold dung-fires, the ash not yet scattered. Footprints, bare human feet, too many to count, and once a dead old woman covered over with stones by the trail. Someone had stopped and used their hands. It was the only thing he saw them leave that meant anything. He read it the way he read all sign, and filed it badly: a prey-herd moving, frightened, with children. He did not understand why that made him uneasy.

The fur pattern was the first thing he lost, and the sixth day was the day he took it back.

It had been blurring for weeks, the chevrons gone soft at the edges, the lines of them crossing the muscle in ways he had to remember rather than see. His dam had cut it. There was no one left to re-cut it. The fact had been waiting under every other fact, and on the sixth evening, in a hollow out of the wind, he took out the knife.

He did not speak over it. His people did not speak to the dead; the dead were busy, being new somewhere, and the knife was only bone. He folded the edge against the meat of his shoulder where the old first chevron had been, and cut. The blade was sharp; his hand was not steady. The new chevron came up crooked, a little too high, and the cut stung as it met the cold air.

It was the best thing he had felt in weeks.

He did not say his dam's name. He said nothing at all. But when he put the knife away, the pattern was no longer only a thing she had done. It was a thing he was doing.

On the seventh day, the trail changed under him.

Horse-sign. Fresh dung, still whole, the smell of it rising in the sun. And under the horse-smell, a people-smell he had no category for: milk-smoke, felt, fat, the smoked old smell of animals kept close. Not ash and tallow, not iron. Not the bare ones he had watched. Something else.

He stood on the trail with the smell in his nose and let it settle.

Then he left the trail, and climbed to where he could see what made it.

* * *

He found them at first light from a crag above the pass road.

They came up out of the east, moving through the grey stone as if the pass were a thing they owned and not a wound in the mountains. Forty to sixty riders, maybe more, the column strung out in the old way: outriders thrown fore and aft, the flanks covered by pairs working the higher ground, the remounts herded inside the line, and in the middle the children and the pack-animals and the old women with their braids done up in cloth. Felt and fur and bone toggles. Short bows, unstrung or strung under hide. There was bone-work in their harness that looked almost like orc-bone, but not quite, as if someone had come to the same answer from a different direction. The horses were rough-coated and small and sure-footed, and they moved with their heads up, smelling the same wind he smelled.

For one clean moment, his chest went warm.

They moved like a Raude moved. Not as the grey wall had moved, not as the screaming fire herd had moved—but as a thing alive in all its parts, each rider a finger of the same body. They had the walking in them. He had heard it in the songs; he had not seen it in anything alive since the mountain took his den.

It was the first time in seven weeks that loneliness had loosened its teeth.

He sat very still on the crag and let them pass below him. They were low-built, weathered, practical, with the earth in their clothes and the wind in their faces. Not bare ones the way the valley had been full of bare ones. These ones looked—the thought came strange and uninvited—orcish. The way they sat their horses, easy and patient. The way their gear was made of the same world they moved through, not bolted onto it.

He liked them immediately.

He did not trust that liking at all.

For two days he shadowed the column at a distance he measured by the reach of a bow. It was not hard. They left a road behind them plain enough for a cub to follow—not careless, but not hiding; this was their country, and they moved through it with the confidence of a pack that had made its peace with being seen. He read their camp-discipline from the ridgelines above: the dung buried, the sentries changed in darkness, no fires after dusk. People who expected bad news.

At night he watched their fires from beyond the warm radius, counted the sentries, listened to the sound of their voices carrying across rock—no words, only sound with shape, the same sound a den makes at the end of a long day. It was the first time he had heard people-sound that did not make the fur on his neck rise. He wanted, more than he had wanted food, to go down to it.

He did not. Riders with bows were death, and he was not a fool. The wanting was not a map.

On the second afternoon, the rearguard rider half-turned in the saddle.

He was a low, wide man on a stolid horse, and he looked straight at the scree where Kharai lay for three long breaths. Not searchingly. Not with alarm. The way a hunter looks at a slope and notes that the wind has changed. Then he turned back to the road and rode on.

Kharai let out a breath he had not known he was holding.

The pass had been full of war before the riders came: abandoned carts with their wheels broken, a horse left dead and already wrong-looking, the traffic-scars of an army that had gone through fast. There was blood on the stone in places, black now, and the smell of old fire under the clean wind. The riders moved through it without stopping, the way water moves through a field of rocks. They watched the south-east. The outriders kept turning their heads that way, over their shoulders, as if whatever they expected was behind them and gaining.

Kharai watched the south-east too, and saw nothing.

On the third day, the pass began to climb. The air thinned and the stone went grey and the riders ahead of him slowed to let the horses breathe. He kept to the high ground, moving when they moved, stopping when they stopped, until he noticed that the light beyond the crest was wrong.

It was too wide. Too flat. Too shining, as if the world fell away there into a place made of more light than ground.

He left the riders' trail and climbed, hand over hand, up the last scarp to where he could see what they were riding into.

* * *

The world opened.

He lay on the crest with his hands on the cold stone and looked out, and for a long time he did not understand what he was seeing.

It was not the world he had crossed. It was the world the Burning had made when it broke the mountains. Below him the land fell away in fresh scarps, one after another, raw as butcher's cuts, their edges still sharp and white with new breakage. The ground was a country of displaced ridges, whole slopes flung down and left where they had landed, the grass still pale with shock. And beyond them, in a bowl of new stone that had no business holding anything, lay a lake. It was still. It did not shine like water fed by a river; it gleamed like water that had nowhere to go, no stream in and no

stream out, the light lying on it flat and wrong. The world had broken here, and the water had come up out of the broken places and stayed.

He had seen that water before. From the cave mouth, the day he climbed out, on the other side of the mountains, with every step he had taken since lying between. It could not be this water. It was the same water: the same flat shine, the same stillness, the same refusal to move. Either the Burning had made the same thing twice, or the world had fewer places in it than he had been taught. It had followed him, or he had been walking towards it all along.

Then his eyes went past it, and found the steppe.

It stood beyond the lake country, north and away, stretching to a horizon the mountains had never allowed. A dry grass ocean, pale and moving under the wind. The same grass ocean he had left on the far side of the Accursed Mountains, seven weeks and a world ago. He stared at it and the shape of things moved inside him. Steppe behind; steppe ahead. As if the world had been one country all along, and nobody had told the mountains.

He was not looking at the far side of the pass. He was looking at the far side of the old wall that had held his den in its shadow.

And at the edge of that grass, where the broken ground gave way to open country, something stood.

It was two miles off, perhaps three; the clear air made the distance lie. But there was no lying about the stillness. Ten, perhaps twenty, heavily armed, standing quiet at the steppe's edge with their backs to him, facing north. They did not shift. They did not look back. Patience came off them the way heat comes off a stone in the sun—the stillness of creatures that were not hiding, but waiting.

The shoulders. He saw them from two miles away, and the shoulders were enough.

The shaved patterns caught the low light in lines too straight for fur grown wild. Orcs.

They were not his den. He could see the cuts were wrong even at this distance: different chevrons, different spacing, the marks of another Raude, a strange one. Their gear was foreign. Their waiting was aimed at something he could not see. None of it mattered.

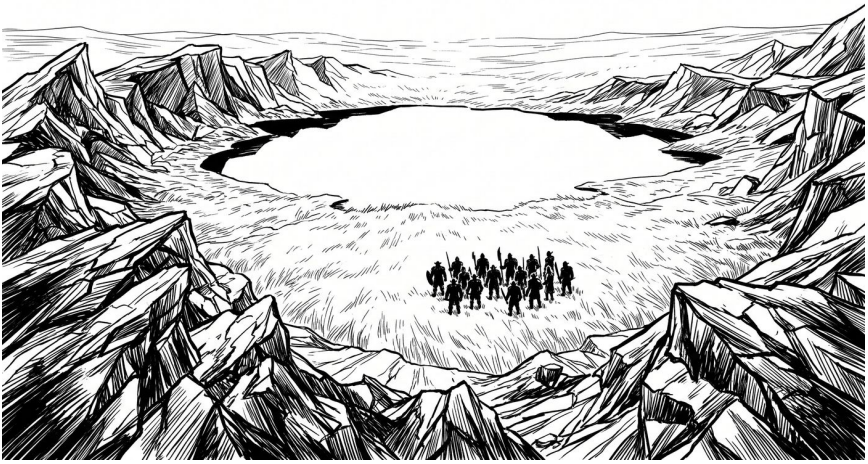
He was moving before he had decided.

Down off the rock, feet finding holds the body had seen before the mind; out of the scree, onto the long slope, through the scrub and the broken new stone, and then the grass opened under him. He crossed the open ground for the first time in seven weeks. The wind came at him out of the north, over the lake, over the troop, and it smelled of dry grass and horse and orc.

He did not call out. They had not turned. If he called, they would be real, and he was not ready for anything to be real. All he had was the walking.

One-Ear had given him the words, once, under a mountain that was not ashamed of its age: *A herd is not a place. A herd is the walking.*

Kharai walked.



The next world

# Armidion

*Write the next chapter yourself.*

The Western Reaches was written by its players, one letter a week. Armidion, a new world of The Flood Chronicles, has ten seats and opens as soon as seven players have committed to it.

You will rule a realm that survived the Flood. You decide who its people are, what they believe and what they will risk. Each week you write what your ruler does, and a Game Master answers with what the world did. The map is drawn around the players, not the other way round.

Committing is free. Nothing is paid until the world opens; after that, each turn costs £5, paid with the turn.

thefloodchronicles.net/armidion

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More tales from the Western Reaches: thefloodchronicles.net/tales