MIRACLES OF

SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

The Scarf

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 Scarf grew out of that play. Its people are the ones the season's decisions and disasters landed on.

Reading time: about 70 minutes.

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The Scarf

Aodhàn Mac-Talla

Autumn, 2 After the Flood. The Valleys of Nepor.

I

The doe came out of the Elvenwood just before first light, picking her way over the boundary as though there were no boundary, which for her there wasn't.

Elgin Farras had been standing in the alder scrub above the stream for the best part of an hour by then, cold in the particular way of a man who has chosen not to move. The wind came down-valley, which was right. The light was coming up, which was also right, though slowly. He watched the doe test the air, put her head down, test it again. Behind her, at the very edge of the trees, a fawn unfolded itself out of the shadow and came after her on legs that had not quite agreed to the arrangement.

No shot, then. He eased his string hand down and let them be.

The boundary here was three old oaks, spaced along the eaves, each with the elf-mark cut into it a long time back and the bark grown thick over the sign. Past them, the law of the Lord of Nepor stopped and the wood's own law began. Nobody felled in there, nobody grazed a goat in there, and if you wanted anything from the elves you asked in Aurec town and waited, sometimes a year. They were, on the whole, the best neighbours a valley could have, a thought Elgin had more than once, usually while touching the nearest oak on his way down to the hunt – out of habit, the way other men touched shrine-posts, though he would have been hard put to say what he was asking for. Luck, probably.

There was a legend in the valley that the Farras line had elf blood in it, that his grandmother was not entirely human. Elgin liked the legend enormously. It made him a quarter elf, by his own arithmetic, and he kept a private list of evidence: the tracking, the bow, the way he sometimes knew where a deer would be before the deer had decided. It was probably nonsense. He touched the oak anyway.

The buck came out a hundred paces further along, old, grey-faced, alone. One arrow, behind the shoulder, and it was over quickly. Elgin gralloched him where he fell, hung what he could not carry out of fox-reach, and shouldered the rest for home.

Eavesend was a dozen houses where the middle valley gave way to the eaves, too small for any map, and the Farras stead was the last of them. His mother was salting fish at the side table and did not look up, which was her way. His grandmother was in the kitchen room with Gudrun Sarl, a farmwife from down the lane, and the air in there had the feel of a sentence being passed.

'A charm,' Grandma Farras was saying, in the tone of a woman reading out a death warrant. 'For the star.'

'It gets bigger every night,' Gudrun said. 'Dreams preserve us, but there it is, bigger. And they say –'

'They say.'

'They say it's a sign. A brand, like. From the judgement.' She dropped her voice on the last word, as if the judgement might be listening.

Grandma Farras – Hildr Farras in the tax book, Grandma to the whole valley, and feared in at least three others – looked at her for a moment. She had been a beauty once and still carried it, which did not make her impatience any easier to be on the wrong end of. She had been angry for as long as Elgin had known her, angry at stupidity principally, and since the Waters the stupidity had been coming up the valley like meltwater. Not the Flood itself; Nepor had got off with a wet year. What came after was the

trouble: the old order gone, the roads nervous, men preaching fire at the forest edge, and now a new star for people to be frightened of. Elgin did not pretend to understand it. His grandmother understood it, loudly and at length, and he admired her for it without reservation, which he suspected put him in a small minority.

'Here's what I have for you, Gudrun Sarl,' his grandmother said, and reached a jar down from the shelf. 'A charm against the star I have not got. Nobody has, and anyone who sells you one is a thief. Salve for the cow I have got, because cracked teats are a real thing, which is more than anyone can say for brands in the sky. Rub it in morning and night. Take her off the wet ground. And sleep in your bed at night instead of standing in the yard looking up – the star will manage without an audience.'

'But they say –'

'Stop listening to men who earn their bread from your being frightened. Off you go. And Gudrun.' The farmwife paused in the doorway with the jar clutched to her. 'Water your milk a little less. People notice.'

The door shut. Elgin discovered a great interest in unshouldering the deer, but not quickly enough.

'And you can stop grinning.' His grandmother did not turn round from the shelf. 'Stood in the alders an hour, I'll wager, watched a doe with a fawn go by, and came home with an old buck you could have shot from the door.'

She could not have known about the doe. There was no way she could have known about the doe. Elgin hung the buck and said nothing, which was what you said.

After supper he went out to see to the hanging. The night had come up clear, and there it was, low in the east over the dark line of the Elvenwood: the new star, with a tail on it now, unless he was imagining the tail.

Brighter than yesterday.

It was a beautiful thing, if you didn't think about what it might mean. Elgin tried not to think about what it might mean, with the usual success.

2

The wind changed an hour before dusk and cost him a deer.

He had been on the stag since mid-afternoon – a yearling, fat on lower-pasture grass, moving unhurried along the stream where the meadow gave way to the eaves. Elgin had the range and was down to his breathing when the wind swung round off the forest and brought smoke with it, and under the smoke, singing. The stag's head came up. It went into the alders without hurry and without fear, and that was that.

Smoke, though. Smoke at the eaves was accident or trespass, and both of those were Farras business. He went after it with his temper for company.

The fire was at the Old Hearth, which did not surprise him once he thought about it. The ruin stood a bowshot from the boundary oaks: four walls of tumbled stone out of the drowned age, black with old weather, and at one end a hearthstone the size of a cart, the only thing in the place that had kept its purpose. Somebody had built tonight's fire in it, a big fire, and round it stood forty people singing something he didn't know.

The singing stopped while he was still deciding whether to go home. A man climbed up onto the hearthstone – Brother Callun, the fire-folk's speaker, grey and spare and ordinary, a man you'd pass at market without a glance. Elgin knew what everyone knew about him: the wet years had taken his wife, and the fire had answered when nothing else did. It didn't make what followed better. If anything it made it worse, though Elgin could not have said why.

'You remember the rain,' Callun said. He spoke quietly, and the quiet carried. 'The rain that didn't stop. The water in the door. Some of us lost

more than doors. That was judgement, brothers and sisters. The world had earned it.'

Elgin stood at the edge of the light and glared. He had lost a deer to these people. He wanted them to know he was there.

'And now look east at nightfall.' Callun's arm came up, and there it was, low over the dark line of the Elvenwood, the tail clear tonight, no imagining about it. 'There's a brand in the sky and it grows. The fire set it there the way you'd brand a beast. Marked. And ask yourselves what came among us before the water came. Ask what lives next door, under the trees, answering to no law and no lord and no faith, watching us, waiting.' He let it sit. 'The foreign brought the Flood down on us. And the foreign is still here.'

Faces turned. Somebody's lantern shifted, and the light found Elgin – a valley boy with a bow on his shoulder and fury on his face, in full view, not moving. A murmur went through the singers. Near the front a big netmender Elgin half-knew from market days looked round and then quickly didn't. Elgin would rather have had the hard look.

The singing started up again, and Elgin stayed. Going home now would feel like being sent.

It was at the fire's edge, a little apart from the rest, that he saw the girl.

She was about his own age, dark-haired, her face lit from below and doing nothing at all. Everyone around her had their mouths open and their eyes shut. She wasn't singing.

She looked up – across the fire, across the ruin, straight at him. The look lasted a breath, maybe two.

He forgot, for the length of it, that he had ever wanted a deer.



3

He knew her for fire-folk before she spoke, because nobody else in the valley wore mourning grey when they weren't mourning anyone.

She was standing on the far bank with her feet in the water, skirts kirtled up like a fishwife, and for a long moment neither of them moved. Elgin had a string of grayling and his wading boots on. She had a shawl she'd plainly grabbed in a hurry and a look on her face he recognised from every deer he'd ever surprised in a clearing: weighing the distance home.

'You're the boy who glared,' she said.

'You're the girl who didn't sing.'

Something happened at the corners of her mouth, not quite a smile, not not one. She picked her way over the stream stones towards him, wobbled on the second one, caught herself, and sat down on the bank a courteous distance away, the way you'd sit near a strange dog you had hopes of.

'Senja Hollev,' she said. 'Of the Aurec Hollevs. The net-mender's daughter.'

'Elgin Farras. Eavesend.'

'I know. Everyone knows the Farras stead.' She said it neutrally, but he heard what sat under it – the feared grandmother, the legend, all of it – and she heard him hear it, because she added, 'I didn't mean anything by it.'

'You can,' said Elgin. 'We're proud of it.'

She was out, she told him – not straight away, but on the third thing they talked about – because there was singing tonight at the Old Hearth, and she had told her mother her head hurt, which was half true, and had come down to the stream instead, which was the other half of the cure. Elgin cleaned his grayling while she talked, because his hands wanted something to do that wasn't him.

The star came up early, as it did now. They watched it come clear over the dark line of the trees.

'Brother Callun says it's a brand,' she said. 'That the fire set it there. Marked, like a beast.'

'My grandmother says it's a star.'

'And which is it?'

Elgin considered. He was nineteen and had a girl sitting next to him asking what he thought the sky meant, and he understood, dimly, that there were better and worse answers. 'It's a star,' he said. 'My grandmother's never wrong about things you can check.'

That got the almost-smile again. 'My father says the world's ending.'

'What do you say?'

She picked up a flat stone, turned it over, put it down without throwing it. 'I think it might be changing,' she said. 'Ending is easier. Ending, you're off the hook. Changing, you have to decide things.' Then, as if she'd said too much, she told him about the rumours from over the eastern mountains – a pedlar in Aurec town swearing that dragons had crossed the high passes, that whole goat herds had gone missing off the summer pastures, that a man in the next valley had seen one come down out of the sky at dusk, big as a mill-wheel. Elgin said his grandmother said there hadn't been a dragon east of the Stonecrowns in living memory, and that the pedlar had probably seen a buzzard, and the goat herds had probably been seen too, by wolves. Senja said her father said the pedlar had no call to lie. Elgin said pedlars didn't need a call, it was a gift.

She laughed. It came out of her suddenly, too loud, and she clapped a hand over her mouth and looked back over her shoulder towards the Old Hearth – nothing there, the eaves dark and quiet – and when she turned round again she was laughing still, quieter, like something let out of a box and not quite caught.

After a while, because the sky had them both, she asked it.

'Is it true what he says? About the elves?'

'Which part?'

'That they watch us. That they're waiting for something. That they –' she hunted for the word Callun would have used and visibly decided against it, '– that they're not like us.'

Elgin thought of the boundary oaks, the bark grown over the old marks. He thought of the year you asked the wood for something and waited, and the way you were answered or not answered, politely, in Aurec town, by people with better cheekbones than seemed entirely fair.

'The strangest thing about the elves,' he said, 'is that they leave people alone.'

She looked at him. 'That's strange?'

'You tell me. You've met Callun.'

She laughed again, and this time she didn't look over her shoulder.

They talked until the light went – about the Flood, a little, carefully, the way you walk a frozen pond: his father, dead of the wet-years fever when Elgin was small, whom he remembered mostly as a smell of wool and river water and a pair of hands fletching an arrow; her father, before the fire took him – her phrase, and she heard it herself and went quiet – a net-mender out of Aurec town who could throw a cast-net so it opened like a flower, before the harbour silted and the trade went and there was no mending left that would keep a family.

'He still mends,' she said. 'Other people's nets, when they'll let him. For nothing, half the time. He says the fire gave him back his pride.' She turned the flat stone over again. 'I don't know what he means. He was prouder when the nets were his.'

The stream went on about its business. Somewhere up the valley a dog barked and stopped.

'I should go back,' she said, and didn't get up. 'They'll sing for another hour. Then there's the walking round the fire, and the names of the drowned.' She said it without mockery, and that made it sadder. 'It's not all –' she gestured at the sky, the wood, the whole accused world. 'Some of it's just people who lost things. Standing together. That's a real thing too.'

'I know,' said Elgin, and did know, because he had a grandmother who frightened the valley and a mother who salted fish and didn't look up, and he understood that people were mostly doing their best with what had happened to them. He didn't say any of it. He said, 'Will your head hurt again next week?'

She stood and shook the wet out of her shawl. 'Heads are unreliable,' she said gravely. 'Mine especially.'

She went back the way she'd come, over the stones, steadier now. At the far bank she stopped.

'Farras of Eavesend.'

'Hollev of Aurec.'

'If it is a brand,' she said, '– the star – then it's a brand on all of us. Not just the elves. He never says that.'

Then she was gone into the alders, and Elgin sat on the bank a while longer with three cleaned grayling going soft in his creel, and thought about how strange it was that the elves left people alone, when leaving people alone was clearly the easiest thing in the world, and the thing nobody could manage.

4

His grandmother caught the smell before he had got his coat off.

'Woodsmoke.'

'There are fires in the valley, Grandma.'

'And fools round them. Which were you?'

Elgin hung his coat by the door. It had been hanging there since the bonfire, apart from the hours he wore it, and she had chosen tonight to notice. Or tonight to mention it, which with his grandmother was a different matter and usually the more troublesome one.

'They were at the Old Hearth. I went to see.'

'And have you seen?'

He set the grayling on the table. Three fish, cleaned, a perfectly respectable reason for having been out until dark. She gave them the attention they deserved and no more.

'Callun,' she said. 'Standing on a stone telling hungry people whose fault their hunger is. Did he point at the wood?'

'Yes.'

'They always point. Saves them having to do anything with their hands.'

She took a dish down and laid the fish in it, examining the gills of each despite his having caught them himself and carried them home, which ought to have settled the question of freshness. Elgin watched her thumb lift the red folds. He had been looking forward to supper.

'There were people remembering the drowned,' he said.

'And while they remembered, he told them who to hate. A useful evening's work.'

'You weren't there.'

'Was I needed?'

He could hear Senja saying that some of it was just people who had lost things, standing together. It had sounded reasonable by the stream. Here, with his grandmother arranging fish in a dish, he found himself wanting to defend it before he had worked out how.

'They're not stupid, Grandma. They're afraid.'

She gave a short, unpleasant laugh.

'Then they can be both. Fear has never stopped anyone being stupid. It generally helps.'

'You talk as though they've chosen it.'

'They've chosen to listen.'

'Who else talks to them?'

Her hand stopped over the dish.

It was a small satisfaction and he regretted taking it almost at once, though not enough to give it back.

'Their own scripture tells them to feed the stranger at the fire,' she said. 'Feed him. Ask Callun about that passage next time he's sending you to

look under the trees. He knows the words well enough when he wants bread for his congregation.'

'You've read it?'

'Somebody ought to.'

She reached for the salt.

Elgin had never doubted that she knew more than other people. She knew what would bring down a fever and what would merely make the patient expensive to bury; she knew which field would flood before its owner admitted there was water in it. Apparently she knew Callun's faith better than Callun did. Yet he wondered, for the first time, whether her anger was wisdom, or whether knowing so much could somehow make a person less wise.

He could not ask her that. He was brave enough to sit by a stream with a girl, but there were limits.

'Grandma?'

'What?'

'Is it true about us? About the elf blood?'

She looked at him.

He had seen that look turn grown men back from the doorstep. On this occasion he stayed where he was, and learnt nothing whatsoever.

'Wash your hands,' she said. 'You smell of fish.'

He went to the basin. Behind him she set the dish beside the hearth, where the heat would take it slowly, as he liked it.

5

The second time she came to the stream, she brought no shawl and no hurry and no pretence of a headache. The third time, he let her follow him.

'You walk,' she said, 'like you're about to catch something or be caught.' She said it admiringly, which was the only reason he didn't take offence.

He taught her track in the afternoons, when the deer were lying up and there was time. Not to hunt – he made that clear, and she made it clear she had no wish to. But to read. Here a roe had turned, here a fox had thought about a hare and decided against it, here a man had passed three days ago carrying something heavy on his left shoulder. She had a quick eye and no patience, which was the worst combination a tracker could have and the most endearing to teach. She would stride ahead and flatten sign, then come back and stand over it, accusing, as though the ground had moved the print on purpose.

'You frightened it,' he said.

'You said these were tracks.'

'Prints don't grow legs, Senja.'

She taught him songs in return. This turned out to be a poor bargain, because the fire-folk's songs were not the marching fire he had expected. They were homesick songs. The drowned south ran through all of them: harbour towns Elgin had only heard named, orchards his people had never had the climate for, a woman standing on a quay singing to a ship that did not come. Senja's voice was small and plain and true, and she would not sing them until they were deep enough among the trees that Callun's god, if he was watching, might be thought to have other things on his mind.

'It doesn't sound like a faith,' Elgin said once, after a long one about a drowned city.

'The singing's not the faith part.' She said it lightly, then not lightly. 'The singing's what's left after.'

He did not know what to do with that, so he showed her where the otters had been, and she was glad to change the subject, and neither of them said anything about why a faith should leave anything after.

The scarf came in the fourth week.

She produced it from a pocket like a conjuring trick, but badly – she had been carrying it all afternoon and had forgotten it twice, so that the giving had the air of something rehearsed and abandoned.

'Here.'

'What's this?'

'Valley wool. Mother wove it.' A long strip of undyed grey, soft from the loom, and through it, just once, a single red thread. 'So you smell of smoke,' she said, 'and nobody wonders why.'

He understood the joke at once and laughed, and then the laughter stopped, because she was putting it around his neck and tying it, and it stopped being a joke the moment it was on him.

'There,' she said, not quite meeting his eye. 'Now you belong to us, and everyone will know.'

It smelled faintly of smoke and of the old house and of something else he could not name and would have known anywhere. He reached up and made sure the one red thread lay where it could be seen, which was a strange thing to want, and he wanted it.

The near-discovery was the fifth week, on the far side of the alders, where the old path from the Old Hearth came down to meet the stream.

Senja stopped mid-sentence. Elgin heard it at the same instant – steps on the path, unhurried, a man walking like he owned the ground – and there was no time to weigh it and no need; they went to ground together the way that dread makes two people decide everything at once.

There was a fallen trunk, rotten down one side, and not enough cover behind it for dignity, only enough for the two of them, if she did not breathe and he did not breathe. She did not breathe. He did not breathe. Shoulder to shoulder, he could feel her heart or hers his, there was no telling, and Callun passed within five paces, grey and spare and staring straight ahead as a man going somewhere with a sermon in him.

He did not see them. He went on down the path, and the sound of him faded until there was only the stream.

Neither of them moved for a long count after. Elgin became aware, slowly, of how close the two of them were – aware of it in places Brother Callun would have had words for – and of the smell of smoke off his own scarf, and of the absurd and enormous fact that he did not want to move at all.

'Safe,' he whispered, finally, because one of them had to.

'The stars be thanked,' she whispered back, which was not her people's oath and she knew it, and then she was laughing into her hand, shaking, the two of them holding the trunk between themselves and the gone man and trying to keep the sound from carrying.

They walked back towards the valley in daylight for the first time, side by side, too far apart, and he kept looking at her and she kept not catching him at it, and by the time they reached the eaves the old question had become nothing he needed to ask anyone.

6

The rumours got to the valley before the news, which was how it worked, and by the first frost there was no telling them apart.

A carter passing through from Aurec town sat in the kitchen while his horse drank, and talked of the old speech – the one Lord Nepomok had given a while ago, naming Pyrran a plague-monger – as though he had heard it himself, which by his own dates he had not. Pyrran was a fire faith of its own, not the Church's; its burning mountain was its own too. In the valley's mouth the two were one foreign thing, and no sermon had ever troubled to part them. The words had come back, though. They always came back when men wanted them to. Elgin filled the man's costrel and let him talk, because his grandmother would have and someone had to.

Aurec had acceded, the carter said: the Southern Valley had joined the Lord's peace as a duchy, its Queen ruling on under him as Duchess. Elgin thought of Senja and didn't know whether her people would count this as deliverance or as the noose settling. It seemed to him the two came dressed alike.

'And the Lord?' he asked.

'Setting timbers with his own hands, they say.'

That at least, the valley could believe.

The star grew brighter night over night, and the fire-folk's sermons grew harder in step with it. Elgin did not go to the Old Hearth again, but the sermons came to him anyway, in the tight mouths of neighbours and in the smaller fires that burned unasked at the edge of the eaves, where nobody would own to having set them. One evening, coming back late along the road, he saw what the week had made: an effigy of twigs and old cloth lashed to the boundary oak, too rough to name but wrong in a way that needed no name, and he cut it down and burned it where it stood and said nothing about it to anyone, because saying would have made it real.

The ugliness came to the valley elf the same week.

She was a trader from the eaves, old in the way elves were old, with a cart of finished cloth and a demeanour that had never in living memory offered anyone so much as offence, let alone harm. Two young men of the fire-folk followed her along the road a little way, not touching, and one of them called a word after her in a flat, carrying voice. The word meant nothing to Elgin; the tone did. The elf did not turn. She walked on with her cart as though the men were weather. Elgin would rather she had hurried. Her not hurrying made it an act of quiet courage, and it should never have needed to be one.

After that, nobody would speak of it, on either side, which was how a valley swallowed its own sickness.

It was Callun who found him, on the path above the stream.

The man came out of the tree-line and walked beside Elgin a stretch without speaking, and Elgin, who could go to ground under a speaker's nose and had done, walked on with his jaw shut and his mind on the one red thread at his throat and whether it could be seen.

'The old law lasted a long time,' Callun said at length, to nobody in particular. 'Longer than most. But the Dreamers dreamed it, and the foreign keeps it, and the water washed both clean. What's coming, the fire's already written.' He said it evenly, like a man reading from a page only he could see. 'Fold with it, hunter, or be folded into it.'

Then he was gone up the path, and Elgin stood a moment with his heart where his stomach ought to be, and understood that he had not been warned so much as told.

He found Senja at the stream that last time, before the break, and she knew before he opened his mouth.

'I keep thinking of the bonfire,' she said, 'and how we all stood warm around one fire and were not yet afraid of the people standing with us.'

'You weren't afraid then.'

'I wasn't brave either. I just hadn't been asked yet.'

She told him, low and fast, the things that had begun to be whispered in the congregation's own yard: that the elves had brought the Flood and watched in the trees for the moment to finish it, that the star was the fire's first finger pointing, that a time was coming when folk would have to choose a side and stand with their own. She was frightened of her people and for them in the same breath, Elgin saw, and loving her frightened him more than the words did.

'What will you do?' he asked.

'Sing the homesick songs,' she said, 'until someone asks me to sing the other kind. Then I don't know.'

There was a silence that had the stream in it, and the last light, and the nearness of a winter that would find them on different sides of a thing neither had made.

Then she said it, looking at him, and it was the first serious thing she had said to him with no joke close behind it.

'If we're ever made to go – look for the red thread. I'll leave it where you'd look.'

Elgin, not knowing he was hearing the last promise that would be made easily, heard it only as a cold thing she felt bound to say, and took her cold hands a moment, and said nothing at all.

7

The handbill went up on the shire-post at the crossroads, where the notices always went, and by mid-morning you could not get near it for people reading it twice.

Elgin read it in the crowd, over a neighbour's shoulder, and read the neighbour's mouth reading it, and then wrote it out in his head in the plainest words he had, because printed words never felt true until he had taken them apart.

All Pyrran believers were to leave the Valleys of Nepor. They had four days.

It said – the handbill said – that this was the Long Directive of Lord Nepomok, his reasoned counsel to a people, his protection of the valleys and their peace. Later, Elgin would learn that it was an abridgement: that a clerk in a chancery somewhere had boiled a long address down to a blunt order, and that the valley, a day from Aurec town and a lifetime from any chancery, had read the blunt order and thought it the whole of the man. The handbill promised nothing, explained nothing, and regretted nothing.

Four days.

All Pyrran believers. Which, here, meant the fire-folk. Which meant the people who sang at the Old Hearth and salted their dead with the names of the drowned. Which meant – Elgin stood in the road and did the arithmetic the way you shift a bad weight from arm to arm – which meant Senja Hollev and her father and every grey sleeve in the congregation.

A voice climbed over the murmur, somebody wanting to know if it was true about four days, and somebody else said it had to be, it was printed, and a third said his lordship had his reasons and who were we to read them. Then old Sarl, who had a temper and no love for any man's sermon, said the fires at the eaves had not lit themselves, and the word that had followed the elf-woman up the road had not spoken itself, and if the wood ever took it into its head to answer, it would not stop to ask who had started it. He said it without pleasure, and nobody argued with it, because it was true. Elgin did not stay to hear whose reasons won.

Sergeant Oddi came to the Hollev door in the afternoon, and Elgin, crossing the road with a shoulder of mutton for a creditor, saw the whole of it from one stride to the next and did not stop walking.

Oddi held a list, the paper folded once and much handled, and he stood on the step of a man he had grown up with and read out the names on it as if each one cost him something. He was a decent man. That was the part Elgin could not look away from and could not bear: not the order, but Oddi's face, a good man reading bad words in a careful voice and hating every line of it while he did.

'Aurec,' Oddi said, not loud, 'Harl Hollev. Senja Hollev.' And so on down the list, the Aurec Hollevs and their kin, four days to be gone, and the door did not open wider and did not shut, and Harl came out at last and took the names standing, and Elgin, at the far side of the road, kept walking because it was not his list and not his door and there was nothing in him that would have done either of them any good.

At the Farras stead his grandmother was reading the handbill like a thing she meant to throw into the fire and had decided not to give it the satisfaction.

'Stupidity answered with stupidity,' she said.

She said it once, flat, and then – this was the part Elgin did not understand until much later – she went on being furious in a different direction.

'You despise the fire-folk,' Elgin said, because he did not yet understand.

'I despise their fear,' she said. 'Fear is the only thing they've got, so they've made a god of it and pointed it at the elves. And now the Lord, who ought to know better, has answered fear with fear, and made every frightened farmwife in this valley more frightened, and called it protection.' She looked at the handbill as if the words on it had failed her personally. 'Four days. It isn't even time to sell a cow properly.'

She did not say anything for a while. Elgin had a long acquaintance with his grandmother's silences, and he knew this one for the dangerous kind – the kind where she was not done, where she was deciding the shape of what came next and whether it would be mercy or the other thing.

What she did next was take the basket down from the shelf.

She did it without ceremony, which is not the same as without meaning. Into it went a wrapped loaf, the good one, not the daily; a pot of salve, the same she had sold Gudrun Sarl for the cow; and, wrapped at the bottom, a little twist of dried herb Elgin knew cost more than the rest put together. She did not say what any of it was for or for whom, and that silence was louder than the first.

'Take it to the Hollevs,' she said. 'At dusk. And don't stand on the step like a man owed thanks, because you aren't.'

Elgin looked at the basket. Then he looked at her, and understood that he was being sent to do the one thing in the valley he was most afraid to do

and most needed to do, and that his grandmother, who despised his reasons, had seen both of those facts clearly and packed for them.

He went at dusk, ashamed and grateful, the basket heavy with bread it would break the Hollevs' pride to accept.

Harl Hollev opened the door before he had raised his hand, as though he had been standing on the other side of it a while.

For a long moment the two of them stood with the door between them, the hunter's son and the net-mender, and Elgin found he could not say the word that would make the basket acceptable, and Harl found he could not say the word that would make it leave, and so neither said anything the door could not have said better.

Then Harl took the basket.

He took it the way a man takes something he cannot afford to refuse – with both hands, and his back straight, and a dignity in the taking that made Elgin want to look away, and he did not look away, because that would have been a second refusal.

'Your grandmother,' Harl said, and it was not a question, or it was a question that already knew itself.

Elgin nodded.

Harl looked at the basket in his hands, the loaf, the salve, the little twist of herb that cost more than you would say in front of a hungry man. 'Tell her,' he said, and stopped, and started again, 'tell her we will not forget who fed us before the road.'

He did not say thank you. The word would not have stood upright in the doorway between them, and both of them knew it.

And Elgin, who had come to the door afraid of seeing Senja, stood on the step and was afraid in a different way, because she had not come to the door at all, and the house behind Harl had the stillness of a place already being packed into what could be carried.

The door shut, gently, which was somehow worse than if it had slammed.

Elgin went home through the dark with his grandmother's basket no longer heavy on his arm, and the valley going quiet around him the way a house quiets before the people in it leave.

8

They were leaving before morning.

Elgin heard it from his mother, who had heard it on the road. The carts were being loaded already. There was still time left on the handbill, but the congregation would not wait for the last of it.

'Tonight?' he said.

His mother nodded. He had one boot off and put it on again.

Outside, the frost had not yet taken. The path gave under his heels, and he went too fast down the first slope, catching himself where the mud had spread across the stones. He had walked home this way only a little while before. At the Hollev door he had thought there would be another day.

There had been nothing to stop him asking.

By the time he reached the houses, a cart was being backed into the road. Two men pushed at the wheel while a third held a lantern low, showing them the rut. The horse stood with its head down. Beyond it, more lanterns moved between doorways and the dark shapes of loaded carts.

He looked for Senja.

A woman came out carrying a cooking pot with folded cloth packed into it. She stood beside a cart while someone made room, then passed it up and went back for something else. There was no room for much else. Bedding rose above the sides, tied down with rope; beneath it he could make out the leg of a stool and a basket pushed sideways into a gap. The woman returned

with a smaller bundle and held it against her until a man reached down to take it.

Across the road, neighbours stood in their doorways. Elgin knew most of them by sight. One had his arms folded over his nightshirt; another held the door partly closed against the cold. They watched the loading, but when someone from the carts looked towards them, they found a buckle or a wheel or the ground to look at instead.

The congregation had been told to go, and now they were going. Nothing anyone did seemed to make this easier.

He found Harl beside a cart further up the street. The net-mender was drawing a rope tight over the load. His hands knew the work, though it was taking him longer than it should have; he pulled the knot open once and made it again.

'Can I help?'

Harl glanced at him.

'Hold that.'

Elgin took the rope where he pointed and leaned his weight against it. Harl worked the slack through, secured it, and tested the knot with both hands.

'That'll do.'

Elgin let go. A shallow groove remained across his palm.

'Where's Senja?'

'With her mother.'

Harl bent to lift a sack. Elgin caught the other end, and between them they got it over the side. The cart shifted on its springs. There seemed no place left for people.

'You've still got time,' Elgin said.

Harl kept his hands on the sack.

'To do what?'

Elgin had meant another day indoors, another night with a roof. He had meant a chance to see her somewhere that was not a street full of people being put out of their homes. None of it would have changed the order.

'We'll go while we can load our own carts,' Harl said.

He pushed the sack further in and turned away.

At the head of the line, Callun was helping an old man up to a seat. There was no sermon. Elgin could hear him asking whether the man had both his blankets. The answer was lost under the scrape of a wheel.

Somebody called for the lantern to be brought forward. A horse shook its harness. Elgin stepped into the road to look past the next cart, and a stone came out of the dark and cracked an old carter across the brow; the blood looked black in the lantern-light, and the man swayed on his feet. A militiaman caught the thrower by the front of his coat and shoved him into the mud.

The street went silent.

Oddi stood with his list open in both hands. His eyes stayed on it, though there could have been little enough light to read by.

Harl had gone rigid beside the cart. He did not look back.

Senja did.

She was on the far side of the load, one hand resting on the boards. Her face turned first towards the old carter, then towards the place where the militiaman stood. After that she saw Elgin.

He went to her.

Someone helped the carter sit. The militiaman stayed where he was, and the young man in the mud did not get up. Elgin recognised him, vaguely, as someone he had passed on the road and thought nothing about.

'Are you all right?' he asked Senja.

She nodded, too quickly.

She was dressed for the cold, with a woollen wrap pulled tight and her hair tucked beneath it. There was mud on the hem of her skirt. He noticed these things because he could see them, and because he could not make sense of her standing beside a cart that would take her away.

'Father,' she said.

Harl looked round.

'I'm getting in at the back.'

Her father's eyes passed over Elgin and settled on her. He nodded once and went forward to the horse.

Elgin followed her to the tailboard. She put a foot on the wheel, and he offered his hand. She took it without looking down, braced herself against him, and climbed into the narrow space left between the bundles.

Then she sat with her feet hanging over the back and kept his hand.

For perhaps half a minute they were almost at the same height.

'Your basket's under here,' she said, touching the bedding beside her.

'Keep it.'

'Mother said it ought to go back.'

'She can keep it.'

Senja nodded. Her fingers were cold. He closed his other hand around them, carefully, as though this were something useful he could do before she went.

'Which road?' he asked.

'North. Towards the Graemoor road.'

'All of you?'

'I think so.'

It would be the long way round. Everyone knew the southern neck was shut to the likes of them – the earthworks at the neck were his lordship's, and they did not open for the expelled. The road to Pyrran, for the people being pointed at it, began by going away from it. Elgin thought of the handbill, promising nothing and explaining nothing, and said none of it.

A man walked past them carrying a lantern. For a moment he could see her clearly, the tiredness beneath her eyes and the place where she had bitten her lower lip. Then the light moved on.

She looked at the scarf around his neck. One end had worked loose beneath his coat, and she reached out with her free hand and tucked it in. He felt her knuckles against his chest.

Neither of them said anything.

There were things he could have said about finding her, about roads and distances, about what would happen once the four days were over. He knew the paths along the eaves. Beyond them he knew what other people had told him. She was watching his face, and he could not give her a certainty he did not have.

The harness tightened at the front of the cart.

'Senja,' her father said.

'Yes.'

She answered without turning. Elgin held her hand for another moment, then loosened his fingers so she could draw hers away.

The cart moved.

He walked beside the tailboard for a few paces. She shifted her feet out of his way, an ordinary little movement, and it nearly undid him.

'Mind the wheel,' she said.

He stepped aside.

The next cart was coming. He had to let it pass, and then there was a horse between them and a lantern swinging from a board, and he could see only part of her face beyond the load.

She was still looking back.

He stood against the wall while the rest went by. Wheels pressed deep into the road. People walked beside them with bundles held close or strapped across their shoulders. One woman stopped to change the arm she

carried hers on, and the man behind her waited without speaking. Callun came near the end, on foot.

Across the street a door closed. Another stayed open until the last cart had passed.

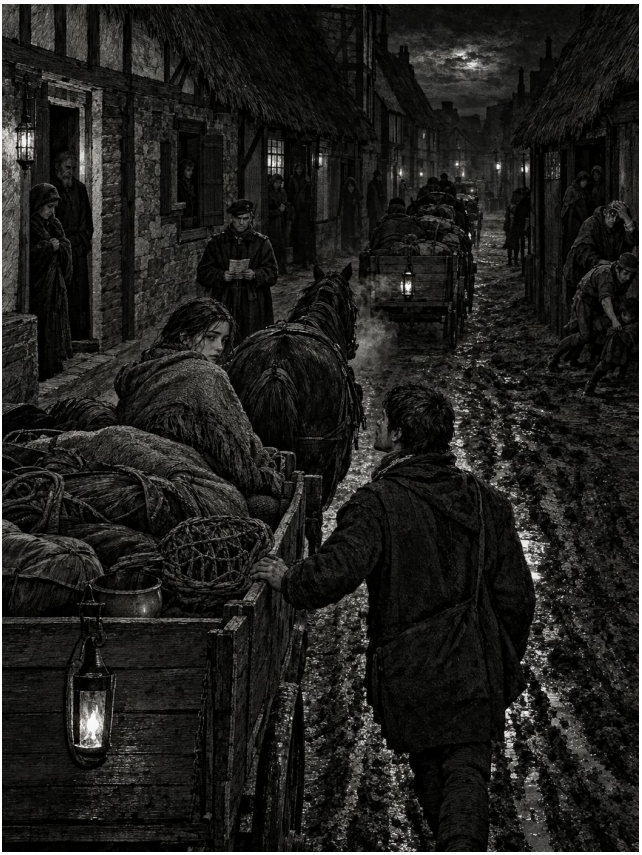
Elgin followed as far as the turn. From there the road ran north, and he could see the lanterns moving along it, close together at first, then further apart as the carts found their pace. He could no longer tell which was hers.

He put a hand inside his coat and found the soft edge of the wool. The single red thread was hidden in the dark.

She had nothing of his.

He searched his pockets then, too late, and found the small things he had carried all evening. He could have given her something. At the tailboard, while her hand was still in his, he could have thought of it.

He stayed until the last light went round the bend.



9

Elgin went out at dawn because there was nothing else a hunter could do with a morning, and the valley had used up its words.

The road north was empty. The wheel-ruts the carts had pressed into the frost were still there, frozen sharp, and he stood a moment reading them as he read any trail – so many axles, so much weight, the direction plain. Then he turned his back on the road and went up towards the eaves,

where there was meat to be had and work to do, and where, he told himself, nothing was expected of him.

The wood was quiet.

He noticed it the way you notice a missing tooth – by touching the place with your tongue. No birdsong. Not the thin, half-hearted winter kind, either. Nothing at all. He stood in the alder scrub where he had stood on the morning this all began, and the silence had a texture to it, a held quality, like a room where everyone has stopped speaking just before you came in.

At the stream, the tracks were wrong.

Deer sign, fresh, and a great deal of it – but moving downslope, all of it, does and yearlings and an old buck, heading for the valley floor at a pace that was not flight and was not grazing. At noon. Deer did not move at noon, not in cold weather, not in numbers, and not downhill towards men's dogs and men's doors. He followed the sign a little way, more out of disbelief than craft, and it did not change. The whole hillside was coming down.

He tried the ridge path above the Old Hearth, and there the dogs found their limit.

Old Becka, who had gone up that path a thousand times and would have followed a stag into his lordship's own hall, stopped dead at the first turn and stood with her legs braced and her head low, and would not go on. Not for the whistle, not for the hand-signal, not for the strip of dried meat that had never once in her life been refused. The young dog got further by the simple expedient of not knowing better, then thought better of it halfway up and came back with his tail down, and sat on Elgin's boot, and leaned.

Elgin stood with a dog on his foot and looked east, along the ridge, to where the Stonecrowns shouldered up out of the treeline.

The slopes were bare.

He did not understand it at first, because the absence of a thing is harder to see than the thing. There were always birds on those slopes. Crows

working the sheep-grass, kites on the warm air, the little dark crosses of them against the rock at any hour of any day he could remember. He stood a long time making sure, because it was the kind of thing a man got wrong and was laughed at for. The sky over the Stonecrowns was empty from end to end, and the rock faces stood in the thin sunlight with nothing on them at all, and the snow up high had no speck in it.

He thought of the pedlar's dragons, for one disloyal moment, and then put the thought down where he put most thoughts that began with a pedlar. A dragon was a thing you could see. Whatever had emptied the sky had done it without being seen, and that was worse.

Something tapped once against the inside of his chest, and it was his own heart, and he could not have said what it knew.

He went home by the stream path, and the wood around him stayed quiet, and the quiet stayed with him after he had left the trees, the way smoke stays in a coat. In the lower meadow three does stood in the open in broad daylight, and watched him pass, and did not run.

His grandmother was on the stoop when he came up the lane. She was looking south, though there was nothing to see that way but the sky, which was the colour it always was.

'Grandma,' he said. 'The birds have gone off the Stonecrowns.'

She looked at him for a moment, and whatever she saw in his face she did not mock it, which frightened him more than the birds had.

'I know,' she said, and went back to looking south.

Elgin stood beside her a while, because there was nowhere else to stand. The afternoon came down grey and ordinary over the valley, and the smoke rose from the chimneys of the houses whose people had stayed, and did not rise from the houses whose people had gone, and he thought about Senja on the open road, two days north, with her feet in the cold of a cart's tailboard.

He was still thinking it, and she was still two days north and getting further, when the ground moved.

Not much. A tremor, brief and deep, that came up through the soles of his boots and the bones of his legs and into the pit of his stomach, and was gone. The kind of thing you would swear had not happened, except that old Becka, asleep by the door, had come awake with her hackles up, and every pot on his mother's shelf had rung once, like a struck bell, and the stoop was still humming faintly under his feet.

Down in the valley, very faint, he heard a door bang, and a voice call out to another voice, and neither of them had an answer.

His grandmother's hand came out and took hold of the doorpost. He had never once, in nineteen years, seen her take hold of anything for support.

'Grandma?'

'Quiet,' she said, not unkindly. 'I'm listening.'

And Elgin, who had spent his whole life learning to read what the world was saying, stood in his boots on the trembling earth, and understood for the first time that the world had been saying something all day, in birdsong and deer-sign and the silence of the Stonecrowns, and that he had only just begun to hear it, and that it was already too late to answer.

10

The sky went copper on the fourth night.

Elgin saw it first from the yard, going to bar the shed, and stood with the bar in his hand and forgot to set it. It was not sunset – the sun was long down – and it was not dawn, and it was not the aurora, which he had seen twice in winters and which moved. This did not move. The whole southern quarter of the sky had gone the colour of a forge door, a deep burning red-brown that had no source and no edge and no business being there, and un-

der it, far away past the valley's southern wall, past everything he knew the name of, there was a light. Not a glow. A light, small and far and so bright it hurt, like a forge spark at the bottom of a well, and as he watched it grew brighter instead of dying, and went on growing brighter.

'Grandma.'

She came out. She looked south for a long time. The copper light lay on her face like lamplight, and he saw her read it as she read everything, and he saw her not find a name for it, which he had never seen before.

'Get your mother,' she said, and her voice was quite calm, which was worse than shouting. 'And bring the dogs in.'

The tremors came first, before midnight. The one on the stoop had been a warning knock; these were the door coming off its hinges. They came in waves, minutes apart, then breaths apart, the earth under the valley floor rolling like a slow sea, and the stead's timbers groaned, and everything on every shelf that could fall fell. Outside, in the gaps between the shaking, Elgin could hear the valley making sounds it had no right to make: a tree going over somewhere up the slope, a long splintering, and then, from far down the valley, a roar that was not thunder and did not stop.

The river ran backwards.

He saw it in the morning, because nobody slept, and he was on the ridge path before first light with Becka pressing against his leg. The Aurec ran north out of the lake and down the valley; it had done so for as long as the valley had stood in anyone's memory, and on that morning it ran up it. He stood on the ridge and watched the water climb back over its own bed, brown and heaving and full of torn trees, flowing south against the lie of the land, towards the burning sky, and his mind kept offering him explanations and he kept refusing them, because every explanation his mind offered was worse than the thing he was watching.

It ran backwards for the better part of an hour, and then it remembered itself, and came down again all at once.

The second day was when the valley learnt what the signal posts were for.

The border earthworks stood at the valley's southern neck – dykes and walls and banks that his lordship's people had thrown up after the Waters, when everyone said it was soldiers' work with no soldiering left in it, mud and timber and a line of tall posts with fire-baskets on top. Elgin had walked past them a hundred times and thought about them not at all.

At midday the southernmost post lit its basket. Then the next, and the next, the fire running north up the line towards Aurec town, and behind the line, over the valley wall, the copper glare stood at noon the way it had stood at midnight, and the light in the far south was a light no one cared to look at twice.

What came up the valley over the next two days was not an army. It was the border settlers – the families who had taken land at the southern neck, closest to whatever the sky was doing. They came up the road with their goods in barrows and their children on their backs, and every one of them was alive, and every one of them had left a house standing empty behind them, and the signal posts had given them the hour in which to do it. The dykes held back most of what the river tried to do. The walls took the water sideways into the old wash-channels. The houses went. Elgin heard it from a settler who sat in the Farras kitchen with a bowl of his mother's broth, and who said, in the flat voice of a man too tired to grieve: 'I stood on the earthworks and watched my own roof go under. I had time to watch it, because the baskets were lit.' He turned the bowl round in his hands. 'I don't know which of those two I'll dream about.'

Nobody could tell anyone what was happening in the south.

The rumours did what rumours do. A pedlar who had been four days south came through and said the mountain had come down – the whole

mountain, the burning one, Pyrran's own peak, gone into the sea. A carter said the sea had come up instead, and was still coming. A settler woman said her cousin had seen the far southern sky catch fire like a thatch roof, all of it, horizon to horizon. A man from Aurec town said that a wood-elf had stood at the town gate on the third day, spoken one sentence to the gate-guard, and gone back into the trees. The sentence had been passed from mouth to mouth all the way up the valley, and by the time it reached Eavesend it had been improved so many times that no two tellings matched. Elgin's grandmother heard the third version and the fourth, and said only that when the elves spoke one sentence, they meant one sentence. 'The valley,' she said, 'has plainly decided to write the rest of the letter itself.'

The one thing every telling agreed on was this: nobody knew. The sky burned, the earth shook, the sea stood up and walked – and no one in the Valleys of Nepor, man, woman or elf, could say why. They never did learn.

The star was gone from the east.

On the second night Elgin sat on the stoop and watched the southern glow and did the arithmetic he had been doing since the carts went north.

Senja had had four days' start. The carts had gone north towards the Graemoor road, away from the south, away from the burning sky – the right direction, the lucky direction, and he told himself so, and then he looked at the light in the south and thought about how far a cart went in four days on a bad road, and how far the sky had gone in one night, and the two distances did not bear thinking about together, so he thought about them together, because he could not stop.

She was on the open road under that sky. That was the whole of it. She was somewhere out there with her feet on a tailboard and the sky on fire behind her, and there was not one thing in the world he could do about it, and the not-doing was a worse pain than any doing he had ever had.

He put his hand inside his coat and held the scarf. It still smelled faintly of smoke.

On the third night the glow dimmed, and the tremors came less often, and the world seemed, very carefully, to be deciding to stop.

His grandmother came out onto the stoop late, wrapped in her shawl, and stood looking south the way she had looked south every night since the carts went. Elgin brought her the stool, and she sat on it, which she never did – she stood to watch things, always; sitting was for indoors – and it was the sitting, more than the glow or the tremors or the running river, that told him how the world had changed.

They watched the copper sky together for a long time. The valley lay quiet below them, the chimney-smoke going up straight for the first time in three days, the lights on in the houses of the families who had stayed and dark in the houses of the families who had left, and nobody singing anywhere.

'They'll be coming back,' Elgin said at last, to have something to say. 'There's nothing to expel them into now.'

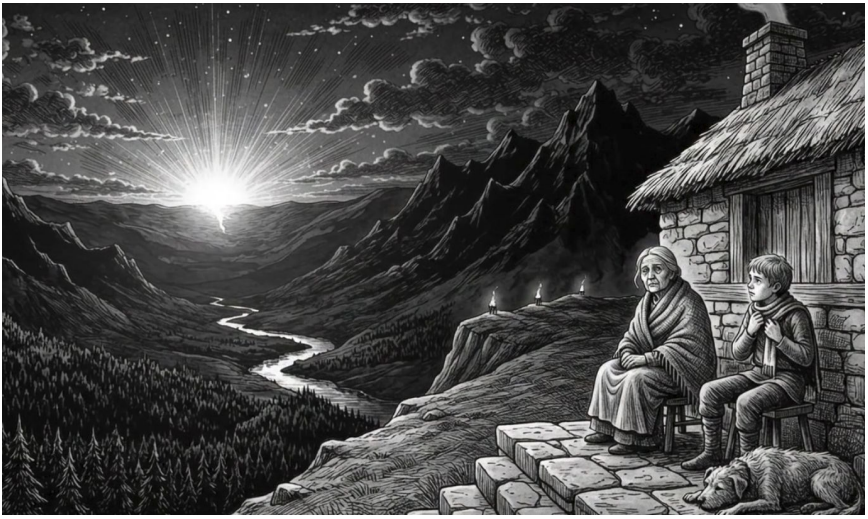
His grandmother did not answer for a while. Her anger had been the loudest thing in the valley for as long as he could remember – anger at the fire-folk, anger at the order, anger at the handbill and the star and the men who pointed – and it had all had somewhere to go, some door to be hammered on, some stupidity to be named. Now the sky had burned and the sea had stood up, and the stupidity had been drowned out with everything else, and her anger had nowhere left to go, and without it she looked – he saw it in the forge-light, sitting small on her stool – she looked old. He had never once thought of her as old. She had never once let him.

'No one is stupid tonight,' she said.

She said it quietly, to the southern glow, not to him, and it was not forgiveness and it was not surrender; it was something he had never heard

from her before, and he understood, watching her face in the copper light, that it cost her more than anger ever had.

He sat down on the stoop beside her stool, the way he had sat when he was small, and stayed there until the light in the south faded to embers, and neither of them said anything else at all.



II

The word came up the valley the way all the bad words had come up that winter, unprompted and unwelcome, and this time there was no outrunning it.

Pyrran was gone.

Not defeated – that would have been a thing you could turn and fight or flee from. Not broken into new borders and new names, the way things changed in peace. Gone. The realm, the mountain, everything south of the border earthworks, the whole of the country that the expelled had been

told, four days before the sky went copper, to go back to – a country most of them had never seen. The place no longer existed.

Elgin heard it in the road, from a man who had heard it in the town, and he stood in the road while the world kept turning round him, and the first thing he thought – the thing he was ashamed of afterwards, and could not un-think – was not of the dead. It was that the order had not even had the decency to leave them a home to be driven out of. They had packed their carts in the dark and gone north into nothing. The handbill had pointed them at a place, and the sky had taken the place away. You could not even call the exile cruel, afterwards, because cruel needed an object, and the object was ash.

'How far?' he asked the man.

'All of it.'

'No. I mean – the road. How far did they get?'

The man didn't know. Nobody knew. The people who had gone with the carts would tell their own stories or not, and the ones who did not come back would tell no stories at all, and what happened on the Graemoor road in those days had become a thing the valley would learn in pieces, the way a family learns of a death, one mourning at a time.

The old carter had gone with the carts, driving at the back of the column.

Elgin learnt that in the tavern, as grief is always learnt, overheard in a low voice meant for the table it belonged to.

'Gone on the Graemoor road,' a man at the next table was saying. 'The old carter. Him that took the stone that night.'

'Of the stone?'

'Of the road and the cold and the sky. The stone just went with him.'

So the old carter with the cracked brow – the blood black in the lantern-light, the man swaying on his feet but up again and driving on – had not come home either. Elgin drank to him, quietly, to no one in particular.

The man who had thrown the stone sat two tables along. He heard it like everyone else. He set his cup down, pushed the bench back, and stood, and the talk did not stop, exactly, but it thinned. He walked out of the tavern with his head up and his jaw set – not in defiance, but in the place where defiance had been – and no one called anything after him, and no one had to.

Elgin heard the other thing on his way out into the dark – the thing the valley would be telling itself for years, in the careful voice people use for the part that must not be got wrong.

Brother Callun did not turn back.

When the recall came – his lordship had put the word out that the expelled were to be taken back, every one of them who could be found – the valley began arguing, in a low, ashamed murmur, about what exactly that meant for everyone who had watched the carts go. Brother Callun did not turn back. He went on. South.

Towards a Pyrran that was no longer there.

Nobody knew if he had understood. That was the sentence the valley settled on, in the end, because it was the only one that could be said without the sayer being wrong. Nobody knew whether Brother Callun had understood that the country he was walking back to was gone, or understood it and walked anyway, towards the fire he had spent his life telling people to fear and love – or whether his feet, once pointed, could simply not be stopped. The word ran out of town with him and stopped somewhere south of the border earthworks, where the road stopped being a road.

Elgin walked home in the dark with the tavern warm behind him and the southern sky dark above the eaves, and thought about a man walking into nothing with a faith in him, and about a young man with the price of a thrown stone on his back, and about a girl on a cart somewhere north of all of it. And the joke – if it was a joke, and not something worse, something

with no bottom at all – was that the handbill had not even survived to be wrong. The thing it had pointed at was gone. The people it had pointed were scattered. And the only man in the valley who had known the words to say over the dead was walking the wrong way into the sky.

12

This time the words were read aloud.

The herald stood beside the shire-post with Sergeant Oddi at his shoulder and waited for a cart to pass before he began. There were fewer people than there had been for the handbill. Some were working on houses damaged by the tremors; others had heard already and saw no reason to stand in the road to hear again. Elgin had heard too. He stood close enough to see where the herald's thumb held the paper against the wind.

By order of Lord Nepomok, the expelled were to be taken back.

The herald read steadily. Someone at the edge of the gathering asked whether that meant all of them, and he lowered the sheet.

'All who return.'

Then he raised it and finished.

Oddi fixed the new notice over the old one. The lower corner curled back, showing a strip of the first order beneath it, and he put another nail through both.

Elgin waited until the others began to leave.

'How far has the word gone?'

The herald folded his paper.

'It's being carried along the roads.'

'The Graemoor road?'

'That too.'

'How far along it?'

The man looked at him properly then.

'I couldn't tell you.'

Elgin thanked him, because he had answered as much as he could, and went to look north.

The first family came back with the same cart they had left in.

Elgin recognised the cooking pot, wedged beneath the seat with its lid tied on. He had watched the woman carry it out of her house on the night of the departure. Now she sat above it with her hands tucked into her sleeves while her husband led the horse. Neither looked towards the doorways.

A neighbour came out before the cart had stopped.

'Wheel's running loose,' he said.

The husband looked down at it.

'It's held.'

'Best get the weight off.'

He reached for the rope. After a moment the husband let him.

Elgin helped with the bedding. It was damp underneath, and when they lifted it clear there was a dark patch on the boards. The woman climbed down slowly. She stood at her own door while her husband searched inside his coat for the key.

'Swelled a bit,' the neighbour said. 'With the wet.'

The husband worked the key in the lock.

'Lift it as you turn.'

'I know.'

Nobody spoke while the door opened.

They carried everything inside. There was less than Elgin remembered loading, though he could not have said what was missing. His grandmother arrived while they were bringing in the last bundle and gave the woman a loaf wrapped in a cloth.

'There's more tomorrow,' she said.

Elgin waited for something about the damp bedding, or the congregation, or the folly of setting out with a loose wheel.

His grandmother asked him to carry the empty basket home.

At the gate he turned back.

'Did you see the Hollevs?'

The woman had begun to close the door. She kept it open to answer.

'There were carts behind us.'

'A net-mender. His wife and daughter.'

'I'm sorry. There were so many.'

'Of course,' he said. 'Thank you.'

He had made her apologise on her own doorstep.

The next return came on foot.

Three people, carrying between them what one tired man could have lifted. Elgin met them above the crossroads and took a bundle from the eldest. The man surrendered it without argument, which told him something about its weight, or about the man.

They had left their cart where an axle broke. Someone had taken them part of the way after that.

'We heard we could come back,' the younger woman said.

'You can.'

'We heard it from a traveller. He hadn't got a paper.'

'It's on the post. They read it out.'

She nodded but kept looking past him towards the houses.

Her boots had rubbed through at one heel. He shortened his stride and pretended the bundle required it.

By then everyone knew that Watcher Helsa Brun had objected to the expulsion when it was ordered, and had put her objection on the record. People who had never mentioned her before spoke of her with a familiarity Elgin found surprising.

'Brun told them,' a man said outside the smithy as the three passed.

His companion nodded.

'She had the right of it.'

Elgin shifted the bundle to his other arm. He remembered one of them saying the Lord must have his reasons. He could no longer remember which, and was glad not to.

His grandmother was waiting at the house with bread. She let the returning family sit before she asked what they needed.

Later, when the eldest man had eaten, Elgin asked about the Hollevs.

The man remembered a net-mender, perhaps. There had been someone mending a harness beside the road, a grey-haired fellow with a daughter.

'Dark hair?' Elgin asked.

'I think so.'

'About my age?'

'Possibly.'

The younger woman shook her head.

'That girl was a child.'

The man rubbed his eyes.

'Then it was somebody else.'

Elgin poured him more water.

A third cart came in rain. He saw it from the upper path and ran down, slipping in the places where the frost had broken the surface.

There was a young woman walking behind it.

For a stretch of the descent he was certain.

Then she turned to speak to the driver, and he slowed. By the time he reached the road he had breath enough to offer help without having to explain why he had none.

He carried a chest into a house near the crossroads. The driver asked him to mind the bottom, which was coming away. He minded it. Afterwards he stood under the eaves while the family went inside and the neighbours finished untying the load.

No one had seen the Hollevs.

Over the following weeks about half came back. Some returned to houses; some to rooms lent by people who had watched them leave. Others sent word that they would stay where they were. There were names spoken quietly, and names nobody could give an account of at all.

The Hollev door stayed shut.

Elgin passed it whenever he had business nearby, and sometimes his business took him further than it needed to. He hunted, brought meat home, helped mend a shed roof. Every day he found some reason to be where he could see the northern road.

When the third week came with no word of the Hollevs, he went up the Graemoor road himself.

He took two days and the old horse, and he rode the road as the carts had walked it, reading what was left to read: the ruts the frost had kept, the places where wheels had dragged and slewed, the grey ash of night-fires long rained on. At the waystone above the moor he found the broken cart the walkers had told him of, stripped to its boards, and a little way off it a cairn of new stones, the turf around it not yet healed. Whoever lay under it had died among strangers, and the strangers had done the work decently. He stood there a while, because somebody from the valley should.

He asked at the two steadings that had roof enough for travellers. At the second, a woman remembered grey sleeves, and a girl with dark hair.

'Might be her,' she said. 'Might be twenty others. The road darkens everyone's hair, by the end.'

It was not Senja. He made sure of that kindly, which took a while.

He came home without her. The word had gone further up the road than he could carry it: people had heard, and turned, and gone. He told himself all the way down the valley that this was what mattered, and believed about half of it.

From the rise above the crossroads he could watch a cart for a long while before it reached him. He learnt how little a person needed to resemble another person at that distance.

He waited until they came close enough.

13

The valley wintered. Roofs were patched, debts half-forgiven and the rest forgotten; the river froze, and woke, and ran the right way again. The public peace came to Aurec on a Fourthday, in the warmest stretch of the year, read out by the same herald who had read the recall, beside the same shire-post, in the same voice. It seemed to Elgin that the man was getting tired of his own voice.

The Valleys of Nepor were a land of many peoples. Any attack on a person for their kind or their blood was a crime against the Lord's peace and would be tried as such. There was more, about courts and witnesses and fines, but most of the crowd stopped listening after the word *crime*. People nodded. A few clapped, uncertainly, the way people clap at a wedding when they aren't sure the vows are finished. Gudrun Sarl said loudly that it was about time, and the man beside her, who the autumn before had stood in his doorway and watched the carts go, said nothing at all.

Then everyone went home and got on with the harvest.

That was the strange part. Life simply went on. The mill turned. The Sarls' sow farrowed, eleven piglets, and the whole lane came to look. Two of the returned families had their roofs patched by the very neighbours who had not met their eyes in the dark, and nobody mentioned it, and the roofs held. The sky had been an ordinary blue for so many days now that children had stopped checking it.

Elgin went hunting.

He hunted with the scarf around his neck. A man wore as little as decency allowed that summer. Elgin wore a wool scarf. His mother remarked on it once. He said it kept the midges off. She looked at him for a long moment and didn't remark on it again.

He didn't let her wash it, either. She'd taken it off the peg one morning along with his shirts, and he'd caught her at the tub and taken it back out of her hands, more roughly than he meant to. It still smelled faintly of smoke – of a bonfire at the edge of the wood, of a night he could no longer quite picture. Soap would have finished that. He didn't explain any of this. He hung it back on the peg, dry and unwashed, and went out, and when he came back his mother had put a sprig of lavender beside it on the shelf. Neither of them said anything about the lavender.

He knew how it looked. A grown hunter carrying a girl's scarf around like a holy relic. He'd have laughed at anyone else for it. He might, a year ago, have laughed at himself.

It happened in the second week, on a grey morning with a low mist on the water.

The stag was a good one – eight points, heavy in the neck, coming down to drink at the bend below the Stonecrowns where the river ran wide and fast over stones. Elgin had the wind and the cover and all the time in the world, and he shot badly. He knew it the instant the string left his fingers. Too far back. The stag went up like a startled horse and crashed across the river and into the alders on the far side, and Elgin swore, once, very quietly, and went after it.

A wounded animal is the hunter's debt. Grandma had taught him that before she'd taught him to string a bow. You don't go home while something you hurt is still walking.

So he went into the river. It was higher than it looked, and colder, and the stones were slick with weed. Halfway across the current took his legs and he went down to one knee, then to his chest, and grabbed at a branch

of a fallen willow that lay out over the water. He pulled himself along it hand over hand, bow held high, and came up the far bank soaked, gasping, already looking for blood on the leaves.

He found it. A good trail, bright and plentiful. He'd gone forty paces along it before his hand went to his throat out of habit.

Nothing there.

He stood very still. Then he turned and ran back to the water.

The willow branch was where he'd left it, stripped and dripping. On one of its twigs hung a single grey thread, a hand's length, fluttering in the current. That was all. The river went on past it, quick and brown and entirely uninterested, round the bend and out of sight.

He searched until dark.

He went down the near bank and then the far one, crossing twice more at places no sensible man would cross. He poked at every snag of driftwood with his bow. He climbed out along rocks. Once his heart leaped at something grey caught in a root, and it was a dead heron, and he sat down on the bank beside it for a while. The mist came back towards evening. The light went. He could not, by the end, have told anyone which stretch of river he'd searched and which he'd only meant to.

He did not go back for the stag.

He thought about it, walking home in the dark, wet to the bone. Somewhere across the water an animal was lying down in the alders with his arrow in it, and he had left it to search for a piece of wool. That was the truth of his day. He tried to feel worse about the stag than about the scarf, because that was what a decent hunter would feel, and he couldn't manage it, and that made him feel worse about everything.

It was ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous. A scarf. People had lost their houses. People had lost the whole south of the world, if the rumours were half true, and nobody knew whether they were. The old carter on the Graemoor road had lost his life. And here was Elgin Farras, a grown man

by most reckonings, walking up the lane with his chin trembling over a strip of cloth.

Knowing it was ridiculous didn't help in the slightest. If anything it made it worse, because now he was sad *and* foolish, and there was no one he could tell about either.

Grandma was on the stoop. She was there most evenings now, wrapped in her shawl, watching the south out of a habit she'd never admit to. She looked at him as he came up – the wet clothes, the empty hands, no deer, the bare neck – and he waited for it. Something sharp. Something about boys who go swimming in their boots. He almost wanted it. It would have been easier.

She said nothing for a long while. Then she moved over on the bench, a hand's breadth, which for her was the same as opening her arms.

He sat. He was shivering. She smelled of woodsmoke and wool and the bitter herbs she kept in her apron, and he did not look at her, because he didn't trust his face.

'It was only a scarf,' he said, eventually.

'Yes,' said Grandma.

They sat. Down in the valley someone was singing, badly, at the Sarls' – a christening song for the piglets, by the sound of it. A dog joined in.

Grandma put her hand on the back of his neck, where the scarf should have been. Her fingers were dry and cold and very light.

'You didn't lose her on a branch, boy.'

That was all she said. She took her hand away, and got up, slowly, one hand on the doorframe, and went inside, and he heard her telling his mother to heat water before he caught his death, and also that the lavender on the shelf was a waste of good lavender.

Elgin stayed on the step a long time.

In the morning he crossed the river again, at a better place, and found the stag in the alders two hundred paces from where he'd lost the trail. The

ravens had found it first. He cut out his arrow and stood there for a while, not praying, exactly, because he didn't know who to pray to any more. Then he went back to the riverbank and began to search again.

14

He went back to the river the next day, and the day after that.

It was not hope, exactly. Hope was a word for something with a chance in it. This was more like the way a man returns to the place where he was last whole, not because the place can give it back but because there is nowhere else to stand. He worked the banks in both directions from the willow, further each day, learning the river's habits the way he'd learnt Senja's face – which stones caught things, which eddies gave them back, which stretches held them under until the autumn floods.

He found other men's losses. A cart-wheel with the iron tyre still on it, half-buried in gravel, some farmer's misfortune from the tremor-days. A wooden spoon, worn smooth. A child's shoe, very small, which he did not touch. Once, a twist of grey cloth that made his heart stop until he pulled it free and saw it was a torn scrap of sail-canvas, someone's patching, never anyone's scarf.

On the fourth morning he was five kilometres downstream, past the old ford, when he heard the horses.

The column came up the valley road in no hurry, thirty riders on good horses, riding two by two where the road allowed. Guardsmen in the Lord's grey-green, but not all of them – there were men and women in plain riding clothes, a woman in travel-stained blue whose horse alone was worth the Farras stead, and one rider, near the middle, who sat a grey mare with the particular ease of someone who had been in a saddle longer than Elgin had been alive.

The Wood Elf. It could only be.

Elgin stood at the ford's edge with his boots in the water and his heart doing something complicated, and the column came on, and nobody called halt, because this was a ford and the river was low and there was no reason to stop for a boy with a bow standing on the bank. The first riders were already in the water when he saw it.

It hung from the cantle of an outrider's saddle, grey wool, damp at one end, a single red thread running through it.

Elgin made a sound. He would not have been able to say, afterwards, what kind of sound it was.

The outrider heard him, or saw his face, or both, and reined in at the ford's edge. The column went on past, hooves drumming the ford's stony bed, and Elgin stood in the water up to his ankles and pointed, because his voice had gone somewhere else entirely.

'That's –'

'Found on a blackthorn,' the outrider said, unhurried. 'Three kilometres down. You're the one who lost it?'

Elgin nodded. His hand was already out.

The outrider did not hand it down. He looked at Elgin for a moment – a practised look, the look of a man who dealt in found things and knew their weight – and then he turned in his saddle and called back, not loudly.

'My lord.'

The words moved down the column like a stone through still water, rider to rider, and the column stopped. Not dramatically. Horses stood. Water ran around their legs. Someone up the line asked someone else what the halt was, and got no answer, and the question stopped.

The rider who came back along the column's length was not the largest man on the road, nor the best dressed, nor the one with the most silver on his tack. He wore a cloak that had been wet and dried twice, and his gloves were work gloves, the kind a man wears when he has spent the morning doing something with his hands that gloves are for. He was not young. He

looked like a man who had recently had to rebuild a great deal of the world and had not yet caught up with the paperwork.

He drew up beside the outrider and looked down at Elgin as a carpenter looks at a joint he hasn't made: attentive, measuring, unhurried.

'My lord,' said the outrider, and gestured at the scarf.

Lord Nepomok of the Valleys of Nepor reached down, took the scarf from the saddle in both hands, and looked at it.

He looked at it as he looked at everything, it seemed to Elgin – as though it mattered, as though it were a document or a boundary stone or a man's testimony. His thumb found the red thread and rested on it a moment.

'Yours?' he said.

'Yes, my lord.'

He handed it down.

It was a small thing, that handing down. A ruler on a horse, a boy in a ford, a strip of wet wool passing between them. But he did not pass it through the outrider, and he did not toss it, and he did not make a show of it. He leaned down and put it into Elgin's hands as you put something into the hands of a person, and Elgin took it, and for a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Lord Nepomok straightened in his saddle and looked at the valley – at the ford, at the banks, at the treeline, at the sky – as a man looks at a place he is responsible for. It was not a long look. But it was thorough.

'What does the valley need?' he said.

It was the question of a man who had been riding for days and asking it at every stop. Elgin understood, with a clarity that arrived too late to be useful, that he was being asked to report.

His mind, which had spent four days on a riverbank and before that several weeks on a road, offered him nothing sensible. It offered him the Hollevs' closed door. It offered him Senja's hands. It offered him the old

carter's blood on the stones. It offered him the word *nothing*, which was not an answer a lord could use.

He said the thing that was true.

'For people to come home, my lord.'

Lord Nepomok looked at him for a moment longer than was comfortable. A receiving look. He nodded once, as a man nods when a report is short and accurate and says what needs saying, and then he turned his horse and rode on up the column.

The outrider gave Elgin a nod – or gave the scarf a nod; it was hard to say – and followed.

The Wood Elf passed three riders behind.

She – or he; at that distance, in that light, it was hard to be certain – sat the grey mare with her face turned towards the ford, and her eyes found Elgin as a hand finds a shelf in the dark. Not searching. Knowing.

The look lasted half a second longer than it needed to.

It was a look that contained something Elgin could not read – recognition, perhaps, or its opposite, or something for which the valley had no word. It touched his face like a stranger's hand on a doorframe in passing, checking the grain.

Then she was past, and the column was past, and the road was dust and hoofbeats going north.

Elgin stood in the ford.

The scarf was wet at one end and smelled of blackthorn and horses and the road, and under all of that, faintly, of smoke. He stood in the cold water up to his ankles and held it in both hands and did not put it on, because putting it on would have meant admitting it had been off, and he was not ready to do that.

The banners went up the valley. Grey-green, small, at the column's head, almost apologetic in the wide air. They passed the turn where the road bent towards Aurec town, and then they were gone.

Elgin climbed the bank and sat on the stones. The sun was up properly now. The river ran brown and ordinary past his feet, giving nothing back, keeping nothing, being a river. Somewhere upstream a fish rose, once, and the rings spread and vanished.

He sat there a long time.

He thought about the Lord's gloves – work gloves, worn through at the right thumb. He thought about the elf's eyes, and what they had or hadn't seen in his face. He thought about the scarf on a blackthorn three kilometres downstream, and how long it must have hung there before the column found it, and how the column had found it at all, and whether found things on the Lord's road were always carried, or only when the Lord was riding, and whether that made it better or worse.

He thought about what he had said. For people to come home. A small thing. A true thing. He had said it to the Lord of the Valleys of Nepor, and the Lord had taken it like a report, and maybe it was one.

He thought about Senja.

And then – it arrived quietly, as the best things do – he thought that the Lord was riding the valley road asking people what they needed, and that the expulsion had been reversed, and that the sky was blue, and that the road north was open, and that somewhere on that road there were people coming home, and that some of them might be the people he was thinking about, and that this was, for the first time in more weeks than he wanted to count, a thing that could reasonably be hoped.

He put the scarf around his neck.

It was damp and it smelled of the road and the red thread was still there, and it was the warmest thing he had ever worn.

He stood up, whistled for the dogs, and went home, and the valley, for the first time since the copper sky, looked like a place where things could happen that were not terrible.

15

Elgin came back from the forest at dusk with two hares and a head full of nothing in particular, as a man comes back from a day that has asked nothing of him and given nothing either – which was its own kind of mercy.

He had the scarf on. He always had the scarf on now, weather or no weather, and the valley had stopped remarking on it, as the valley stops remarking on a limp or a missing finger – it had become, simply, the way Elgin Farras was.

The light was going soft and blue over the eaves. He could see the stead from the last rise, the smoke going up straight, the door shut, the stoop empty. Nothing unusual. He came down the lane at his usual pace, unhurried, the hares swinging from his belt.

He was twenty paces from the door when he saw the thread.

It was tied to the door latch, where his hand would fall: a single red thread, no longer than his finger. He read it as he read sign – twice, because the first reading could not be true. Red thread, where he would look. He had been told where to look, once, by a girl at a stream, the autumn before.

Then he saw her.

She was sitting on the stoop with her hands in her lap and her feet together, as you sit when you have been sitting a while and have stopped expecting anyone. She was wearing his grandmother's shawl – the grey one, the good one, the one Grandma wore on cold evenings and had never once, in Elgin's memory, lent to anyone – and it was too big for her, and she had it pulled tight around her shoulders against the evening cold, and her hair was longer.

He stopped walking.

She looked up. The light was going, but it was not gone, and he could see her face, and her face was tired and thinner and older in a way that had nothing to do with age, and it was hers.

Neither of them moved for a moment. The smoke went up. Somewhere down the lane a dog barked, once, and stopped.

'Senja.'

'Elgin.'

He came the rest of the way to the stoop and stood there with the hares at his belt and the scarf at his neck and his heart somewhere he could not account for, and she looked at the scarf, and then at him, and something happened in her face that he had seen once before, across a fire, in a ruin, when he had been a boy glaring at people he didn't know.

'Your grandmother,' she said, 'gave me bread.'

'She does that.'

'She asked me about the road. For an hour.' A pause. 'Then she gave me the shawl.'

'Mother and Father are at the house,' she said. 'Someone had seen to the roof.'

Elgin looked at the shawl. Then he looked at Senja, and she was looking at him, and the look lasted as long as it lasted, which was long enough.

'Stay,' he said.

'Yes.'

He sat down on the stoop beside her, and the door behind them was open, and the light was on inside, and the valley lay quiet in the dusk, and the road north was empty now, because there was no one left on it that he was waiting for.



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.

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