

The Horde of Counterwind

By Alain Damasio

Translated by Alexander Dickow

In memory of Mamu, my grandmother,
Who left in my heart and my lungs
this round ember of pure love,
That I try to revive,
Through my feeble means,
with each breath.

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This book is dedicated to you by right, Olivier,
It is dedicated to the aircraft carrier of attention and of staunch friendship
held in the frame of your shoulders,
to your inexorable generosity,
to the intelligence of your multiple contributions
whether human or literary,
to the relevance of your words when I struggled there
and of your silences when I can't keep quiet,
and at last to your noble heart, that many take for mere integrity of soul, but that I know to be
the secret name of a lofty form of courage

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"Only it's never certain that we're strong enough, since we don't have a system, we only have lines
and movements." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*.

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The Horde

Ω Golgoth, trailbreaker
π Pietro Della Rocca, prince
J Sov Strochnis, scribe
ζ' Caracole, troubadour
Δ Erg Machaon, defender
¬ Talweg Arcippé, geomaster
> Firost de Toroge, brace
^ The Austringer, bird-hunter
' , Steppe Phorehays, florian
J)- Arval Redhamaj, scout
~•The Falconer, bird-hunter
∞ Horst and Karst Dubka, flanks
x Oroshi Melicerte, aeromaster
(.) Alme Capys, mender
◊ Aoi Nan, gatherer and dowser
∫ Larco Scarsa, sky-poacher
◇ Learch, smithy
~ Callirhoé Deicoon, kindler
∂ Boscavo Silamphre, woodsmith
≈ Coriolis, spur
√ Sveziest, spur
|| Barbak, spur

I - Phareola

) With the fifth salvo, the shockwave fractured the bulwark-femur and the wind sanded the village raw through the granite's gaping seams. Under my helmet, the awful sound of grinding rocks pierces; my teeth vibrate – I bend against Pietro; quartz needles grate against his countermask. On the ground, in the alleyway covering us, two tardy old men hammering on a shutter have been riddled through; farther on at the crossroads, I look in vain for the handful of kids who were swaggering, naked-faced, yelling challenges that no one, not even us, at this intensity and under this air-viscosity, could meet. The entire Horde is at present pinned against the western face of a structure that seemed to us a bit less pitifully grouted than the others, waiting for the backwash, for the short pause in acceleration that will allow us to counterwork in the maze of roads up to the fortifications, then beyond, if we move out. If we decide – in the end – to move out. From the highest domes, twisted metal screeches in the lulls; an aeolian creaks, splutters – starts up again...jams. The blades crackle under the grit. Another gust – and the sound merges into the saturated roar. To my left, an oblong cat, ruffled, secures herself in a corner too narrow for her, and the broken toys, calabashes, benches scraping by, and terracotta tiles torn off and hurled as if by hand within three meters of us, all fly past. There's no doubt now, for anyone: the threshgale is coming. It will be here within the hour. It announces itself, as always, with a quintet. And it will leave nothing standing here, in this godforsaken village never recorded in any counterwork logbook, since its square street plan, its axial alleyways and its pisé architecture would have made an eight-year-old Oroshi scream.

"Where is Arval?"

"Scouting ahead! He's looking for the opening in the rampart."

"And Caracole?"

"They're together."

"He shouldn't be fucking around out of the Pack. Shit! Call him back!"

"Call him back? I can't hear Sov at four meters!"

"What? What's going on?"

"Carac left the diamond like a sprite. In back, Coriolis has been scraped against the ground by her sled."

"He was covering her?"

"Supposedly."

"Fuck..."

"Pietro! What do we do?"

"Horst takes Coriolis' place. We shield her at the heart of the Pack. Alme will tend to her."

"Who will take Horst's place?"

"Learch. He volunteered."

"And then? We play at hop-cat?"

"We wait for the wind to break, Firost."

¿' Friends of the open sea, over and over: greetings! Young sand glyphs, chrones and antechrones promising little in the way of manners, I await you with a spry foot: let

us welcome one another! Ah, this threshgale, this old whistling sire, I love anticipating its winged arrival, admittedly muddled, although still!?

I did not introduce myself? Pardon, the moment lends itself to the lyrical; we are, greetings, you are? Caracole, where am I? Yes, he himself, a troubadour, then—and teller of tales beyond count. On whose account? For the 34th Horde of Counterwind, My Lardships, led with a sure hand by its Trailbreaker, the fiercesome and gustguzzling Golgoth, ninth of that name. Backed, it must be noted, by our defender, a real chopper with a propellor-blade, that's Erg Machaon; and on his right, with the brace of all braces, a pillar with legs, Firost de Toroge, miladies, that you'll be happy to have before you when my fathers and mothers will be spewing flour from their lungs, in under an hour. Well! And who is following these three animals? Who elevates and uplifts our spirits? Pietro the Prince, a Della Rocca of the most noble lineage, and his counterpart, a beggar's son, a blade upright, always to the left of Pietro: my mate Sov the profound, called scribe, but a "philosovical" one, to me. Between them geomaster Talweg stands astir, stone-lover, and behind them – am I going too fast, should I slow down? – behind these six forthmentioned marvels referred to as the Lance, is the Pack to be sure, in three solid rows, ventilated by irreconcilable bird-hunters, by a canny gatherer and a kindler, by a cryptic scout and two craftsmen, by bums – hi Larco! – And then... Whoever? The three spurs bringing up the rear, do condescend to follow, pulling the load! How many in all? Twenty-three. Without the goshawks and the falcons, mark you. All square, standing, steady? Well I dare say so, but still alive? I know not...

"Caracole!"

"Derbidil?"

"I've found the gateway. Let's downstream and warn the others!"

π I'm waiting for Golgoth's reaction. He hasn't opened his mouth yet. Everything about him shows his disgust for the village. He shakes his head, kicking the pisé with his heels. At the end of this too-straight alleyway, the bulwark is visible. The Lascini effect is fierce between the houses. The hard-packed earth, gray with dust, has been covered over within a few minutes by a coating of laterite. The sky has taken on the color of my discus. Is nothing more than a long metal carpet rolling past, faster and faster. The village streets have finally emptied. A few families have had the decency to collect their elderly. Doors and shutters are seen to close one after the other. Not one look, not one word for us. The wisest have descended into their wells, carefully bolting shut their trapdoors. The sheltered shut themselves away. And they are already praying, no doubt, to one or several gods.

"At my signal, we fall in! Countering diamond! Spurs, stick to the Pack with your sleds in your ass, handles gripped, jam the space! We dislodge double-quick, we counter straight for the bulwark and we pound our way to the gateway. Once there, we stop and settle it!"

"Why don't we try to knock on the trapdoors? We could take shelter in a well and wait for the storm to pass!"

◊ You've hit it right and sweet, pretty Coriolis, but no Lancer will listen to you, since you're just a spur, you counter back in the rear and you don't know anything about

facial wind, you haven't been part of the horde for long enough, how much, barely eight months. Even if they respect me as a gatherer and dowser, they would smile and tell me: "My little Aoi, come up front if you like, and cover us..." And I would obviously be unable to...

Even if it means dying impaled on a piece of wood, they'll always prefer that it be in the midst of the wind, in the plain, rather than here below, buried in a well, backbone crushed under the weight of a beam. There's nothing rational in these things. The threat outside will be extreme. Here, it's still manageable, it would be enough to pick a good wall, I spotted one or two, and to hitch onto it. But there you are. It's not what we'll do. We're going to yell at each other, oh not so much, briefly: a few voices against, no doubt Silamphre or Larco, Alme of course and Sveziest who is already terrified at the sight of Coriolis' wounds. Then Golgoth will say: "Let's go!" And we'll go, because he's the Trailbreaker, since he hasn't been wrong once, in thirty years, about a threshgale. Except that today I'm really afraid.

Ω As soon as I caught a whiff of the blaast with its cold odor, I knew there'd be havoc. I pulled down my leather helmet, forehead covered, strapped my doublet tight. Up to the gills. Then I dove right into it with my head down. Into the schnee. In the alleyway, it pecked like a beak in the cheeks. So much you'd use your hands. I knocked down the flow, I threw my shoulders into it, right, left, center, holding. A chair bruised my knee, the tiles went flying over our heads. I kept from following the burons too closely, because of the sand yachts chained to the hook that were pitching fierce, enough to chip the walls. For Coriolis, I get it. She's spooked stiff, it's her first threshgale. Still a virgin, squeezing her thighs together. But fuck, we'll cover her! The best we can. We already took the wheel off her mitts. What? We're attached to her. Them especially. Still a little girl, but she must learn the cry. She's got the pluck. I said: "Stop!" and we piled up, backs to the bulwark. Behind us, shacks collapse. The hamlet suffers the red deluge, ventral. Masses of sand that seem poured from the sky by washerwomen with great buckets. Not so stingy!

◊ To find some peace, I sat down and leaned over to lay my head against Oroshi's shoulder, so as to be able to watch the silhouettes advance and come out through the opening in the rampart. A stone canopy, located two meters upstream from the gateway, divides the primary current. Perforated by the wind, it lets trickles of dust through. Turbulences weasel between our legs, undulating. It's pointless to talk or argue, it's enough to watch how each of our bodies enter and come out again with fearful or willful movements, tense or confident expressions, and with hope also. Talweg stayed for a long time outlined in the doorway, with his fur hat topped with a windsock and his hammer across his lower back. Then he disappeared, coming back through, his face hard, his beard tinted red-orange, emptying between his feet a pile of sand so fine it smoked as it flowed.

"I took my samples. Sand on pure laterite! No quartz or mica, the particles we felt before came from the ramparts. Which means there's nothing for leagues upstream. Desert, folks! And certainly no villages.

"Our botanist can confirm? Steppe?" fires off Oroshi, breathing in my face.

“Yep. Bush with no miracles: eucalyptus, a few dwarf oaks. And bunches of spinifex everywhere, enough to graze on. It’s been the same bouquet for two weeks. You end up familiar with it.”

“So no danger, if we stay away from the eucalyptus?”

“No danger if we each find a hole with a dune of spinifex in front of it to hook his jaws onto, and enough luck not to swallow his weight in sand from now till the end of the festivities! No, Oroshi, it’s more than risky. The spinifex is low: it’s not the same as boxwood, it doesn’t cover as well.

“What do the two of you recommend, in that case?”

“We lie down right here in front of this wall, stomach to the ground. We take out the rope and tie ourselves down.”

“And if it gives way at the joints? You’ve seen this wall, it looks like a grate! We could also get caught in a rotor, with the heavy debris...”

“We know about those risks. They’re still less bad than walking around naked right in the middle of the plains in hopes of finding THE grove. The grove that’ll divide the current without stopping it, nice and streamlined, without vortices or vicious rotors, a miracle in the shape of a bush, right!”

“In the plains, far from the houses, object impacts are rarer, Steppe. It’s enough to find an adequate site and to know when to hold your breath in the waves.”

“Oroshi, nobody here is questioning your experience with threshgales. You are of all of us the most apt to survive in this howling shithole. The problem is the spurs. Have you seen Coriolis? If Larco hadn’t plunged, she would have been in ribbons!”

π With these gales, I can hardly hear Steppe answer Oroshi. All I know is that the threshgale is imminent. That if we keep going upstream, Sveziest and his sled risk being swept away. I think of the girls, of the girls especially. At the high point, we know very well how it turns out: the Pack comes apart. It’s pierced by the gusts. That’s what happened last time. Yelling symmetrically all along the wall so that the whole horde can hear me, I step in:

“Wisdom would have us stay here! Sveziest risks death! Callirhoé and Aoi also, they’re too light. We’re about to confront one of the heaviest threshgales we’ve ever seen. Laterite weighed down with rain! Mud on the ground for a foothold and a torrent of sand in the face!”

“Pietro’s damn right!”

“Pietro is not an aeromaster, that I know of!”

“So what?”

“Only Oroshi can assess the deep risks!”

“No need to be an aeromaster to know we’re going to get torn to pieces if we go out into this desert!”

ζ’ Come on, Golgoth, are we letting the hordlings confabulate willy-nilly each with the other – debate, dispute and quarrel? Why don’t you give em a smack in the kisser? Ah, he’s getting up, the Goth, he’s producing his long and heavy mug, with his sniffer’s nostrils flared, an original model, very useful for expelling snot. He’s

passing before us, squat, knob-headed; he fusses and moils, as always, and so delicately snorts and resnorts, go on, tally-ho, superbly elegant! A trickle of spit is stuck in his reddish beard, that he wipes off. He walks up to Steppe, comes back toward Talweg, says three words to Oroshi, looks at Pietro, a fairy ballet, all of suppleness and thrust. He signals that we should ditch the wall and form an arc. Everyone obeys, for my part in front and deftly. He's about to speak up!

"You recall the last threshgale we tackled? It was what, two years ago? I could cough it all up right here for you. How we lost Verval, ripped away by his sled. How we lost Di Nebbe, though he was a solid flank. He had scooped so much sand in one gust that he couldn't get up again, and when he got on his knees to vomit, he was swept away by a drifting fence, with Karst and Firost. They're still here, thank the Wind. But his throat was slit by that fucking stockade. We couldn't even find his body the next day. The threshgale showing the tip of its nose now is the spitting image of the one we lived through. Same shitty semi-desert, same useless ground that's going to slip under our cleats if we don't trailbreak in the sandbanks. I wanted to tell you this morning. But I couldn't do it. So I'm going to break it to you now."

◊ The backwash just started. A hanging silence, very soothing, lets Golgoth's words stand out against the granite of the wall:

"You're the best Block I've ever had in tow. Maybe not the toughest, not so much, but the hardest hitting in counterwork. The most compact. We're tied together, folks, I can't say it any better..."

"Knotted together..."

"Knotted, yeah, Sov, hitched with a knot of the guts of us. With you people, I know I can trailbreak farther than my father will ever go. I know I can go *to the end*. I don't want to lose one single slab of the Block we make. Not even Sveziest what's still a bit light, not even Alme or Callirhoé, those two pains in the ass. Not even that trooper Caracole who don't get what a Pack is, but who can sense the gusting, Wind knows how. I'm going to tell you what I think: if we're going to end up butchered, I'd rather it be on the other side of this wall, and all together, than in this village of harborigines that don't even got a tower to hang a flag! Move out now, no point yapping for an hour over it, it ain't safe... No trailbreaker straight in his noggin would take that risk. Me, I'll take it. Even if I have to eat the schnee solo, with my helmet and my breastplate! I won't make anyone follow me. If the Pack wants to take this on, take it on!

He blew his nose and snorted:

"So who wants to stay in this hidey-hole? Raise your mitt high!"

π Golgoth, asking for our opinion! There was something almost bewildering about it... He gave himself up, for once. He spoke right to *us* – not to his dead brother. Not to his hated father... It was out of the question that I let him leave alone. He positively knew it. But just the opening he left us, as theoretical as it was, was enough for me. Coming from him, it spoke volumes: the esteem he had for us, tight-lipped as he was, all the more touching. Around me, I began to count the raised hands: Alme, Aoi and Callirhoé, Coriolis, Sveziest, Silamphre, the Austringer, Larco,

Talweg and Steppe... there was a hesitation. That made ten hordlings in favor of taking shelter. Surely not enough.

“Who’s for moving out, now? Raise your fist!”

Ten fists burst upward! Mine last because I hadn’t wanted to influence anyone. Caracole and the Dubka brothers were left, who probably didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Sov called out to Caracole, who had taken advantage of the backwash to throw his boo. Dangerously.

“Caracole, can we hear what you think?”

“Yes indeed!”

“Well?”

“I don’t know what will happen if we stay here. But I know a little farther up there’s a windport, within walking distance.”

) Was it one of his visions again, like the ones he had sometimes had, so clearly? Usually, he only told me about them, for fear of inducing worry...

“How do you know?”

“I remember. In the future.”

Nobody knew quite whether to laugh or scoff at him. Time was of the essence. Talweg decided to take him seriously:

“At what longitude is it, your port, Carac?”

“Ten degrees south.”

“We’ll have to counter a little at an angle.”

“Are you serious, troubadour? It’s very important,” Pietro insisted.

◊ Caracole’s body, so fluid, stiffened slightly, losing some of its natural grace. His curly hair was turned down over his face by the gusts. On his shoulders, his harlequin sweater (sewn out of myriad bits of cloth he had taken from the clothes of men, women and little darlings with whom he had passed, as he put it, more than a “jolly time”) had reddened a little, and it undulated.

“I’m serious. There’s a port a half an hour upstream, ten degrees south, with two drakkair-hooks, rusty but solid.”

“No boat docked there?”

“No boat, fellas. Just for us.”

“How do you know that?” Coriolis repeated, grimacing under the bandages Alme was tightening around her arm.

“I can’t tell you how. I’ve been through the scene. We’ll be there, all of us, waiting for the wave.”

) Golgoth picked up Coriolis himself, and all the girls, one by one. He adjusted his streamlined leather helmet, a marvel, then he turned back toward us:

“We move out immediately, the rain is going to come very soon. Listen: we counter in teardrop formation! Horst and Karst, you take the sleds with Barbak. At the flank, I want Learch to the left and Steppe to the right. If we collapse at the fore, Erg, Talweg and Firost, you hold us up! If the Lance stalls, the Pack moves closer to block our backsliding. Pronto! Till we’ve got the juice to get going again. If the Pack bursts, get down and back in position by crawling, till I yell ‘Up!’ Spurs, just a piece

of advice: when the first wave hits, the reflex – we’ve all done it, you’ll be stupid just like we were – is to open your mouth. If you want to kick it, it’s your best bet. If not, shut your trap, it’ll prolong your life expectancy up to the next wave. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t keep trying to breathe. Hold it, hold it, hold it! From the second we pass this gateway, there are only two people to pay attention to: Oroshi and me!”

◊ As for Oroshi, she advances, slim and lovely, so true in her gestures. She undoes her haik completely, unfurls it in the wind, then ties it again around her legs and arms, on her stomach and her chest, up to her head. Next she adjusts her poppy-colored silk straps at the points where the beige fabric will flap. Now she’s ready. On her complicated bun, in the midst of her dark chestnut hair, she has left a furbellows: a sort of tiny paper aeolian that spins without ruffling. She seems serene when she addresses us, if not for her tone, which has an unaccustomed hardness:

“Tighten your belts and straps to the point of bleeding: ankles, wrists, armpits, along the thighs and arms, everywhere it’ll flap. Hats and helmets pulled down to the eyebrows. Adjust your thigh and tibia armor ; afterwards it’s too late to fix them. Leave some play for the breastplate, don’t choke yourselves! Strap your bags to your shoulders. Nothing should move around or hang loose. The threshgale is a wolverine whose claws love your skin. Any exposed part will howl with pain! Gloves for those who have them ; the others, hurry to Alme to get your hands wrapped. Never try to breathe directly, but always through fabric or with your back to the wind, if you can. The wave will make itself heard for eight seconds before it hits us. I won’t describe it, you’ll know. At that moment, if we’ve had the time to attach ourselves, protect your heads, and pray to a spirit close to you, if you’re still conscious.

We have a half an hour of slamino ahead of us, then the gusts are going to come back and crescendo in very short stages. It’ll get unbearable very quickly, but face it head on, always! The threshgale wave ordinarily surges after a slight deceleration. There will be three, according to my observations and deductions. The worst will be the second one.”

“What do we do if we end up on our own?” ventured Sveziest.

“You hit the deck.”

“Feet upstream or down?”

“That depends on the evenness of the ground, the slope gradient, your weight, the wave... There are fourteen types of waves categorized with certainty. Laminary, sheared, rolling and skimming, cyclonic, aspirant, with or without vortex, gyratory or linear, with effects of spin or suction...”

“What are we...in for, most likely?”

“A priori, the worst: a skimming wave. With a turbulent cyclonic signature, gobs of vortices, and no doubt chrones.”

“And what’s that... to us?”

“Nothing, Zay. It’ll twist you up like laundry on spin-dry. I’m kidding! Not for sure.”

J Alme finished wrapping up Coriolis' arm, and the latter paled when she heard Oroshi's final words. I wanted to comfort her but nothing truly reassuring came to me. I had a bad feeling about this threshgale -- about the ground which wasn't good at all, judging by our geomaster Talweg's face, and the sound of it pounding my ears and causing Silamphre, our music-lover, to make faces as he resolved to take out his leather minerva and to pass another to Sveziest. All our delays... I had the impression we would leave too late... We were dawdling... Coriolis finally got up again; she had a little more color and made a last-ditch effort:

"Does everyone here intend to die? Did you hear what Oroshi said? We're in for the worst! Why don't we stay here? Why? What are you trying to prove? To whom? Have you seen my shoulder? We're all doomed!"

Ω You, now, you'll be losing your virginity, my pet...

x I went to Coriolis and took her in my arms. Larco was looking at me with envy – the palpable desire to be in my position.

"Why aren't we staying behind this wall, Oroshi?" she repeated to me.

"Because this wall will collapse under the shockwave, even before the wave touches it."

"And the village behind it?"

"The village that *was* behind it. There's no more village."

"It's going to be destroyed? All these people are going to..."

"The cyclonic signature. The roofs are going to be pitched off, the houses centrifuged by the turbulent wake. Prepare yourself, now. I'll wrap your head myself when the time comes. You're going to counter just behind me in the Pack. Don't anticipate the fear. Just do what I tell you, at the exact moment I say it."

J Outside, the bush was waiting for us, dressed splendid and desolate in its red laterite. A few desert oaks here and there set down a vague course for counterwork. Over the rest, chaos reigned, a round plateau, clogged with halfway-solid hills, precarious dunes that the threshgale would blast to pieces, lined with furrows too, that it would have been easy to take in clement weather – on this day potentially fatal, since they would serve as beds for rivers of sand. Golgoth had rushed on without a second thought, almost to the point of racing; he had chosen an axial ridgeline and had trailbroken. The ground, fairly firm to stand on, was too hilly, and the spurs had a hard time with the bumps. Pietro and Erg unhooked from time to time towards the rear to relieve them, but soon that would become impossible. Speed was necessary now, to gain as much ground as possible during the slamino phase. Down below, the eucalyptus trees were already bending frightfully, certain tufts of branches were shredded by the gusts. On a sign from Arval, our scout, who was moving about some hundred meters in front of us, Golgoth dove abruptly down the slope, towards a ravine, and drove us into it... Fifty meters later, he yelled:

"Hard right! Corpse!"

"To the right!"

"Don't stop, he's dead!"

An individual, whose fresh wounds were plastered with sand, lay on his side. A glance was enough for me to understand that he was still conscious: he still had a gaze. Not for long: he was losing blood at mid-thigh and he was flayed at the shoulders and hips. Erg, who wasn't a warrior-protector for nothing, unhooked behind me to turn the man over, feel his bones and scrape his wounds with a knife:

"Well?" shouted Golgoth over his shoulder, neither slowing even for a second, nor doubting that an answer would reach him.

"He's an Oblique, no doubt a pirate! Must've been thrown from his sand yacht! Then launched by the blaast. Can't stand up, soon as they've got to advance without their wheels. He's got a gang tattoo, we'll likely run across others! Should I cut him short?"

The question was purely pro forma. I took a few quick steps upstream to try and put some entirely mental distance between the sound I was expecting and my ears. I wasn't swift enough. The dull thwack of the hammer to the occipital cavity nailed it down: Erg had cut him short.

"Better watch out for the yacht itself, it must've landed in the ravine..."

"If it hasn't already passed..."

"Get down!"

π In a fraction of a second, the entirety of the horde throws itself to the ground. A velicar hull rolling from side to side has shot around a bend in the ravine. It strikes, right then left, the earthy slope, projecting whistling shards of rock downstream. It collides with a boulder jutting out ten paces in front of us. From the impact, the craft takes off a meter into the air, landing behind the sleds... Hell of a stroke of luck... We wait a few seconds. Then we get up again.

"Arval, forward-break! Arval!"

"Yes?"

"Position yourself within sight-range upstream! In case of danger, you drop the white cloth!"

◊ As soon as Arval left the Pack, I found myself not sheltered enough, on and off under the direct wind. I was cold; the impression, that I was having trouble dispelling, of being progressively split raw and slivered through my every fiber. My pants shivered like sails at the shins, the cloth pulled at the sleeves and neck, never thick enough at this speed, never opaque enough. I envied the bushes, the space they made for themselves between their branches to let the big packets of air through... Since I was small, often the same idiotic dream: I would have liked to become, at these moments, a boxwood hedge, not this flesh-sail lain across the flow, this flattened trunk without even roots at our feet to join with the earth...

In the ravine, the dreaded rain came all at once. Exploding beads of water on my forehead, making round dark spots on my blue suit... And at once the shower turned to a torrent, the raindrops became so dense, and the wind so powerful, that I stalled for several seconds like a pebble sliding along at the bottom of a river in spate. I fell back, the fear of getting unhitched in my belly...

"Rivek Dar, Arval!"

At a word from Golgoth, Arval rejoined the Pack, I lowered my head, everyone had drawn closer all at once, without yelling or coordinating, the animal reflex of an instinctive herd. There would be no surviving alone, for no one, not even for the Goth; we were no more than a little mound of frail, moving flesh; together, a solid block; separated, almost nothing, barely a chunk of cracked wood ready to split beneath the squall, sawdust to blow away with a breath. And everyone knew it, Pietro and Sov more than all the others who were countering a good half of the time with their backs solidly to the rain, turned toward us, to better link the Lance together with voice and gesture – the Lance to the Pack, the Block to the spurs --, with nothing but a look sometimes, a few words of placement, pacing, or love.

π Very soon, there's sludge. The laterite clay doesn't absorb a thing. Golgoth has taken us out of the ravine, he's sweeping broadly, sends Arval back out to scout, tacks upwind. But he can't avoid the molasses accumulating under our cleats. The rain intensifies. The wind accelerates, as expected. We're getting mired in the clay. Our clothes, completely soaked, stick to our joints. When I'm able to open my eyes again, I can barely discern any depth of field. The green balls of the spinifex alone manifest space. We stumble into them, we thread our way across while pricking ourselves on them. Their blond tufts glisten, blown over by the gusts. Easy to distinguish from the earth, which has turned rusty. The light is greyish, hazy. Golgoth trailbreaks approximately east by south east. He's leading us along the border of the ridge, halfway up the dune, looking for counterwinds...

"There's a bum at nine o'clock!"

"Erg, in position!"

"Let him come closer, Erg, he's wounded!"

) A rain-streaked silhouette, almost bent in half, came partway into our field of vision; it was teetering. The gale pushed him around, long wallops and clouts... The man fell, rose with difficulty, on one knee – fell again heavily, head first, like a dead drunk, groggy. He tried to continue on all fours, but with the wind behind him, he obviously couldn't anticipate the gusts, the skulkwit... Face it! Golgoth didn't adjust his course one iota, but he signaled that I should leave the Lance to go look. The fellow, rather tall, had ventured into a mud-strip, a real pleasure... He saw me coming and touched the boomerang at his hip, but I reassured him by showing my hands. The thickness of the deluge forced me to bellow:

"You won't get far that way, face the wind!"

"I broke the mast of my yacht... The whole squadron broke..."

"Are you Obliques?"

"Yeah... But not looters... itinerant prospectors... We were leaving to hang nets on the Bellini axis... We got caught in the storm..."

The fellow was answering me on his knees. His hair ran with greasy mud, the rain drew his blood along his forearms in light red trickles.

"Are you looking to get to the village?"

He nodded with his head down, and:

"Do you know where it is? He asked with a start in his throat.

"A half an hour downstream."

The fellow's mud-fringed eyes widened. For a few long seconds, he looked downstream, the horde advancing *upstream*, in a triangle, with the sleds dragging on the clay dissolving in the volume of the rain, as they went along... Twice, he asked me to repeat "downstream." He clearly didn't understand a thing. Who would have?

"But where are you going, all of you?"

"Higher."

He marked another pause, still unable to stand.

"But for God's sake, *who are you?*"

"The Horde."

"*The* Horde of Counterwind? The Horde of the ninth Golgoth?"

"Yes."

He seemed to be thinking, as much as he still could. He shook his head, at a loss, crossed himself briefly, wanted to ask his question again, it was too much for him, he couldn't process it, and then he could:

"Can I go up with you?"

"Dig your feet in behind me, as close as possible. When we hook back up, I'm going to take position again in front, at my place in the Lance, just behind the Golgoth. You can just put yourself between two spurs, at the rear. But careful: when you hear "Get down!", don't think it over: drop to the ground. Got it?"

"Thank you."

We hooked up again with difficulty: I had to tow him along several times, up a mound and down it again, he had a poor foothold, a poor intuition for the salvos and he was very probably already on his last legs. When I took up my place in the Lance again, I regretted what I'd done. He was going to bother the spurs, who were already under enormous pressure. Neither the Dubka brothers nor Barbak had emitted the slightest sound when he had taken position... We were now following a linear forest, under a bewildering wind, with numerous rotating and lateral gusts that were destabilizing us. The flow intensity was now such that Golgoth yelled "Chain!" every minute. "Chain!" and immediately we held tight – grabbing each other by the arms and belt. "Chain!" and the collective base went into operation: the gust passed over us without finding any crack to pull us apart. We were united. We were unity. Impregnable. Undislodged. The survivor, in back, doubtless didn't understand a thing, but he followed along, he held out, he stretched out his arm, he hollered "Block!" with us when he heard "Chain!". There...

"Get down!"

...was an explosion: the mound in front of us was pulverized in space by a blast. A mixture of sand and laterite rinsed our shoulders and backs. When I got up again, covered in dirt, I realized two things: the spurs had been dragged several meters by their sleds, but they were in one piece. As for the Oblique, he hadn't hit the ground – in any case not fast enough...

"Sov, leave it alone!"

I could not, or could no longer leave it alone. I downstreamed a few lengths with the wind at my back, which was abruptly soaked, down to the undershirt, down to my skin, by this filthy horizontal rain. The mound, which it was only a matter of going back down, had partly reformed farther away, but very stretched and flattened out for ten meters or so. I approached quickly, looking for something

jutting out of the mound. I found it. The guy was a piece of earth now, no less and no more. His throat and mouth were stopped up by bits of...

"Leave it alone!" I heard indistinctly. "You did what you could..."

The voice sounded at a few paces from me: Pietro, obviously.

"Come take your place in the Lance. We've got to trailbreak."

...his throat stopped up with bits of his chin.

He wasn't the last of his gang that we met, might as well admit it. By guesswork, there must have been fifteen of them or so, seeking a village or a shelter, taken by surprise and cast low, their yacht capsized, having to wing it to confront that for which they would have needed a lifetime of experience. We weren't necessarily more athletic than they were, but we were a unit, with the best for every position or nearly so, in any case the most mentally solid, not to mention experience or an everyday life so totally devoted to the wind and to the pugnacity of counterwork that being cut down by a gust was no longer on the horizon of possibility for us. I saw them pass, these Obliques, yes – but with no great emotion despite the bloodstains, so little was left of them. Contorted, they advanced any old howl, in the indifference of our half-closed eyes, emptying themselves like the punctured skins of dolls without their grist. We called out to some of them, we ignored many others. None of them, in any case, would have held out ten minutes in our ranks and at our speed, nor been able to adapt to our by now instinctual discipline, this strength... This strength? Yet it wouldn't be enough to face what awaited us... It fooled neophytes, and at the still bearable speeds at which good linking and prompt orders to get down would dispel the greater part of the danger. But after that?

"Within walking distance, you said, Caracole?"

"Yek! Two more miles, perhaps."

"We're going to have to swim them if this keeps up!"

"According to my compass, we're on course."

"You okay, ladies?"

"Yes, Larco!"

"And Coriolis? Your arm?"

"It's getting wet. It hurts."

"It hurts for me too: but it's when I see you smile!"

"Get outta here, you idiot!"

"Look out!"

π The falconer slipped, causing Steppe and Aoi behind him to fall. He gets up again without a word. His finely cut clothes are covered with mud. He takes his place on the flank again. Other falls happen before Golgoth, furiously concentrated, taut as a cable, finally scents a rocky outcropping that relieves everyone. The spurs particularly, since they suffer so much, and without flinching. Never would Coriolis or Sveziest have been able to maintain the traction of the soaked sleds, at this tempo and with these terrain conditions, as the Dubka twins do, impressively powerful. Nor like Barbak, now that we gauge how much his experience towing is irreplaceable.

) “Linked,” said Golgoth. “Knotted at the guts.” No, it’s me that slipped that to him last month. Amazing how certain words pierce his shell and click into place, to reappear long afterward, assimilated. “Knotted.” We will never know how it all hangs together. Ceaselessly I turn around and look for Aoi, my little droplet, so light, tottering with rain; over shoulders I look for Callirhoé, a tawny patch, just as fragile, with the bearing of a flame that the slightest gust could snuff out; I ask about Sveziest, too far behind for me to spot him, whether he is resisting, to protect him well. I speak, I take turns with Pietro who is encouraging the group, impeccable, never getting annoyed, who remains our unboastful, genuine prince thanks to whom the horde holds together and holds good, in spite of Golgoth and his flare-ups.

π The rain has completely stopped now. The sand dries at a speed hardly imaginable. No trace of a port anywhere I look. I don’t know anymore. I don’t know if we ought to have trusted Caracole. I fear a catastrophe. The first jellyfish have fallen from the sky. We found enormous ones ripped open on the ground, a sign that the wind is thickening at high altitudes also. In short, that it’s coming... Golgoth didn’t hesitate in the slightest. He asked us to attach ourselves line by line. He’s sticking to Caracole’s vision. He’s staying the course by compass. He’s not looking to trailbreak with subtlety anymore, since you can’t see anything anymore anyway. The air streams by, orange. A grained flow that crackles against the torso, that hammers the head. We’ve put on our leather masks and we barely open our eyes when it yields just a little bit. We have to prepare to dive if the wave is coming. I locate the slightest bit of rock, the slightest usable hollow. To be ready, ready if it explodes... to hug the ground.

“We can take shelter there!”

“Where?”

“There, on the right, behind the boulder!”

“We can’t fit three people there!”

“Gotta keep going!”

“We’ll make it, my Reeds, the port is all ready!”

“My ass, we’ll never get there in time! We’ve gotta dive!”

“Nobody dive! Jam the holes in the rear!”

“Aoi is at her breaking point... Keep a hold on her...”

“There, there’s a hollow! A good hollow! Golgoth!”

“He can’t hear you, Learch! He never could!”

“You in the Pack, shut up!”

) My voice eventually calmed them down. A bit. In the counterwork logbooks I’ve had the chance to read during my training as a scribe, the threshgale has always had a special place. It remains the active and unpredictable figure of death. Each horde has met some – sometimes as many as seven or eight, and each scribe has tried, to the extent of their knowledge and means, to extract lessons that might save future hordes. These lessons are strange, sometimes crazy, more often deep and sound. They are all moving, by way of the filament, the gift they stretch out, at their fingertips, toward the future. As though, even when destroyed, even when dismembered, a horde still kept at its heart, encased in its faith, the hope that one

alone among them, later and further on, maybe centuries and centuries upstream in the future, thanks to the combined exploits of the others, will finally reach the Upper Reaches – and that they will thus be justified, all of them, whatever they did, and forever. That link, none of the sheltered, no Freole will ever understand its strength. It is what makes us rise each day the Wind blows in. It is what keeps us standing up beneath the hail, in the chafing rain, in the face of the stesch, without faltering, without breaking. It is why we will never give up, on no account, since behind us, confident, there stand those lofty dead, whom we will honor till the end, not because they died, even as heroes, but because what lived in them was that gift, that furious *trust* they have granted us without even imagining our faces or our bodies, our own quest. What they knew is what we know: that hordlings die, not the spirit of the fight. That it would be enough to see a baby windhog point his snout into the wind, a boxwood resist the gust, to grasp, instinctually, in which direction courage blows. “Quick is he who stands to face it. Never turn back, if not to piss,” read the inscription in the counterwork logbook of the 19th Horde. We left Aberlaas, Lower Reaches, twenty-seven years ago now. We were eleven. And we have never turned back.

◊ A downright river of sand washes continually over us. We’re not going to make it out! It’s no longer possible now. Even if the port is a hundred meters away, we won’t see it, even at ten meters. We may have already passed it... It was perhaps behind us, downstream. To the right, I thought it... Or to the left, who knows? Blessed Breath, who knows? The panic is beginning to rise, irrepressible. I hug the girls, I’ve got stomach spasms, I’m leaning on Alme...

“Bolster the Lance!”

“What?”

“Hold! Hold!”

“Tight! As a block! Bloooooock!”

x The Lance made a nosedive under the gust’s intensity. The acceleration is so enormous that the flanks are mechanically pushed toward the inside of the Pack. They struggle to stay in line to protect the rear. Sov wedges himself back in with a jerk of the hips and leans in. The whole Pack has locked in its supports and holds. For the time being. The air has passed from a liquid thickness to a quasi-solid consistency. Each fluctuation strikes the block as with a sledgehammer. And breaks it apart. The falconer has been brought down again. He crawls to get back in position, stands up and falls again.

“Hang on, Darbon!”

Behind us, the sleds fly up and go haywire. They thump down, whirl around, thump down again...

“Unhitch the sleds! Let it all go!”

“No!”

“Let them go!”

“No! the helmets and the birds are inside!”

The Dubkas clipped the sled grips directly onto their harness. The thirty kilos of equipment pitch around behind them.

“Support Learch! Prop him up from behind!”

“He can stand!”

“Hold him, he’s listing! He’s at his breaking point!”

) This was the passage during which the earth itself began to rise up in patches. What was rushing toward us no longer had any shape, but a color, brick red – and a sound – the sound of a cold torrent in spate. Four times, Golgoth made us get down. Four times he had us get up again and he pulled us, by his voice alone, by his gall alone, upstream, whereas not a single hordling in the Pack would have had the will to counter any longer. Golgoth, insult him if you like, but never in front of me. He asked and he asked again, tirelessly, if we were on course. And we were. Then came the threshold where it was no longer possible to stand and we advanced in a squat, pounded by sand and shards of rock, blind beneath the leather helmets and caps, beneath the bands of circled cloth, under the fur hats and the jute masks, which absorbed the abrasion, not the shock of the blast.

A long floating devastation invaded space and we were lost, haggard with weariness, pockmarked, completely dazed in the midst of the bush, in full laminar fury, in full ascent toward its peak ; branches arrowed through the brick curtain, inconceivable objects pierced the mass of dust, arose suddenly, propellers out of nowhere and buckets, shredded nets, bags, everything that had thought itself able to still hang on, and that now understood; everything that thought itself heavy enough but never was – even the hull of a hovercraft, pushed meter by meter, and even the ghostly velicar that passed four paces from Learch, its sail jammed, pilotless, and that took off indefinitely downstream.

“Over there!”

“What?”

“Over there, on the right!”

“Who said that?”

“Silamphre! Starboard, he says!”

“What, starboard? We can’t see anything at all!”

“Listen! Listen carefully!”

For a moment, I thought Silamphre was raving, so much did the uproar of the schnee once again fill up the entire field of the audible. Then nothing, a brief lament, a thin melodic fiber, barely discernable at the fringe of the senses, as if winding its way in from a dream, came free amidst the roaring column. Not music, not noise, even less a voice, no, it rose and fell in frequency, mingled with the horrible rustling, cutting across it, surfacing at times, then plunging again.

“What is it, Silamphre?”

“You hear it?”

“Barely. What is it?”

My heart nearly leapt out when I realized. The ululation, yes! The phareola! The port’s phareola! The aeolian siren that guides ships in bad weather!

“That’s it, yeah, shit!”

“Holy shit!”

“Counter like a crab! We’re veering to starboard! In position on the ground! Sov, Pietro, Steppe, Talweg and Erg on the leading edge with me, the Pack behind us! We’ll use the frontal thrust and slide!”

In our hurry, we collapsed, we got up again. We slid – a bit, very briefly. We burst into pieces. We crawled and crawled, as fast as possible, half-drowned in the sand, a wandering swarm, yet still united.

With Golgoth and Pietro, we painfully made out a sort of canal, marked out every fifty meters with pierced rocks... Sound-cairns! Whistling in the wind when they were not yet jammed with earth. Step by step, like an unsound ship seeking the way to the port, we advanced due south on the port tack, hanging on the ululating of those cairns as we might follow a night guide carrying a feeble candle, crawling on our elbows for the parts without cover, running as soon as the area was a little sheltered.

When the canal ended, there was nothing left but the trumpet, dominant at present, of the phareola. Alone, playing for itself in the empty immensity of the bush, the unhoped-for foghorn called us to it, mechanical, and yet in that instant more human than a mother, more precious than anything. We didn’t know what type of port to expect, we rushed toward its cry, toward that nostalgic and urgent keening, when the storm threw us onto the slope.

x Feeling my way along, I looked for the wall of the dike, I sat down with my back against it and drew back the cloth from my eyes to analyze the site as precisely as possible. By the relative weakening of the flow, I know we have two minutes left before the wave arrives. The dike, which stands four meters high and ten wide, is made of stacked granite cubes in the middle of which are fixed – Caracole was right - - two mooring hooks. The basin into which the port is carved is a natural sinkhole whose sharp ridge is about six meters away. The ground, which is paved with stones, is covered with a sand layer thick enough to confirm the obvious: this is an open-wind port, barely fitted out and practically unprotected from the flow.

“Get out your helmets and ropes! Then lock down the sleds and tie them to the hooks.”

The sinkhole is oval-shaped, with a gentle slope upstream and an abrupt one downstream. I observe the flow. It dives at times as a katabatic wind, bounces off the paving, comes and touches the hill to the rear and then leaves. Under the wave, it’ll be very different. With the shockwave, the reverberation will launch us against the dike, then suck us into the sky in a twisting motion.

“Seven-ranked teardrop formation! Leave fifteen meters of rope between the dike and Golgoth, then attach him.”

“Fifteen meters?! My ass! We’ll leave the sheltered zone! I don’t wanna take the wave right in the face! We’ve gotta stick to the dike to make it out of this!”

π Oroshi doesn’t even make a gesture of annoyance. Erg turns his back to her and adjusts his steel helmet. When he turns back around, he’s even more impressive than usual. Oroshi’s voice rings out again. She remains precise and beautiful:

“Fifteen meters, Erg. Otherwise you’ll end up smashed against the dike.”

“Impossible!”

“The afterwave, Erg.”

x The ropes are unrolled. I double-check the distance: fifteen meters, fine. I keep talking:

“Eight ropes, four on each ring. Tie yourselves directly on: Golgoth, with two ropes, then Sov and Pietro, Erg and Firost, Horst and Karst. Everyone clips on with their neighbor, rank by rank. Then in front and in back. Hold on to two tying points in front of you. But leave an arm’s length around you. Why not joined together? For the flow circulation. It must stay granular.”

The wind just weakened: the wave is coming. I run to take my place at the heart of the Pack. The lock biners are ready. Karst on my left and Alme on my right click me on to the belt. I snag the ends of the Austringer’s and Steppe’s straps in front of me and screw my ring on. Then I feel Larco fastening himself behind me. But not Caracole...

“Caracole? Hook on!”

“Caracole, come back!”

“He’s nuts!”

“Bring him back!”

) As the horde settled at last into its ranks, with little nervous steps, geometrically, and as the heavy full helmets, of steel or wood, had been affixed over the heads of those who had the frame to carry them without bending, Caracole did something unheard of: he left the Pack. Struck dumb by the aberration, I saw him run, climb headlong up the wall of the dike, leap to the summit of the ridge and kneel, arms lifted against the light, his torso flattened by the intensity of the torrent of earth that was washing over him. For an instant, he appeared transparent beneath the piercing wind. I wanted to yell something to him, but I was too afraid, too much terror in my lungs to... He had already turned back anyway... He then let himself slide down the slope, one knee in front, to sketch out a bow... At which point he opened his mouth, sucking in with his stomach a sufficient volume of air to declaim and he spoke these words, whose meaning, in hindsight, appears infinitely more lovely to me than what I drew from it then:

“Threshgale, *maturaturi, te salutamus!*”

And he jumped into the sand, like a cat, to take up his place and fasten himself again...

x Abruptly, the ropes groaned and the horde retreated as one. We heard it. Eight seconds.

) It was the moment, noticeable, when the wind stopped howling and passed into a properly inhuman speed, unbearable even for the stones, even for the boxwoods. The sound lost its chiseled shrillness, left the fifth form and became what no hordling could erase from his physical memory once it was heard, that horrifying torch of chafed earth that was called the threshgale. The shockwave was audible at some hundred kilometers upstream projected by the thunder, and at that moment, even when used to it, even in the face of my fifth threshgale as I was, a cold terror

rose through the axis of my spine and the immediate reflex, impossible to counter, useless to acquire...

“Shield yourselves!”

“Fucking hell...”

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II - Chrones

– Those who tell you “during the wave, I was thinking about this and that,” are lying. When it comes, you don’t think anymore. You forget what you wanted to do, were dreaming of being, thought you could do. The body alone answers. And it answers as it can. It defecates, it pisses on itself. It eats its mouth with its teeth, like meat. It burns its tendons clenching into the front strap. It drools. And afterwards?

Afterwards everyone says what they want, he tells, she expands, he puts words into it, he splits what’s nothing but a rock of brute fear... Me? What I could tell you – you bunch of skulkwits huddling in your stone cages when you’ll ask us from right in the middle of your villages, tomorrow or in six days – I can see you already, survivors from your comfortable wells, your stuccoed burons, with your ripe cheeks at the end of the evening, yeah, in the ruddy sun shining in your clear panes of glass, waiting to be told of it, for us to burnish the slab of the exploit, that under a threshgale... But let’s not talk about it anymore. Under a threshgale there’s nothing to say. There’s just surviving when it comes knocking at your forehead – because it doesn’t envelop you anymore or “submerge” you or any other la-di-da: it hits you, with a poleax, in the chinks of your bones. There’s just hanging on – your neck taut – snapping backward – under the shock. Hanging on, that’s it. That’s what I just did. My hips are cut in half by the strap.

“You okay?”

“Morrff...”

“You okay, fellas? Who’s wounded? Answer!”

x Gurgles come from all around, groans of twisted beasts shaking themselves off after a flood. A few gusts are still rinsing the basin, dispersing a bit of sand, a few red whirlwinds whistle at the rim, dive and wisp into nothing, but the greater part of the vortex has passed. A respite is near, perhaps for a half hour, although I fear the chrones that are going to form in the turbulence of the wake. For the most part, it went as I’d hoped. The worst is never certain, they say, though it was a very close call. The worst comes with the second wave.

“Oroshi... Oroshi! What happened?”