

**ARD CHRONICLES: ACT 1**

# **THE ASH-GRAY WINDS**





## ARD CHRONICLES: ACT I

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**T**he wind came in low, steady gusts, carrying the ash.

The **clansmen** were already moving, without formation, simply following their instincts. One spat into the ash. *"Tastes like a burnt bone."* Another glanced sideways. *"You'd know."* A few rough laughs. Then someone noticed **Korni**.

He stood out immediately. Half-orc. Half-elf. Wrong twice.

*"Well, look at that,"* one clansman muttered. *"Elves didn't want you, so you came crawling back here?"*

*Korni didn't react. Just watched the ground.*

*"It's moving,"* he said.

The first clansman snorted. *"And the half-breed speaks wisdom! Tell me, when it eats you, which half screams first?"*

*"You should pull back from the low ground,"* Korni said. *"Whatever's down there..."*

*"We decide where we stand,"* the first one cut in. *"Not you."*

Down the slope, the **Beast Riders** were already mounted. **Warfangs** paced in tight, restless circles. **Boars** stood planted, muscles tense, snorting ash from their nostrils. The riders didn't waste words.

The tremor came again. Harder. A crack split the lower ground. Ash erupted upward, thick enough to choke sight and sound alike. Tents, bodies, gear – gone in a breath.

**The Ashquake Burrower** tore its way out at the far edge of Korni's settlement. The ground there simply gave way. Huts tilted, then vanished. A cooking fire

flipped into the air, scattering embers that died instantly in the ash. People ran – but the earth was faster.

Korni saw it happen. He knew that something was deeply wrong, which is why he wanted to inform the clansmen. But no one listened.

*"MOVE!"* he shouted, already running downhill, while the Burrower's body shoved the earth aside in massive segments. Korni reached the edge just as the first collapse finished. Someone was still there, half-buried. He grabbed them. Pulled. The body slipped as the earth beneath them dropped.

He screamed. A hand caught his shoulder. *"You go down there, you die,"* said an orc woman, flat and certain.

*"They're still alive!"* Korni snapped, trying to pull free.

*"They were,"* she replied. *"My name is Bunra. I'm a Stonebraker commander. Pick your ground, or you join them, half-breed."*

Another tremor ran through the earth. Korni froze, looking at the collapsing edge of what had been his settlement.

*"Then listen,"* he said, forcing the words out. *"It doesn't move randomly. It follows pressure. When it rises, it exposes the joints, or segments, where it bends. That's where it's weakest."*

Bunra watched him for a moment. Then nodded once.

Warfangs darted along the edges, snapping at exposed sections. Boars charged in short bursts, then peeled away before the ground gave out. Javelins struck in waves – some finding cracks in the creature's plating.

The ground rolled. A rider vanished as the earth folded beneath them. Another barely cleared the edge as a Warfang leapt blind through ash.

They pulled away instantly. Then the Stonebreakers came with heavy, measured steps. They formed around Bunra without a word.

*"We break what we can reach," she said. "When it rises, we hit. Then we step back."*

The Burrower surged again.

*"Higher!"* Korní shouted. *"At the bend, left side!"*

Bunra adjusted without hesitation. *"Left. Up."*

They shifted. Struck again.

What came out wasn't just blood. Thick, dark, mixed with ash and heat, spilling over the ground in heavy waves. The rotten smell hit the nostrils immediately.

The Burrower reacted. Its body snapped sideways. It twisted sharply and plunged downward. Straight into the ground. The earth collapsed after it, pulling loose bodies, shattered weapons, and pools of blood into the depths.

It was gone. For now.

*The ash in the wind became thicker than before.*

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