



1 SOMETHING IN THE GROUND

Marnelius Cotch-Baumen pinched the bridge of his nose and winced. He was getting a beastly headache. The climate of Sestina did not agree with him. It was not as cold as Noran, but it was definitely wetter, and the damp caused terrible clogging in his sinuses. The fact that he had to live in one of the hovels Sestinians called ‘manor houses’ did not help either. The sooner his new keep was built, the better. As Provinchus of this area, he was entitled to a decent standard of living and his poor health demanded it. He gazed dourly at the woman who stood before his desk. Dressed in unadorned travelling clothes, she was crude and unladylike, with the ever-present Myunan tool roll slung over her back and the unsightly coloured markings arcing across her otherwise attractive face – even running through her long, dark hair in pale streaks. He despised Myunans.

‘I’m sure you can understand the dangers of mixing mining and children,’ he said to her. ‘They are like white wine and red meat: incompatible, and hazardous to the constitution. Out of concern for your youngsters, I would ask that you exercise proper control over them.’

‘Our children were not in danger until you started mining in our territory,’ the woman replied. ‘I would ask that you exercise proper control over your forces ... and leave.’

‘We have gone over this time and again,’ Cotch-Baumen sniffed, dabbing his nose with a handkerchief. ‘You hold no title to this land; you have no right to it under law. Indeed, you wouldn’t know what to do with land if you did own it. You Myunans wander like a herd of cattle, making no attempt to civilise yourselves. If you want land, apply in writing for a grant of land, like any civilised person.’

‘We didn’t need *titles* until you concocted them and all the laws are yours! Our people have *always* lived here ...’

‘Yes, as I have said, we have gone over this time and again. Your protests have been duly noted. But on the matter at hand, I have asked politely. Now I must insist. Keep your children away from our operations at the mountain or your tribe will be held accountable. You may go now.’

Nayalla Archisan stared down at the Provinchus, struggling to maintain her composure. This thin, string of a man had insulted her and dismissed her as if she were a lowly servant rather than an elder of the powerful Hessingale tribe. He was already reading from a report on his desk, paying no more attention to her. She closed her eyes and willed the colours of her face to change. Her flesh paled to whiteness, shadows deepened and in moments, her face bore an uncanny likeness to a human skull. She leaned in close to the Provinchus and her eyes flicked open in their sunken sockets. Cotch-Baumen looked up and gave a start, taken aback by the sight.

‘Do you think that planting your flag in our territories will make this land yours?’ she hissed. ‘Listen to what we are saying. This land delivers dire retribution upon those who abuse it. Do not make enemies of the Myunans.’

Cotch-Baumen sat bolt upright.

‘Such theatrics,’ he said, flustered. ‘Really!’

Nayalla turned and walked out, the skull vanishing from her face. She was done with the Noranian. Now it was time to have a few words with her children.

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The episode with the Myunan children had served to release some of the tension the miners were feeling and the rest of the morning had passed without any further mishap. The mines were still so shallow that the miners could come out for lunch to soak up some sunlight and spare their spirits the gloomy darkness while they ate. Noogan decided to stay and work on for a while, encouraged by the progress he had made that morning and eager to chip away more of the slab of hard, grey stone he had uncovered. He was only seventeen, with dark hair, and a face that bore a perpetual, gormless expression. He was tall, but still had a boy’s build and he was struggling to earn the respect of his workmates. A farmer’s son, he had turned to mining when his brothers took over the family plot. Like any young lad, he had made the usual cock-ups as he learnt the ropes and the older men weren’t letting him forget them. Working under this mountain made him nervous, and that was causing him to make even more mistakes. Mistakes were not easily forgiven by men who worked in fear of cave-ins and gas poisoning.

A sound made him stop and turn around. He could see nothing in the light of his headlamp, so he picked up the bule-oil lantern and held it out in front of him. The noise was grainy, like sand being poured from a bucket. He ground his teeth together. He knew the rest of the team were up at the

mouth of the mine. But there was definitely someone down here with him. The Myunans again. Bloody whelps, he thought as he cast the light of the lantern around. He'd spank them black and blue if he caught them.

A movement on the floor of the tunnel caught his eye and he knelt down. Some of the dust from the ore they had dug out was cascading down the pile of rock and shifting along the floor. Noogan frowned. He hadn't noticed any draught. He wet his finger in his mouth and held it down near the floor, expecting the side facing the draught to turn cold. It didn't. He put his cheek down near the shifting dust. Definitely no breeze. He stood up and shone the lantern on the ground further down the tunnel. The dust and some of the smaller lumps were moving along the ground, like a column of ants. He laughed nervously and thought of going up to fetch some of the others, but his curiosity got the better of him and he followed the trail of iron ore to see where it was going.

It led him to a pit that Balkreht, one of the other miners, had been working in that morning. It was waist deep and twice as wide. Balkreht had found a rich deposit there and had been crowing about how he had cleaned it out as he walked up the slope for his lunch. There was another sound coming from the bottom of the pit. Noogan peered in, but the light was still poor and he could not see the bottom properly. The trail of ore fragments was pouring into the hole as if it were trying to refill it. He climbed down into the pit and was astounded at what he found.

The ground was moving beneath his boots, tickling the soles of his feet. It was boiling like water in a pot, but there was no heat coming off it. He put his hand down to touch it and felt it pull at his fingers. He jerked upright, intending to

step out of the pit until he knew what he was dealing with, but his feet would not move. He was ankle deep in the ground, his feet stuck as if in a marsh, but this was dry earth. Fear started to rise in his chest. He dropped the lantern, which smashed and went out as he grabbed for the edge of the pit. The earth around his feet was folding in on itself, pulling his feet with it.

‘Help!’ he screamed. ‘Somebody help me! Please ...’

He had his elbows on the edge of the hole and it took all his strength to hold himself up. More debris slipped down from the pile of ore and skated along the ground towards him, flowing over his arms and shoulders and into the pit. He shrieked again and heard boots running down the tunnel. His right elbow slipped over the brink and he reached back up and dug his fingertips into the tunnel floor. As more of the ore filled the hole, he could feel the grip lessen on his feet, but now he was buried up to the knees and something was still tugging at his boots.

‘Jusek ... Balkrelt! Somebody, help!’ His other elbow was slipping and the fingertips of his right hand were sliding back. A light appeared and then another, the headlamps of his workmates. Moments later, strong hands were seizing his arms and pulling at him, but at first it seemed the ground’s hold was too strong. Then he felt something give and he was hauled out of the hole. He thrashed out, knocking away their hands and backed up against the wall, shivering and close to tears.

‘What was it, Noogan?’ Balkrelt asked. ‘What had a hold of you?’

Noogan’s chest was too tight to speak. He knew if he tried to say anything he would start to cry and that would be too

much, so he just shook his head and pulled his knees up to his chest. He stared down at his socks and ground his teeth to stop a sob escaping. The earth had taken the ankle-high boots right off his feet.

‘I’m going to have to dig all that out again,’ Balkrelt moaned. ‘What were you up to?’

‘Leave it,’ Paternasse told him.

‘What are you talking about? We’ve got quotas to make.’

‘Fill it in. Put it all back in. Whatever’s in there can bloody stay in there. The lad didn’t bury himself. Fill the hole in.’

They stood around the small pit, staring down into it in bewilderment and unease. Then they grabbed their shovels and dumped the ore back where it had come from.

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Mirkrin Archisan was returning to his village from a market in a local town when he came across a triangle scraped into the clay of the track ahead of him. Glancing around, he frowned, and then rubbed the mark out with his foot. As he wandered back into the glen where their tribe, the Hessingales, spent part of the mild Sestinian summers, he spotted his Taya and Lorkrin coming out of the trees nearby. He sighed and beckoned to them.

‘You’re late for your lessons,’ he chided them. ‘Where were you? If I find out you were up at the miners’ camp ...’

‘We weren’t, Pa!’ Taya answered, automatically.

‘... I’m going to be very annoyed,’ he continued, ignoring her. ‘You know you’re not supposed to be wandering out of the village with all those Noranian thugs hanging about. They’re a bad crowd, and I don’t want to see you ...’

His voice drifted off as he caught sight of his wife, Nayalla.

She was striding towards the elders' lodge when she saw them. She spun on her heel and marched straight at them, her face a mask of fury. If looks could kill, Taya and Lorkrin's remains would have been spread over a wide area.

'By the gods,' Mirkrin muttered, looking at his wife's expression and turning to his children. 'What did you do?'

Nayalla stopped in front of them and went to say something, but took a breath first. She was almost too angry to speak. Lorkrin and Taya both turned pale.

'You two are ...' she started, then took another breath. 'It is going to take you a long, long time to make this right.'

Mirkrin's face darkened.

'What is it?' he asked.

'It has taken us three weeks to get a meeting with the Provinchus,' she growled at the two children. 'It is the first chance I've had to talk to him without having to hold a mob back at the same time. The tribe was counting on me to make him understand the damage he is doing to Absaleth, to our land. I walk in there and have to wait for him to finish being shaved and perfumed by his barber, then wait again as he reads some ... some ... I don't know – some periodical. Then, when I finally have his attention, he turns around and tells me my *children* have been scaring the living daylights out of some of his miners. This, as far as he is concerned, is all that we need to talk about. I am there to try and stop our land being desecrated and end up getting told off for not keeping control of my children!'

'Ma, it wasn't us ...' Lorkrin began.

'Don't even try it!' Nayalla snapped at him. 'Don't even open your mouth! Your class is starting, hurry up over there

or you'll be late again. I need to talk to your father.'

Lorkrin and Taya trudged on towards the communal lodge that stood in the centre of the glen. The village was made up of domed lodges; each one roofed with sods of grass and dug in so that part of it lay below the level of the ground. For the children, it was the least interesting place in the world. Mirkrin watched them walk away, and then put a hand on his wife's shoulder.

'They were down in the mines?'

She nodded.

'He said they were hidden against the wall of a tunnel. One of the men almost hit Lorkrin with a pickaxe.'

Mirkrin grimaced and shook his head. He was a burly man, with a mop of dark hair and a strong, square face. He was of a mellow disposition, in stark contrast to his wife, but even he had limits.

'We're going to have to do something serious this time,' he muttered. 'They have to learn. I thought that disaster in Noran would have taught them some sense, but they're as bad as ever. I don't know where they get it from.'

'They get it from us,' Nayalla smiled tiredly. 'Not that they can ever know that, of course. When I think of the stuff we got up to ... But they have a habit of getting into trouble with the wrong people. I mean, the Noranians for goodness sake.'

Like their mouldable flesh, Myunan children had very impressionable natures. It would be all too easy for them to pick up bad habits from their new neighbours – particularly Lorkrin, who was developing an unhealthy interest in swords and all manner of other dangerous weapons.

'Oh, I nearly forgot,' Mirkrin looked at her. 'Emos is here. He left his mark on the track for me.'

‘I wonder what he wants. It’s not like him to leave the farm so close to Harvest Tide.’

‘Well, we’d better go and find out; it can’t be good, whatever it is.’

‘Before or after we punish the brats?’

‘Oh, before,’ Mirkrin nodded solemnly. ‘Best to let them stew for while. Nothing like a bit of anticipation to put a lively fear into them.’

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Emos Harprag was Nayalla’s brother. He was an outcast, exiled from his tribe and forbidden to have any contact with Myunans after he had mysteriously survived an epidemic that had killed his wife. They feared that he might still be infectious; even if the disease had not killed him he might still be a danger to others. It was believed that he had survived by practising the black art of transmorphing – manipulating lifeless materials like metal or wood as if they were his own malleable flesh – a crime punishable by exile. Transmorphing was considered an assault on nature itself. Nayalla and Mirkrin had kept in contact with him – discretely, so as not to embarrass their tribe – and they knew there was no danger of infection. They had helped him recover from his wife’s death and his exile, and he was always there for them when they needed him.

Emos had become something of an enigma. He still practised the transmorphing and he had travelled to more strange lands than any Myunan alive. He had eventually settled down on a farm in Braskhia, giving up the nomadic Myunan lifestyle, but he still went wandering when the mood took him. It could not be a coincidence that he was here now, when the Myunans

were facing an invasion of their territory.

Mirkrin and Nayalla walked until they were well out of sight of the village and sat down to wait on one of the fallen monoliths that had once marked the boundaries of their ancestors' territory. They knew Emos would be watching the village and they only needed to wait and he would find them. While they waited, Nayalla told her husband about her audience with the Provinchus.

'By the gods, it was embarrassing,' she sighed. 'I lost the rag in the end. I had to give up or just scream at him. He had no interest in listening to us. We're just cattle to him.'

'It was only going to be a matter of time before they started settling here.' Mirkrin lay back on the stone. 'They've filled every land around them. We don't have the Braskhians' technology or the Karthars' strength, so the Noranians were bound to turn on us eventually, once they got over their superstitions about us. There's some who're starting to think a fight is the only way to go.'

Nayalla looked up sharply: 'I know that you're not one of them, right?'

Mirkrin shrugged and avoided his wife's gaze.

'How much territory do we let them take, Nayalla? They're destroying the birthplace of our culture – the place that's made us what we are. What will be next? The smelt pools? The birthing glens? How long do we stand for it?'

Nayalla scowled. Beyond the occasional fight between tribes over territory, the Myunans were a relatively peaceful race. She was not averse to a stick-fight every now and then – it kept everyone on their toes – but a fight with the Noranians would be for keeps. And the Noranians were experts in war. The Sestinians had fought for decades against their

northern neighbours and the wars had crippled their country. Now they were little more than a Noranian province. The Myunans could not win a war against Noran.

She was spared further brooding by the appearance of her brother over the edge of the trees in the shape of an eagle. He glided down, landing lightly and then slunched, letting his malleable muscles relax to regain his normal form. A lean man with grey, shoulder-length hair and a face marked with a blue, triangular tattoo, he always had the air of someone who knew more than he wanted about the world. Walking over to them with a rare smile on his face, he hugged his sister and then grasped Mirkrin's hand. He stood back after greeting them and hesitated. Emos had been looking after Taya and Lorkrin the previous summer, when they had run away and got involved with an attempt to rescue a gardener from the Noranians. The two children had nearly been killed several times as a result and Emos winced with shame every time he thought of it. Now, he had come bearing more grim news.

'Kalayal Harsq is coming to Absaleth,' he told them, his face even more grave than usual.

'The exorcist from Braskhia?' Nayalla frowned. 'Why is he coming here?'

'The Noranians have contracted him to purge the mountain of its soul,' Emos grunted bitterly. 'It seems they believe in ghosts when profits are at stake.'

'When is he coming?' Mirkrin asked.

'He could arrive at any time. He left Braskhia with his followers two days ago, before I heard the news,' Emos replied. 'I flew out here as fast as I could. He and his people are coming in trucks. He is supposed to pick up a Noranian escort along the way.'

‘I’ve only heard stories about him,’ Mirkrin looked out towards the horizon. ‘They say he can wipe the life from a land. Fields that he has blessed bear crops with no taste or goodness; lakes and rivers with the purest water carry no fish. Makes me wonder why anybody would want him around.’

‘Because forests had to be felled where those fields were planted, and dams had to be built in front of those rivers,’ Emos said. ‘And for that, part of the land’s spirit had to be broken. Going up against nature takes good judgement and a sense of balance. With a man like Harsq, you need neither. And the Noranians are bringing him to Absaleth.’

All three were silent. Nayalla could sense the anger in the two men and it scared her, because she knew that the rest of her tribe were feeling the same. Absaleth was of huge spiritual importance to the Myunans, and the mountain was considered the anchor of this land’s soul. That the Noranians were defiling the mountain with their mines was bad enough – she was having trouble keeping the peace as it was. But an exorcism! The men of the tribe would kill anyone who tried such a thing. And the Noranians would know that. They would be prepared.

She looked wearily out towards the tall mountain and wondered how she could prevent her tribe from starting a bloody battle that they could not win.

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Taya and Lorkrin sat quietly through their class. Ceeanna, the matriarch of their tribe, was teaching them texturing. She had set them the laborious task of mimicking the bark of the oak tree. Lorkrin worked on his arm listlessly with his routing skewer, pressing ridges into his flesh. By slunching his

muscles – relaxing them to make them malleable – he could mould the soft flesh into shape with his tools. The art of amorphing. His tools were a novice set, made eight generations before; he could name all of the previous owners. As with all Myunan tools, the amorite used to make them had come from the open veins in the streams high up on Absaleth. Legend had it that the great prophet Amarrin had come down from the mountain, after weeks of fasting and praying, with the very first set of amorphing tools – tools bestowed upon him by the mountain’s spirit.

Lorkrin thought it was a load of rubbish, but would never have said it to anyone but his sister. He crefted his reformed muscles, tensing them so that they held their new shape. It was a half-hearted job; bark was boring, and he just wasn’t in the mood.

‘I said “oak”, Taya,’ he heard their teacher say. ‘That’s more like chestnut – and mouldy chestnut at that. Try paying a bit more attention.’

The two youngsters didn’t know what was going to happen to them, but they knew it would be bad. Myunans beating their children was not unheard of, but children soon learnt that they could take a lot of the pain out of a slap by letting their flesh go soft to absorb the blow. Like all skills motivated by the avoidance of pain, it was learned quickly and as early as possible, with the result that slapping Myunan children was considered somewhat futile. Unwilling to raise the levels of pain on their beloved offspring, Myunan parents became more inventive in their punishments instead. Lorkrin and Taya’s parents had a wide range of options open to them.

They dragged their feet on the way back to their lodge after

class. Mirkrin and Nayalla were sitting facing the entrance as they walked in. The lodge was a low, domed timber construction, covered with a canvas tarpaulin and sods of earth and grass. Inside, earthen steps led to the floor, which was below ground level to help keep the warmth in and a section of canvas hung down over one part of the large room to partition off their parent's bed. This was home. Apart from a single low table, a simple stove, cooking implements and some bits and pieces their mother had picked up on her travels, the room boasted nothing but warmth and a raw animal comfort. Their father, who was the tribe's toolsmith, worked outside for the most part and kept his tools tucked carefully away near his small forge, which he could dismantle when the tribe moved the village. Myunans did not care for collecting things and it showed in the way they lived.

Taya and Lorkrin stood sullenly in front of the hide flap of the door. One look at their parents' faces told them this was going to be bad, that excuses would just draw it out and that they should just fall on their swords and be done with it.

'I'm sorry,' Taya mumbled, looking at her feet.

'I'm sorry too,' Lorkrin mumbled too, staring sideways at the wall.

'Give me your tools,' said Mirkrin.

Lorkrin gaped.

'Which ones?'

'Now don't get smart with me, boy. All of them.'

The two children were stunned. A Myunan without tools was half a Myunan. They would be unable to assume anything but the most basic shapes. They would not be able to play with their friends. In fact, they would not even be able to show their faces in front of their friends. They would only

have their colours to hide them when they were away from the village. There were so many places they would not be able to go and things they would not be able to do. It would be like wearing chains.

‘You can’t!’ Taya whined, close to tears.

‘You have got to learn,’ their mother said, softly. ‘You can’t go on behaving the way you do.’

‘You’re not having my tools!’ Lorkrin yelled. ‘I earned them! You don’t have the right!’

‘Mind your tone!’ Mirkrin warned him. ‘Now, hand them over. We won’t have any more argument about it. Do as you’re told, young lad.’

Lorkrin pulled the straps of his tool roll from his shoulders and threw the pack at his parents’ feet. Mirkrin jumped up, but Nayalla grabbed his wrist.

‘I hate you!’ Lorkrin bellowed, then whipped the heavy hide flap aside and ran out before they could see that he was ready to cry.

Taya slung her pack from her back, stepped forward and dropped it in front of her father, her face frozen as she cast her eyes over her parents.

‘I don’t hate you,’ she said. ‘I just think we’re *your* fault. So why are *we* always the ones getting punished?’

She turned and walked out after her brother. Mirkrin, sighed, shaking his head and flopping down to put his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

‘Why do I always end up feeling that we come out of these things in worse shape than they do?’