



2 A RING OF SKACKS

Evening fell early because of an overcast sky, the sullen, grey clouds blocking out the last light of dusk. This suited the four Myunans of the Hessingale tribe, who stood near the top of a bank that overlooked a flat, straight stretch of road. Their skin and clothes reduced to muted earth colours of greys, greens and browns, they waited invisible, watching out for the first sight of Kalayal Harsq. The mumble of distant engines reached their ears and all eyes turned east. There, coming around the side of a hill on the horizon, they saw the twin oil lamps that lit the way for an oncoming vehicle. They were joined by another pair, and another. There was a long column of vehicles rolling down into the valley.

Mirkrin and Nayalla watched the approaching lights with Ceeanna. The matriarch's colours were starting to fade with age, but she had lost none of her strength, or sternness. Standing a little further from the others, the fourth figure was Westram, a tall, commanding man, and the tribe's border chief. Now that the elders had agreed that Harsq had to be stopped, there only remained the question of how. Westram was in favour of attacking the convoy and killing Harsq before he reached the mining compound.

'There are a lot of them,' Ceeanna observed. 'I count a dozen trucks. Why would he need so many?'

'They've sent an entire battlegroup with him,' Mirkrin

sighed. 'Infantry, armoured wagons, even a crossbow turret.'

'So you say Draegar told you about this?' Ceeanna enquired, referring to an old friend of the couple. 'Why didn't he come down to the village? Not worried about being saddled with your little terrors again this summer, is he?'

Nayalla shot a glance at her husband. The tribe were not supposed to know that Taya and Lorkrin stayed with Emos – she always told them that the children spent part of the summer with Draegar. She knew Ceeanna suspected otherwise.

'He was in a hurry towards Brodfan,' Nayalla shrugged. 'Once he'd told us, he had to head on.'

Ceeanna clucked her tongue as she regarded the approaching convoy, and then glanced at Westram. He kept his eyes on the oncoming convoy. Mirkrin spat and said what they were all thinking.

'We can't take on those kinds of odds. They'd slaughter us.'

'What other choice do we have?' Westram responded.

But there was doubt in his eyes. He knew the stakes were too high.

'We'd lose this,' Nayalla shook her head. 'People are going to get killed for nothing.'

'Harsq has a machine,' Mirkrin spoke up. 'He used to rely on blessings alone, but they were too arbitrary. Now he uses science too. He uses one of the engines that make lightning. If we could destroy that, I think it would hold him up ... until he got another one, at least.'

'We'd need to find a way in through all those extra guards,' Westram nodded towards the approaching battlegroup.

'I say we don't wait for them to get there,' Mirkrin said.

‘We go in now, set ourselves up in hiding before they even arrive. Wait for the machine to be brought in and then destroy it tonight.’

‘It would be dangerous, but smarter than fighting them head on,’ Ceeanna nodded. ‘I am in favour, but we need to act now. Inform the other elders. We must have a decision immediately.’

+ + + +

In the trees atop another hill, not far away, two other men took in the scene before them. One was Emos Harprag, his solemn face showing nothing of the feelings that boiled inside him, seeing his tribe before him in dire need and being unable to join them. The other figure was a Parsinor. Taller than his Myunan friend by head and shoulders and twice as wide across, Draegar hailed from a race of desert-dwellers and it showed in his appearance. His face was broad, his nose and ears small and his wide mouth lined with yellow, crooked teeth. Braided hair swept back and down off his massive skull.

But it was his body that was striking. He had a hinged shell that protected his back. His legs and feet were extraordinary; two legs extended from each hip, joining again at the bottom to a single, long foot on either side. Knobbly armour shielded his shoulders, forearms and thighs and the tops of his feet. If his physique was fearsome, it only reflected his character, for Draegar was a map-maker and he travelled the wildest, most dangerous lands to plot and record them. He was Emos’s closest friend and he was here now to help the Myunan outcast in any way that he could.

‘That’s a lot of soldiers,’ his voice grated. ‘It’s going to take

more than brute force to better that lot.'

'They need to destroy the machine,' Emos said quietly. 'They'll see that. But the Noranians will too. This night will be a reckoning. If Harsq isn't stopped tonight, we will have lost Absaleth. I have to help them any way I can. Let's go and stir up some trouble.'

+ + + +

Marnelius Cotch-Baumen watched from the window of the minemaster's office as the vehicles pulled into the compound. He glanced towards the open gate, but the soldiers had things well in hand. The men in the tall, wooden watchtower were his best, and even with the poor facilities of the camp, he was confident that with the extra forces, he could keep a tight rein on things. Checking his appearance in a full-length, gold-framed mirror that travelled with him wherever he stayed overnight, he walked out the door and down the steps to greet his guest.

A small, gaunt-faced man swung down from the lead wagon as it ground to a halt. He was dressed in the blue robes of an eshtran, a Braskhiam priest, and his long black hair was tied in a ponytail. He drew a small canister with a mouthpiece from his inside his robe and took a long breath as he gazed up at the mountain. His eyes were wide and bloodshot and had an intensity about them that could have been religious fervour or just plain madness. Cotch-Baumen strode over to him.

'Eshtran Harsq, I am Provinchus Cotch-Baumen. It is a pleasure to meet you, sir.'

Harsq took his hand and nodded.

'That's one cursed hill of rock you have there, sir,' the

priest intoned. 'But we shall remedy that by and by. Brask, the good Lord of the esh, has just the answer for such evil promontories.'

'Excellent, excellent.' Cotch-Baumen clasped his hands together. 'I look forward to seeing you work. I have read all your essays on the spiritual effects of electrical projection and must say that I find them fascinating. I am something of an amateur scientist myself, you see ...'

'Science is only a *lever*, sir, onto which I apply my Master's blessed will. But it is heartening to hear that you are a man of education, for it is only through knowledge and enlightenment that we will subdue the rebellious spirits of the land.'

'Yes, of course,' the Provinchus smiled uncertainly. 'Rebellious indeed. I think you will find our situation an interesting challenge ...'

'I do not seek personal gratification beyond the service of my Lord's will, sir. Rest assured however, that your great lump of uncooperative rock and iron here will be pacified by this time tomorrow.'

'Excellent, excellent. Would you like to come up to the office and we can discuss the terms of your payment?'

Cotch-Baumen waved the eshtran ahead of him and sighed in disappointment. He had hoped to enjoy some intellectual conversation with a like mind, but it seemed this particular mind was of a slightly distracted nature. When they reached the office, he gestured to the other man to take a seat and he himself sat down behind the minemaster's desk, a rather ramshackle, tradesman's affair, but unfortunately the only one available.

'As an educated man, I'm sure you're aware of the importance of my generator in this operation,' Harsq said, leaning

towards him. 'You realise those ungodly Myunans will make every effort to get in here and destroy it.'

'I do,' the Provinchus replied. 'In fact, I would be surprised if there were not one or two already in the compound somewhere. They are sly demons and terribly difficult to find when they have a mind to conceal themselves. However, I have taken measures to ensure the safety of your wonderful device. I can assure you that it will be quite safe.'

He stood up and walked to the window, inviting the eshtran to join him. There, in the compound below them, a van was reversing up to the large generator truck that formed the centre of Harsq's ceremony. Stakes with metal rings had been hammered into the ground around the truck. Unnerving howls and screeches rose up from the back of the van as two soldiers with thick leather gloves and heavy wooden clubs opened the rear door of the van. The animal they pulled from the vehicle was a skack. It took both of them holding onto its two leashes to hold it still. One of the men turned and beat back a second beast which was trying to clamber out. Then they led the first creature to one of the stakes and attached its chain to the metal ring.

The skack was a native of the volcanic region of Guthoque. A mottled purple and grey in colour, it was roughly the size of a large man, but living in one of the most dangerous regions in the Noranian Empire had honed the skack's evolution to a fine point of savagery. Powerful arms hung from its muscled shoulders. Its forearms each ended in a long, curved and serrated claw which folded down along the forearms when the skack wanted to run on all fours. Its hind legs were short; its back was hunched and covered in spines. Because of the poisonous gases of Guthoque, eyes

would have been useless to a skack. Instead, it had a deeply ridged forehead that could detect the reverberations of its high-pitched screeches – much like a bat – and this sense guided it with deadly accuracy. Heavy jaws dominated its short, blunt snout, bearing poisonous, razor-sharp teeth.

Far craftier than most animals, it had lightning-quick reflexes and could track prey better than any dog. Their bloodthirsty instincts made them virtually untameable. The two handlers led one beast after another out to the stakes, until eight skacks formed a perimeter of snarling, screeching death around Harsq's generator truck.

'Praise be to Brask,' said the exorcist.

+ + + +

'Look, skacks!' Lorkrin said excitedly.

He and his sister were ensconced in the branches of a tree on a hill overlooking the compound. They were supposed to be back at home, helping to pack up and move the village in case the Noranians came looking for the tribe after the ambush; but the temptation to see the action had been too great. From the road, they had trailed their parents and the others here, but had lost them when the grown-ups had dispersed into the darkness around the mining camp. They wondered why the adults had let Harsq reach the safety of the compound. Now, there were skacks out in the yard, and the situation looked worse still. Lorkrin had a young boy's fascination with fierce creatures, but Taya just hated them. She could not forget the night they had been chased by these predators the year before and it still gave her nightmares.

'Why have they been spread around that truck?' she wondered out loud.

‘To guard against us,’ Lorkrin guessed. ‘It must be important. I wish we could help.’

He had been making brave noises like this all evening. He couldn’t help it. Whenever he shrugged his shoulders to straighten the straps he knew should be there, he noticed they were missing and he became conscious of the space on his back where his pack should be. It was unsettling to remember how helpless he was. To his surprise, the other children had not laughed when they heard. They all agreed that losing your tools was not a laughing matter.

Taya did not reply to his remark. She knew how he felt, even if she didn’t feel the need to hide it with bravado. But she did want to do something to help the tribe. In some ways, she and Lorkrin knew more about the Noranians than a lot of the grown-ups. After all, they had nearly been killed by their soldiers several times.

‘Do you think they’ll stop him?’ Lorkrin asked her.

‘How should I know?’ she snapped back, wishing he would shut up.

Even the soldiers were nervous about the skacks, she noticed, despite the fact that they were chained to posts. Everyone was nervous about skacks. She wondered what the elders were planning to do.

+ + + +

Cotch-Baumen had been mistaken when he had guessed that there were one or two Myunans already in the compound. There were no less than thirteen of the shape-shifters hidden around the mining camp. Some had flattened themselves out against banks of stone or earth, some hung underneath trucks disguised as part of the iron chassis, or as spare

wheels. Others were concealed in the shadows of the heavy plant, the cranes, winches and mechanical scoops that threw criss-crossing shadows over areas behind them. Dozens of blue-oil lanterns lit the great yard. But even with the thirty guards patrolling it, there were any number of hiding places for a well-camouflaged Myunan.

Nayalla was hidden in the corner of the yard, her shape melding with a pile of gravel. Her eyes carefully shielded, she watched the skacks being led out and cursed under her breath. The plan had been to wait until the early hours of the morning, when the guards would be less alert and slow to react, then to strike. They had thought causing damage to the truck itself would be the main problem; the generator was a massive, cylindrical device mounted in a steel frame, there was very little about it that would burn, so slinging burning missiles at it had been ruled out. Braskhiam technology was second to none, and they built things to last. Instead, it had been decided that those in the compound would create a diversion, while the main attack would start from above, from the top of the mountain itself. But they had not counted on skacks. She breathed out through her teeth and resigned herself to wait; they would have to deal with the animals when the time came. In the meantime, she stayed perfectly still, watching the Noranian defences unfold.

The signal to begin was the appearance of the harvest star, the brightest star in the east. No sooner had it lifted itself over the horizon, then a fire broke out in the guards' quarters. Men and women came running out, struggling into their armour, some trying to fight the flames, others casting around for an enemy to fight. Another fire flared up in the

offices and by this time some of the miners were up and out. They immediately began filling buckets of water and started a chain up the stairs to the burning room. The soldiers were slower to tackle their fire, being more intent on finding the arsonists. Cotch-Baumen arose from his bed in the mine-master's quarters to find the mining camp in complete confusion. With no time to see to his uniform, he shoved his feet into his slippers and pulled on his dressing gown before marching out, bitterly cursing the Myunans for forcing him to appear before the soldiers in such a state of undress.

'Whipholder Mellev!' he roared.

'Yes, sir, Provinchus!' The burly commanding officer ran up.

'Get your troops in order. Stop wasting time looking for the Myunans. Ensure the safety of the eshtran and the generator truck, and assign a detail to deal with the fire in the guards' quarters! The remaining troops will secure the palisade. Have them stick a spear into anything moving that isn't Noranian. If we can't stop them getting in, we'll bloody well stop them getting out.'

'Yes, sir!'

Even as the officer answered, he noticed fire start to climb several sections of the palisade. The Myunans were attacking from the outside as well. Suddenly hot flames burst from the door of the mine-master's quarters.

'Not my clothes!' Cotch-Baumen shrieked.

Miners rushed to fight the blaze, but it was already raging out of control. The Myunans were determined to burn every building in the compound to the ground.

The soldiers in the watchtower at the gate kept their heads, loading their crossbows and seeking out their first targets. But with their attention drawn into the camp by the

fires, they failed to see the Parsinor at the foot of the tower. The desert-dweller was up the ladder and among them before they knew it, swinging sword and battleaxe and bellowing his tribal battle cry as he waded into them. All around the perimeter of the mining camp, soldiers found themselves fighting shadows – camouflaged Myunans attacking from the dark, their faces sculpted into fearsome battle-masks.

In the midst of the chaos, no one in the compound heard the rush of air over wide wings, and only the skacks looked up in time to see three figures dropping towards the top of the generator truck. Mirkrin, Westram and Ceeanna had shaped their arms, chests and backs into wings and their feet into powerful claws. Westram carried a large bottle of the volcan acid that Mirkrin used in his toolsmithing. He dropped onto the top of the machine and slunched into his normal form as the other two swung away to distract the skacks.

Westram threw the raging animals a wary glance, trying to block out their constant screeches as he strode forward to find the controls for the machine at the end of the truck. Pulling a sturdy brace from his tool roll, he leaned down and prised off the cover panel to expose the bare mechanical workings underneath. A skack leapt at him, causing him to jerk back, but Ceeanna dived in and kicked it in the head, knocking it away. Westram plunged the brace into the workings, breaking up what he could. Then he uncorked the bottle and poured acid over the whole mess, watching it dissolve into metal sludge.

Ceeanna and Mirkrin were struggling to keep the skacks back. Their chains were long enough to allow them to reach the top of the machine and it would only be a matter of time before one of them managed it. A crossbow bolt struck the

metal near Westram's shoulder and he rolled away in alarm, spilling some of the acid on his hand. He cried out and wiped the burning hand on his tool roll. Another of the arrows buzzed past his face. He turned to see a soldier about sixty paces away, her foot holding down the nose of the crossbow as she pulled back the cord to reload it. Ceeanna wheeled around and swept down towards her.

'Ceeanna, no!' Mirkrin called after her, jinking to one side to draw off the snapping jaws of a skack.

The soldier saw the ageing Myunan coming and smoothly finished loading her crossbow. Then she raised it and fired the bolt straight into Ceeanna's chest. The Myunan's momentum carried her on towards the soldier and she crashed to the ground, her limp body sliding up against the woman's feet. Two of the skacks raced forward to try and seize the easy meat, but their chains pulled them up short.

The soldier reloaded and took aim at Mirkrin. But before she could take her shot, a nightmarish winged creature suddenly crashed down on her, throwing her backwards and seizing her crossbow with four writhing tentacles. It was a jankbat, another native of Guthoque, and it had a triangular brand on its bony, spine-laden face. It pulled the weapon apart and swept on to attack other soldiers who tried to take aim at the saboteurs.

Mirkrin wanted desperately to go to Ceeanna's aid, but he was now on his own against the skacks. Turning his back on his friend, he flew circles above the animals, dodging left and right, infuriating them, his shoulders aching, his back and chest ready to cramp.

Westram was satisfied with his damage of the controls, but there was still the generator's engine. He could see the fuel

tank down on the side of the vehicle. If he could reach the cap ... He pulled a tinderbox from his pack. He heard the metal slap of a chain and turned to see a skack advancing along the top of the truck towards him. He hurled the last of the acid at it, and then threw the bottle, making it stumble backwards off the roof. Another vaulted up to take its place. With Ceeanna gone, Mirkrin was losing ground to the beasts. He swooped in and delivered a kick to the skack's ribs. It staggered sideways and, finding nothing on the smooth metal to grip, slipped down the curved side of the generator to the ground below.

Westram turned his attention back to the fuel cap of the engine. He could just reach it. His fingertips touched the knurled disc. A serrated claw slammed into his forearm and dragged it downwards. He slipped off the top of the generator and into the clutches of a snarling skack. Mirkrin caught his foot and hauled upwards, but the skack had the better grip and was not about to let go. Westram screamed and thrashed wildly as the animal's jaws bit into his shoulder and held on. With his teeth clenched and every muscle straining to its limits, Mirkrin heaved his friend upwards.

Another skack leapt at them and got a grip on the first one's leg, and Mirkrin was lost. The weight dragged them all to the ground and he kicked desperately at the animals that came at him. Two more skacks piled on top of Westram, tearing in with claws and teeth and his screams rose to a piercing pitch and then went quiet. Mirkrin could not get to his feet while he was kicking out at his attackers and so was unable to fly. He dragged himself backwards to get out of reach of the animals' chains, but his wings made him slow and clumsy. A skack was making straight for him, but was

suddenly shoved aside by another winged Myunan. Nayalla banked around and grabbed Mirkrin's shoulders, driving down hard with her wings to get enough lift to pull him from the ground. More soldiers were becoming aware of the fight over the generator and crossbow bolts started shooting past them.

The jankbat dived down at the soldiers, scratching and clawing at their faces with tentacles lined with claws. Other Myunans joined in the fray, attacking the soldiers in a range of winged shapes. Nayalla hauled her husband upwards into the dark sky, sweeping out over the trees to lose their silhouette against the hills so that they could no longer be seen. She released her grip and followed him as he glided wearily to the ground. They watched from the hillside as the tattooed jankbat made a pass over the remains of Westram's corpse, and then flew down and seized Ceeanna's body, picking it from the ground and carrying it out over the palisade.

Whistles sounded: the signal for the Myunans to fall back. All over the compound, flickers of movement could be seen as some of the camouflaged figures slipped over the palisades or through the burnt gaps; others scaled the steep face of the mountainside and the rest took to the sky. The Noranians turned their defences outwards, rushing to shore up the holes in the fence and make ready the perimeter in case another attack should come at them from out in the darkness.