

# The Crossing

by Greg Farshtey

*The Crossing is a book-length Bionicle story published by Ameet exclusively in Poland, released chapter-by-chapter in their Glatorian book series. Although the story was originally written in English, only the translated Polish text was ever distributed. The first half of the text presented here (chapters 1-3) is a 2014 back-translation by Joev14. The rest is a rougher 2012 translation whose author has been lost. Full text edited for the most glaring syntactic errors by Peri.*

## Chapter 1

Strakk slammed his Ice Axe on the table so hard that the stone plate splintered with a sharp crack. The sound made Metus wince.

“No!” said Strakk.  
“No. Definitely not.”

Metus frowned. The Agori villager had been acting as trainer of warriors and

promoter of matches for many years. He was used to dealing with stubborn warriors, but most of them didn't react as quick-tempered as Strakk. He should have expected it, though. Especially for a Glatorian like Strakk, everything was about profit. It was a running joke in the village of Iconox that Strakk wouldn't even open his eyes in the morning unless it would benefit him somehow. For a moment, Metus considered giving up. Then he thought twice, for Strakk's agreement was very important to him.

“You owe me a favor,” Metus told him. “Where would you be without me? And how often do I ask a favor of you?”

“Hm, there was that match against Kiina last month”, Strakk replied. “And at your request I helped with the training of



that bully, who then completely forgot it was just a practice match and sent me into a healer's barracks for weeks. Oh and then there was..."

"All right, all right," snapped Metus. "You don't need to tell me the story of your life. This is a quick and easy job, won't take longer than a week, and it'll be well paid. Do you want it or not?"

Metus was lying, of course. He had to lie often when negotiating with his fighters. The job he had offered Strakk would be neither quick nor easy. The village of Iconox had to send a shipment of the valuable metal Exsidian to the village of Vulcanus, payment for a match another fighter called Gelu had lost. Under normal circumstances the carriage would take the shortest route, southeast through the Dunes of Treason and then directly to the Fire village. Not the safest route in the world, but one that was used very often. In recent weeks, though, a group of barbaric nomads called the Bone Hunters had changed the dunes into a lethal trap. For reasons they hadn't revealed, they were about to sever trading connections between villages, especially with the Water Tribe village, Tajun. The result was that every caravan that moved through the desert was in danger. Worse, the Bone Hunters weren't content with simply robbing the goods – they also killed the coachmen. Iconox didn't have a choice; the carriage had to be sent on its way. If they refused to pay after a lost battle, their fighters would no longer be welcome in the arenas of Bara Magna. So now it was about finding a route on which they could transport their goods safely all the way to Vulcanus.

"Well, let's see," said Strakk. "You want to send a fully loaded carriage eastward through the Black Spike Mountains, over the Dark Falls and then through Creep Canyon. Every single one of these places is more dangerous than a Sand Bat with sunburn. And you want me to guard this cargo on its way. Did I get that straight?"

"Yes," Metus nodded.

"No," said Strakk. "I'm a Glatorian. I fight for my village if it needs something from another and I'm paid well for it. I'm no guard or guide or errand boy. I fight against other Glatorian in an arena. I don't fight against Bone Hunters. They have the nasty habit of killing everyone who fights them."

Metus had to admit that Strakk was right. No one dealt with Bone Hunters if it could be avoided. Their mounts, called Rock Steeds, possessed rows of sharp teeth and scary, scorpion-like stinger tails. Their sense of smell was so fine they could sense a foe from miles away. And regarding the Hunters themselves, they hadn't survived millennia in the Wastelands by just being friendly. They were ruthless, violent and greedy. If they possessed a virtue, then it was their endurance – they rarely gave up a chase – and they were very thorough. After an attack there was nothing left standing. The Agori left Strakk's shelter. The Glatorian followed him and kept talking.

"And don't forget the Skrall – you remember them, don't you – huge, black-armored, turning people to mincemeat just for fun? Who do you think lives up in the Black Spike Mountains?"

“Calm down,” said Metus. “Listen. We’ve hired the best.”

Metus pointed toward the fully loaded carriage. On the coachman’s seat sat an Iconox Agori – Kirbold – and a green-armored Agori from the village of Tesara. On the Sand Stalker next to the carriage sat a Glatorian Strakk identified as Gresh.

“Since when does Tesara send their Glatorian and Agori to help Iconox?” Strakk asked.

“Since the Bone Hunters’ attacks are starting to get them, too,” answered Metus.

“They want to find out themselves whether this new route works. If that’s the case, they can use them too. The Agori’s name is Tarduk. He’s said to know the wilderness.”

Metus turned around and stared at Strakk.

“Iconox wants one of their Glatorian to join this tour – you’ll surely understand why. If you agree, I am sure I could manage to get you some matches in Vulcanus... to show everyone what heroism you will show here.”

Strakk laughed out loud.

“I know everything about heroes. They’re the ones who get buried in holes in the ground. And when they’re lucky, someone will place a marker in the earth above their heads. But I’m not unreasonable... not much. So I shall go... for double the reward.”

Metus swallowed hard. That would mean Iconox would have to get a lot of weapons, armor and supplies for Strakk. But he obviously didn’t have any other choice. If Iconox were to neglect their payment duty to Vulcanus, the whole system of solving conflicts between villages by Glatorian matches would be at risk. In the end, that would mean he would lose his job.

“Deal”, the trainer said. “I will explain it somehow to the village elder. Get ready for departure.”

“I’m already ready”, Strakk said smiling. “See to it that my prize is ready. I’ll soon be back to get it.”

*Only if you’re lucky, Metus thought. And where you’re going, you may need more than luck.*

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Sometime after sunrise, the carriage departed with its guards. Gresh would’ve liked to depart immediately at dawn. Strakk had insisted on taking as much Thornax Launcher ammunition and extra weapons as possible. Gresh, however, was of the opinion that they should move out with as little baggage as possible so they could cross the desert as fast as possible.

“Oh, I know many traders that traveled with light baggage”, Strakk had replied. “That way they found death much faster. Listen, little one, Bone Hunters care only about one thing: can you kill them faster than they can kill you? If the answer is yes, then maybe – maybe you’ll have a chance of getting away with your life.”

“So you think we should engage them?” Gresh asked.

“No, no,” Strakk replied. “I suggest we don’t even make this trip. But if it has to be done, we’ll do it the clever way. We strike first, and we won’t run away from them. Instead, we’ll outmaneuver them and use strategy.”

Strakk didn’t know Gresh very well. They had met once out in the Wastelands and rode together for some time to Vulcanus. Back then they had had a small skirmish with Bone Hunters, but got away without too much trouble. Since then Strakk watched his back carefully. Bone Hunters had a long memory, especially when it came to their enemies. He didn’t like Gresh very much. The Tesaran fighter was young and strong, but a little too honor-bound for his liking. The only Glatorian Strakk really got along well with was Malum, one of the fighters from Vulcanus. But there was the rumor spreading in the desert that he had been exiled by his village for trying to kill an opponent in the arena that was already down and had conceded. As far as Strakk was concerned, this was only more proof of how little the villagers of Vulcanus knew about the life of a Glatorian.

Strakk rode up to the carriage. The two-headed Spikit that was pulling the carriage kept all four eyes fixed on the bumpy way in front of it. The Glatorian hoped the carriage was loaded with enough food. Even though a Spikit was a tough and enduring beast of burden, it would consume everything in its vicinity when it got hungry – including the carriage it was pulling, and everyone who was unfortunate enough to be sitting inside it.

“So, Tarduk”, he said to the Tesaran Agori who was holding the reins in his hands, “I heard you’ve done your share of explorations.”

“Sure”, the villager replied, “I collect artifacts – old armor, weapons, scrolls, small fragments of history. I spend a lot of time looking around ruins and searching for things.”

“That sounds... interesting”, Strakk said. *And really, really boring*, the Glatorian added to himself.

“I’ve always wanted to see the Black Spike Mountains”, Tarduk continued. “I bet there’s a lot of treasure to be found there!”

“Wait a second, you’re the guide”, said Strakk, “and you’ve never been to where we’re going?”

“Nope”, Tarduk responded, smiling.

“Then why...” Strakk began.

“He was the only one who was willing to go there”, Kirbold said, “So he got the job.”

“Don’t talk so much”, Gresh said quietly. “Our voices carry far. We don’t have to let every Bone Hunter in the whole area know that we’re coming.”

“You’re an optimist, my friend”, said Strakk. “If they’re outside in the Wastelands – and they are – then they’ve known we’ve been on the way since the moment we left

Iconox. At best, we can hope that they don't know what we're carrying."

"And if they do know?" Gresh asked.

Strakk pointed towards the Thornax Launcher Gresh was carrying.

"Then I hope you know how to use that, little one."

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For the untrained eye, Bara Magna might look like any desert. Certainly, there was sand in almost every direction as far as the eye could see, shaped into dunes by the wind or spread like a soft blanket over the sleeping earth. When the wind whips over the vast stretches of the Wastelands, the sand whirls around at such high speeds that even Glatorian armor can't provide enough protection. And then there's the heat, of course. Bara Magna's sun burns and around noon it reaches such high temperatures, that only Bone Hunters and the desperate Agori traders hunted by them can be found in the sands. During the worst part of the day the sand is so hot that one touch can lead to burns. Everyone who gets lost without water in the desert plateau will be dead within a day. At evening the sun disappears as suddenly as a torch is extinguished. The temperature sinks rapidly and the Agori must crowd together around their campfires. The desert becomes – if that is even possible – twice as dangerous in darkness. Nocturnal predators come out of their caves or from under their rocks, where they hide during the heat of the day. The Bone Hunters are getting bolder, sometimes getting close enough to a village

to take out a sentry that has strayed too far from the torches. There is an old Agori saying that says: "At least you see death coming in daylight." At night unfortunately, you are not so lucky. For those, however, who know Bara Magna well; the desert is much more than just a vast place with barren, sandy plains.

Many do remember that, in earlier times, more waterways than just the Skrall River crossed green fields. They remember how the village of Tesara wasn't just an oasis, but part of a giant jungle that stretched over the entire continent. They still hear the cries of sea birds from the ocean that existed far to the south in those times. All that changed about 100,000 years ago, when a terrible disaster changed the planet forever. After that there was no more time for memories of what once was. One was completely occupied with surviving each new day. Still – while the carriage moved through the sand, Strakk had to think of how things had once been. He wasn't originally from Iconox, but from a land far to the north. He had been on a scouting patrol when the disaster that is now referred to by everyone simply as "The Shattering" had occurred and he had suddenly been cut off from his homeland. He stayed in Iconox while the world around him changed, jungles transformed into desert, the ice melted in the horrible heat. He wasn't sure if anyone would be able to survive the disaster. But there were survivors and he, too, survived – and since then everything in his life revolved around bare survival.

Strakk glanced over his shoulder. Iconox was no longer visible. He reined his Sand Stalker to a halt. "Good, now we're far enough away", he said, "Now we can stop."

Gresh slowed his mount down a little and looked at Strakk, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you think?" Strakk said. "You didn't seriously believe we were going to drag this whole load all the way across the Black Spike Mountains, did you? Did you honestly believe my talk of stirring sand and fighting down Bone Hunters from earlier? If so, then you really have spent too much time in the sun."

"But that's our job", Gresh replied.

Strakk snorted. "Good. Then I'll explain to you how this works. The Agori will get out of the carriage. We take all the Exsidian metal, hide it, and shatter the carriage. Then we'll tell the people in Iconox we were attacked by Bone Hunters who stole our cargo."

The two Agori shared a look. Tarduk shrugged as if he wanted to say, "I don't understand it either."

"And then?" Gresh wanted to know.

"In a few weeks we'll return and dig the load out", Strakk gloated. "We'll divide it among ourselves and then go our separate ways again. And no one gets hurt."

"Except the people of Iconox when Vulcanus thinks they don't want to pay their debts", Gresh said. He pointed casually with his Thornax Launcher at Strakk.

"Now we're going to do the following. You ride a little ahead of us. And should you try to leave us behind, then rest assured that you won't get far."

"Are you completely out of your mind?!" bellowed Strakk. "There is a fortune to be made here!"

Gresh gestured with his launcher. "Go, now! We've got a job to do, that's how it is. And that's exactly what we're going to do."

Strakk glared at Gresh, but spurred on his Sand Stalker. Riding past the carriage, he muttered: "Out of dozens of Glatorian on this world they had to give me the only one who cares about doing the right thing."

Gresh ignored him and turned to Tarduk. "Do you have any idea what's waiting ahead of us? I hate surprises."

"Anything might be ahead of us," Tarduk replied. "In earlier times, this had been a quiet corner of the desert, until the Vorox infested the Dunes of Treason. They drove out a lot of Sand Bats and dune snakes, and even giant cave scorpions into the north. The desert between here and the Black Spike Mountains is full of them."

"But that's not the worst part", Kirbold said. "Have you ever been to the Sea of Liquid Sand?"

Gresh nodded. The "sea" was located south of the village of Vulcanus. It looked like any other desert track, but in reality most of it was soft mud, which swallowed all living things that tried to cross it. It was possible to get through, if one

was clever or lucky enough. But all others who tried it now rested at the bottom of this sea.

“Scattered spots of liquid sand”, Kirbold said, “also exist here. There aren’t many, but there are spots in the sand that are just as treacherous... maybe even worse. You don’t see them until you are right in the middle of them and then...”

“Did you hear that, Strakk?” Gresh asked.

“Why wouldn’t I listen to such wonderful news?” the Ice Glatorian shot back. “I’m really glad you asked me to ride ahead.”

“Keep your eyes open”, Gresh said. “We’ll make it.”

“Sure you’ll make it”, Strakk said. “Just wait until I sink into the sand and when you do... stop. Simple.”

They rode in silence for some time. Before them the Black Spike Mountains towered in all their majesty. Even when Bara Magna had been a lush green place, this mountain range supplied stuff for numerous legends. Some of them were just the usual Agori talk – travelers who were journeying through the mountains and never returned. More convincing stories, however, were those about villagers who returned, but who weren’t right in the head ever again. Gresh gave Kirbold a quick glance.

“Why exactly were you chosen for this job?”

“I mined this metal”, came the answer. “It’s perfectly suited for patching equipment. Doesn’t rust and is very wear-resistant.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

“I dug it out. I dragged it up. Others use it, but I found it. That’s why I simply have the feeling it belongs to me. Should the cargo be in danger, I want to be there.”

Gresh nodded. He had already heard crazier things. More than one Glatorian would never let anyone else tinker with his weapon or launcher for a very similar reason. The sun would soon be high in the sky.

Gresh pointed towards a ledge. “Let’s set up our camp beneath it until the worst heat is over.” Kirbold and Tarduk steered the carriage under the ledge and carefully fed the Spikit first before they themselves ate something. Strakk sat down in the sand and closed his eyes while Gresh kept a careful eye on the desert.

“What do you think is up there?” Kirbold asked Tarduk.

“Who knows?” the Tesaran Agori responded, smiling. “There may have lived an entire civilization in these mountains that we’ve never heard of. They may have left behind equipment, tools, maybe even records of their history. For someone like me, that is a treasure chest just waiting to be opened.”

“No, I mean... do you think there are monsters up there?”



“I think so... if you regard Skrall as monsters.”

Kirbold lowered his gaze towards the sand.

“No, I don’t think they’re monsters. But if they ever were to attack us... well, then I don’t know where we could hide.”

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Late in the afternoon they resumed their journey. Strakk observed how a Sand Bat exploded out of a dune to throw itself onto a Sand Fox and then dragged it underground. The Spikit saw the same and grunted in anger and fear.

“I hate those things,” Strakk said. “You never know where they are until they’re right in front of you.”

“Giant scorpions are even worse”, Tarduk said. Despite the heat he shivered. “I’ve seen them several times while searching for artifacts in caves.”

“There’s an easy way of avoiding such encounters”, Strakk said.

“How?”

“Stop wandering around in caves”, the Glatorian replied.

“I can’t stand dune snakes”, Kirbold remarked. “You want to know why?”

“Why?” Strakk said.

“Because they are everywhere around us.”

Gresh’s Sand Stalker suddenly reeled in panic, followed by Strakk’s mount. The Spikit tore at the reins and made efforts to break free. However, Kirbold managed to hold the beast under control. Everywhere around them the dunes moved, the poisonous snakes slithered right beneath the surface of the sand. It looked like a sea of waves rolling under the dunes, but it was neither a peaceful nor comforting sight. The bite of one of these serpents could lead to death within seconds, not to mention the snakes were absolutely fearless. They wouldn’t hesitate for a second to attack something larger than themselves. “We must have ridden right into a nest!” Strakk said. “What do we do now?”

Gresh tried desperately to get his Sand Stalker under control again.

“When your mount topples, jump off or you’ll be trapped beneath it.”

“Thanks, I certainly would never have thought of that”, Strakk growled. “If you had just listened to me...”

“Look!” Tarduk yelled. “A path!”

He was right. Somewhere to the right there was a strip of sand that wasn’t moving. It was clear to all of them that this was the best and only way out of danger.

“Let’s go!” Gresh said who had already turned his Sand Stalker into the direction of the passage.



Strakk was already ahead of him, letting his mount jump over half a dozen snakes that had darted out of the sand. Behind the two Glatorian, Kirbold urged the Spikit forward. Strakk was now a good distance ahead of the group and didn't look back. Suddenly his Sand Stalker toppled over. The next moment, he was up to his waist in liquid sand.

"Help!" he cried.

"We can't help him", Kirbold claimed. "If we get too close we'll sink, too."

"He's a Glatorian. I can't leave him behind", Gresh said. "We can ride around the liquid sand and pull him out."

"Not without riding through the snakes", retorted Tarduk.

"It seems we don't have a choice", Kirbold said. "It's either him or us."

## Chapter 2

Gresh had no time to think. For several seconds, the sand devoured Strakk, and the snakes gradually formed circles around the caravan. The only escape was through the soft sand, but the trailer was heavy as stone. Suddenly he had an idea! It was about as crazy as suicide, but there was a small chance of success. Everything depended on how high Gresh could jump and how fast his Stalker was, as well as his knowledge of the dunes. If even one element of the plan failed, none of them would escape alive.



"Tarduk! I need a rope attached to the Exsidian! Now!" shouted Gresh.

The Agori quickly cut the rope. He tossed it to Gresh, but it reached only two meters.

"Whatever happens now, nobody separate!" ordered Gresh. "Keep each other in sight and don't talk, okay?"

Kirbold and Tarduk obeyed. None of them spoke a word. On the other side, they were approaching the dune snakes. Gresh took the rope, tied it to his Sand Stalker and galloped off. He had to execute each step with precision. Upon reaching the bank of soft sand, he forced his steed to jump. In that same instant, he hurled the rope over the treacherous sands in Strakk's direction. Strakk caught the rope, and he was yanked free from the trap by Gresh's Stalker.

"You saved me!" Strakk cried, delighted and surprised. "I can't believe it!"

"I had to," said Gresh. "Now get back to the caravan."

"Are you crazy?!" Strakk cried. "You want to go back into the jaws of the dune snakes? I care about Exsidian, but I won't risk my life for it."

"Not even if you're risking the loss of something valuable?" replied Gresh.

"No way!" Strakk shook his head.

"I haven't got time to argue," said Gresh. "You can have half my payment if you help me."

Strakk's eyes shone with eagerness. "What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

The two riders jumped from the smooth sand and grabbed onto the harness, hoping that their mounts wouldn't be caught by the serpents' fangs. But instead of stopping at the

caravan, Gresh and Strakk spun around. The Agori looked at the Glatorian in silence, both wondering if Gresh had lost his mind.

"Is there a reason for why we're doing this?" Strakk asked.

"Yes," said Gresh. "Dune Snakes are blind on the surface, right? So they don't use sight or smell when hunting."

"They use hearing," Strakk guessed. "So we're making noise."

"Exactly," Gresh smiled. "It works, see?"

Strakk looked back. The snakes no longer surrounded the caravan, but now they were heading towards the Glatorian.

"Yiiiiii!" Strakk shouted.

"Over here!" Shouted Gresh.

The Tesaran Glatorian rode over the soft sand, with Strakk right behind him. Gresh's mount jumped back from the deadly place. Strakk managed to do the same. The hungry Dune Snakes were unable to avoid the sand trap, which absorbed them without giving them a single moment to escape.

"Good thinking," admitted Strakk. "Using one trap against another. Although it cost you half of your pay..."

Several hours later, the travelers arrived at the foot of the Black Spike Mountains. They found a narrow path between

the rocks that was so narrow only one rider could fit through at a time. Gresh had Strakk go first, while he himself covered the rear. Strakk showed little enthusiasm for his proposal, but Gresh explained that if someone had been following since Iconox, they would not plan a frontal ambush, but an attack from behind.

“You never know,” said Strakk. “There were traps in places where no one would’ve ever expected. But you’re too young to remember that.”

“When was it exactly?”

“During the war. At a time when Bara Magna was part of a larger world... long before The Shattering...”

Gresh had heard little of the war that changed the world 100,000 years ago. Other Glatorian were reluctant to talk about it. Apparently they wanted to eliminate all the memories related to that event.

“Enlighten me,” said Gresh. “What has that got to do with this?”

“The Black Spike Mountains were one of the few places where there were no battles,” Strakk said.

“No one wanted to fight here?” said Gresh.

“No one dared to approach this place,” said Strakk. “Check out these rocks. I bet there are many deposits of precious metals and who knows what else. Do you think anyone

would want to extract it? Not even the Skrall were foolish enough to come here.”

At the mention of the Skrall, Gresh pressed his hand to the reins of his mount. It was no secret that the Rock Tribe was not from the desert regions of Bara Magna. Their home was among a land of volcanoes in the far north. They had lived there for many centuries, protected by their warriors, the Skrall. Not long ago, the Skrall and Rock Tribe appeared in the south, inhabiting the Black Spike Mountains and the surrounding land. When they reached Roxtus, it became the largest village on Bara Magna. It was rumored that they had moved to the area running to escape something far more dangerous than they themselves were, but there was no evidence of this and the real reason remained a mystery. It soon became evident that the newcomers were not dependent on forging friendships with other tribes, although they sent warriors to battle in the arena, any sane Glatorian knew not to try and face them. Anyone who had to deal with them would face the leader of their tribe, Tuma, who only desired to have the Skrall take what they wanted. However, by far, the Skrall followed the rules during arena matches. The fighting system in the arena was not a problem for the Rock Tribe - the Skrall were lovers of battle. So far no Glatorian had managed to defeat them. Gresh knew that perfectly well. Not long ago he lost a duel against a Skrall warrior in the Vulcanus arena. The Skrall was willing to break the rules while fighting in the arena, and had another Glatorian not intervened, the encounter would have been the last thing Gresh had done in his life. That simple memory brought him shame. Tesara had had its chance at victory, and he had failed them. Gresh stopped thinking about it. It was not the best time to be thinking of

the past. He and his companions had just entered the territory of the Rock Tribe. The only bad thing that could happen now was if they were attacked by Skrall.

“Look!” Kirbold said suddenly, pointing to the top of a hill.

Gresh looked up. The Glatorian saw three Skrall on the edge of the summit. However, as soon as he got a better look, he realized they were simply helmets and pieces of armor hanging on stilts above the sand.

“They’re only puppets,” Gresh said. “Probably to help deter uninvited guests.”

“Look at them more closely,” Strakk said.

“I did look at them. So what?”

“They’re not pieces of Skrall armor. One is red, another is blue, and the third is green. Where do you think they came from? They’re the spoils of dead Glatorian. Am I right?”

“I don’t think so,” said Gresh.

“Go ahead, don’t believe me, rookie,” laughed Strakk. “They came to find the end of their lives.”

“You should remain silent,” a voice whispered.

The Glatorian turned quickly, raising their Thornax Launchers towards where the ominous words had come from. Tarduk grabbed the reins of Spikit, just in case they had to flee. Kirbold crouched down in case there were any

enemy projectiles. Up on a rocky hillside, was a red armored Glatorian. Strakk and Gresh recognized him immediately. He was called Malum. At one time his name was spoken with great respect, but Malum’s wild temperament had caused problems. During a match in the arena, he had tried to kill a Glatorian. For that crime he was banished from the village of Vulcanus. Since then, the desert had become his home.

“Well, well, look who it is,” Strakk said. “And I thought you were eating Sand Bats.”

“Do something!” whispered Kirbold. “He just wants the Exsidian!”

“Don’t worry,” said Strakk. “Why would they seek Exsidian in an area so remote? And besides, if Malum wanted it, he would have taken it before we entered the mountains. Right, old friend?”

Malum looked at Strakk with a cold stare. “I’ve never been your friend.”

“What do you want?” asked Gresh.

“I warn you,” Malum answered. “The Skrall have become more ambitious. Many of them are in the mountains, chasing something, or someone, maybe you. You should listen to their talk of Tajun. Would you be interested?”

“Why would you care?” spat Strakk. “Will you regret it when we’re killed by the Skrall, before you can take your revenge on us?”

The dark smile on the Malum's face didn't reveal anything good.

"To be honest... yes."

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Raanu, leader of the village of Vulcanus, had grave concerns. Without Malum, his village had just one experienced Glatorian available. There were several potential candidates to take Malum's place, but they were young, and inexperienced. Regardless, the last Glatorian duel with Iconox ended in victory for Vulcanus. Iconox had to pay Exsidian, but the precious metal had not yet arrived. Raanu had discovered why. "Through the Spike Mountains? Are they crazy?"

Metus, Glatorian trainer of Iconox, spread his hands. "You know that with the Bone Hunters..."

"I know about the Bone Hunters," Raanu interrupted. "I've heard that excuse before. But my people have justly earned the victory in the arena. If your pay does not deliver, Iconox ..."

"Vulcanus will not be willing to pay our winnings, if we lose, in the next fight," Metus concluded.

"And if that happens, Metus... our system will collapse before our eyes. By stopping the practice of settling disputes with Glatorian warriors, we can expect only one thing: war."

Metus gave the Vulcanus leader's words some thought. Undoubtedly Raanu was right. Centuries ago it was clear the Agori could not afford an armed conflict between tribes. Nobody wanted to try and imagine the nightmare of destruction left by the last war. Thus, all disputes between tribes were settled with Glatorian. However, this system was based on mutual trust. The result of a duel in the arena was not subject to discussion and was absolutely accepted by all. If a village broke the rules or didn't pay as agreed, the other did the same.

"I hope that those who were hired by Iconox won't disappoint me," he said softly. "If the Bone Hunters or even the Skrall intercept that shipment ... we're in trouble."

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Malum vanished as quickly as he had come. He became one with the rocks, with the ease of someone who had been born among the mountains. Where had he gone? Gresh didn't even want to know, but he did not take the former fire Glatorian's warning lightly.

"Skrall..." Tarduk said. "I once tried to unearth some artifacts near Roxtus ... bad idea, I know. I barely escaped. Had I been caught, I would have been a corpse."

The road through the Black Spike Mountains to the east was there, but barely so, due to the passing years. The fresh mountain air brought some relief to the trip, especially for Strakk, who occasionally had to turn back down the mountain to help push the caravan uphill. The silence was broken only by the sound of the hooves of the Stalkers, the

whistling of the wind passing between the peaks and the tranquil sound of wagon wheels. A sharp cry of a Mountain Striker made both Glatorian jump. A second cry made Strakk turn his gaze to the sky. Mountain Strikers were birds of prey whose wingspan could be as wide as five feet. Their claws could tear through armor as easily as an Agori could tear through dry parchment. They hunted mostly small animals, but if driven to great hunger, they wouldn't hesitate to attack opponents much larger than themselves. Strakk and Gresh prepared to fire their weapons, hoping not to meet someone more dangerous than the Mountain Striker.

"I didn't see anything, do you think it was really just a Striker?" Strakk asked, his voice barely audible.

"It sounded more like a signal," said Gresh.

"Skrall?"

"Exactly. Bone Hunters do not haunt these fields."

Strakk shook his head.

"And if they made that signal, then the Bone Hunters are smarter than I thought."

"What do we do?" Tarduk asked. "Try to escape? Or should we be ready to fight?"

"We heard his signal. That means they're close. Too late to escape," Strakk said. "Well rookie, you always wanted to be a hero. Now's your chance to die as one."

Gresh plunged deep into thought. He had to find a way to save them. They could try and leave, pretending they hadn't heard anything suspicious, and move on, trying to escape from the Skrall ambush. He tried to guess which option Strakk would choose: running as soon as possible and leaving the mountains behind. Wasn't there any way to get the goods delivered to their destination? Too late. He had already wasted too much time trying to decide. As he looked up, warriors in black armor emerged from their hiding. The Skrall had surrounded them.

"This is the land of the Skrall," said one of them.

"Travel through these mountains is forbidden for anyone," added a second.

"Unless you want to see Tuma," added a third. "What's in the caravan? Show us!"

"If we do, they will take the Exsidian," Kirbold whispered nervously.

"And if we don't, they will kill us." Tarduk replied, then turned slowly and uncovered the load. Rarely did the Skrall show any joy, even a smile was uncommon. However, the fighters managed to see something that was not normal for their species - the Skrall nearly laughed. They sought a priceless treasure that belonged to them briefly. Interposed between the precious metal and themselves were only two Glatorian, and two Agori. In an instant, time seemed to stop.

“Take the contents of the caravan out. Now!” ordered the group leader.

Strakk sighed with relief. Apparently, fate had been kind to them. It was true: the Exsidian was lost, but at least he got to keep his head. They had been lucky that the "supply" of the Skrall sounded better than killing them.

“We have business with Iconox,” Gresh said proudly. “The burden is not ours. But, we can’t leave without the consent of the owner.” The Skrall's faces became serious.

“Try it,” threatened a Skrall.

“I will,” said Gresh.

*Why are you doing this? Strakk thought. They'll kill us all!*

“Iconox is in debt to Roxtus,” Gresh lied. “We have orders to deliver payment directly to Tuma as a humble apology for the delay. He wants to see it himself. Do you want to be the one to tell Tuma that you had not heard of the apology and sent us back into the desert?”

His words served to panic in the Skrall. Tuma, their leader, was the only being who really frightened them. Sending back the payment would bring his anger upon them. He would break the bones of any Skrall who disappointed him. Nobody wanted to stand before him and explain why they hadn't received what he had expected.

“You will come with us,” said a Skrall. “But unarmed.”

The two Skrall approached the Glatorian and took their Thornax Launchers, along with Gresh's shield and Strakk's axe. Then they searched the carriage. They found an extra launcher, which they confiscated, and ordered the Glatorian to stay away from the caravan. Under the watchful eye of the Skrall, the team began to question their chances of survival.

“Great idea,” Strakk murmured. “Next you'll want to give our hands over in addition to the Exsidian.”

“No,” said Gresh. “It isn't my intention to stay with them.”

“What?”

“Right,” replied Gresh, hitting Strakk over the head with an Exsidian ingot.

Most surprising of all was that the wounded Strakk gave no answer. After a while both were fiercely fighting in the caravan.

“Stop!” the Skrall said, as they approached the trailer to separate them.

“This is just what I expected,” said Gresh. Once the Skrall were within his reach, Gresh delivered a powerful blow with the Exsidian. Gresh grabbed a Thornax Launcher from the Skrall, and before anyone could react, he fired, hitting the rock wall on the right. He reloaded and fired again, this time at the rock wall on the left. Both shots caused an avalanche, dropping tons of rock upon the caravan and their



escort. The Skrall fled before the avalanche. Gresh jumped straight to his Stalker and shouted, "Ride, Kirbold!"

The Agori took the reins, and sent the Spikit running at full speed, something that anyone in that situation would have done. The rocks fell toward the trailer's sides, making the road even narrower.

"We need to go faster!" Tarduk cried.

"We can't!" Strakk replied, "We're driving a carriage with a few tons of Exsidian. How can we go faster?"

"Come on!" yelled Gresh. "We're making good ground!"

"It's better to stop talking!" Strakk growled, massaging the spot on his head where Gresh had struck him. "The next time you plan something like that, would you mind telling me about it?"

Strakk snatched the Thornax Launcher from Gresh and turned around. He pointed at the rocks that were rolling toward them and fired. The rocks shattered, creating another shower of stones. At that same moment, the entire hillside exploded, sending a gigantic piece of rock rolling down the hill toward the trailer.

"It's heading towards the caravan!" Tarduk cried.

The Spikit stopped and stood near the convoy, almost blocking it, but its body managed to hide Strakk and Kirbold. Gresh left his Stalker, grabbed the saddle, and placed it over the trailer. Tarduk plunged into the carriage. While he did

so, a wave of rocks hit the trailer but when they collided with the saddle, it pushed them off to the sides.

A moment later, it was over. Where the Agori and Glatorian had previously been standing, there was now a pile of rubble. The air was stifling due to the dust. Soon, silence ensued. The Skrall, who'd managed to escape alive, approached the pile. At first, they attempted to push some of the larger stones out of the way, but were unsuccessful.

"What will we tell Tuma?" asked one of the warriors.

"Nothing," said the leader. "There was no transport. No one saw it. If anyone ever finds out what happened to them, we'll say that it was an accident ... one of the many that can happen in a dangerous place like this."

The Skrall looked down at the axe and shield in their hands - The Glatorian's weapons. After some thought, they were thrown into the rubble.

"We don't need them, they are no longer useful."



## Chapter 3

Strakk couldn't see; he could barely breathe. Of course, he had to be a hundred percent sure ... but knew that it probably wouldn't be good. *I deserve it*, he thought. *This is the last time I'll do something for others. I have a very soft heart. That's my problem. Enough! It's over! I will become a champion of the arena, never to*

*take an escort job again in my life, no matter what I do.*

Strakk clenched his fist and struck something hard. Something grabbed his wrist and pulled him out of the rocks. He was relieved when he touched the ground. The dust kicked up by the fall caused him to cough violently. When he looked around, he saw a faint light around the dust, forming a familiar silhouette.

"I'm alive!" Strakk sputtered after a while. "What happened?"

"You really need to ask?" Replied Gresh, his voice laced with fury. "Your fire triggered an avalanche. We all fell down the slope."

"But I'm alive, right?" Strakk murmured, rising. "If not, I would have gone where good souls go. I'm definitely not there."

"The avalanche pushed us against the wall of the ravine. Then I saw a small opening in the rock," Tarduk said. "We went inside, but the entrance was blocked by the rocks."

"What of the caravan? And the Exsidian?" Strakk said, alarmed. "If Exsidian is lost, I will not receive my payment and the whole expedition will have been a waste of time."

"The Spikit is a bit battered, but the carriage is fine," Kirbold said. "I'm glad you asked."

As Tarduk spoke, Gresh returned to the opening. It was blocked. Pushing with all his strength, he tried to move the rock, but to no avail.

"Even if we do manage to move the rocks from the inside, the other side would be blocked by debris and boulders. I'd prefer not to go out that way." Tarduk lit a torch, illuminating the dark corridor.

"Is there another option?"

Strakk stepped forward, carefully examining the surface of the walls. The rock was perfectly smooth and polished. He was looking for a second exit. If there was one, it was not located somewhere in the ceiling, so climbing was not an option. He walked around, looking for scratches, cracks or anything that indicated the existence of a door, but due to

low amount of light provided by the torch Tarduk had, he couldn't find anything.

"Where do we go from here?" Strakk asked.

"This is not a natural tunnel," Gresh said. "Someone created it. But why? And where does it lead?"

"Well," Tarduk shrugged. "It seems our only choice is to follow the path ... Unless you'd prefer to stay here and die."

Everyone sighed with relief when they discovered that the corridor was wide enough for the caravan to pass through. According to Kirbold's calculations, the corridor should be running roughly from east to west, almost the same direction of Vulcanus. Of course, if he was wrong, and the tunnel did not lead in that direction, it would undoubtedly cross the Dark Falls and end in the eastern territories. Nobody liked that possibility. Anyone who traveled there, even the Skrall, never returned. Tarduk's torch was the only source of light in the hallway. They hadn't yet encountered a sign or anything else that would indicate where they were, or where they were going. Tarduk also wondered why there were no signs of life. No doubt the Sand Bats would have dug holes to gain entry. If there was another way out, it would be closed. For a moment Tarduk wished that Bara Magna's Glatorian could control the elements to which they belonged. If that were the case, the Jungle Tribe could control plant life, and the Ice Tribe would control ice. Strakk could freeze the boulders blocking the exit and break it in half with one blow of his axe. That idea was a nice one, but he knew it was impossible. Nearly a hundred thousand years ago the Glatorian had fought a major war on the

planet. Tarduk preferred not to think about what would've happened if they'd had the ability to control their elements then.

"Hey, look," Gresh said. "What's that?"

Several strange symbols on the wall glowed brightly in the torchlight. A series of circles with lines were turned at various angles, forming strange inscriptions. Tarduk's mouth curved into a smile.

"I saw something like that once!" he said, rushing to the wall to see the markings more closely. "I found these writings in some ruins!"

"Excellent," Strakk said. "I hope this symbol is: "Exit.""

"I don't know what's written here. I can't read them," Tarduk said. "But based off where I found them, I think..."

"Spit it out!" Strakk grunted.

"... I think it has something to do with the Great Beings..." Tarduk ended in silence. "That's... good news," Gresh said, uncertainly.

"That's wonderful," a stunned Strakk rubbed his head. "Just great. Things couldn't get any better. Unless you see lava in here..."

"You know what? I think I left a flaming torch at the entrance," Kirbold murmured. "I'd like to go back."

Tarduk perfectly understood what his teammates felt. Even if no one had seen the Great Beings, all knew of them. Many people would forgive them for making Bara Magna a technologically advanced world. However, the vast majority of them blamed them for the catastrophe that had struck the world. Why they disappeared, Tarduk did not know - in time it became a legend. However, there was no doubting one thing: the Great Beings had committed a horrible act. The consequences of their negligence had resulted in a tragic disaster. Since then no one talked about the Great Beings. In the past, Tarduk had made several attempts to find them, but the leader of his tribe forbade him to look, considering his attempts to be a "waste of time." *But he's not here now*, thought Tarduk. *Perhaps now, I'll finally manage to learn something about them.*

"Why would the Great Beings have dug a tunnel in the mountains?" asked Gresh.

"To reach the other side of the mountain?" Strakk guessed with a hopeful tone in his voice.

"Perhaps the Great Beings built this place ... and left a guard?" Tarduk suggested. "It may be in here now."

"After a hundred thousand years? Please!" Strakk scoffed.

Suddenly a sound echoed through the hall - a hollow sound, like something on the ceiling had been loose and dropped down from above. Everyone jumped.

"Someone's here," Kirbold whispered.

"Something's wrong," said Gresh, his voice a whisper. "Stay here, I'll investigate."

Before Strakk could protest, Gresh advanced. A few hundred feet down the path, the floor of the hall seemed a bit different. The smooth surface was replaced by thousands of ancient stones. On the walls were more symbols. As he continued he heard strange noises ahead - sounds of scraping and a quiet hiss of air. Gresh's nerves were pushed to the limit.

"Gresh!" Tarduk cried. "The ground is moving!"

Gresh looked down. Tarduk was right. The "stones" in the path were actually Scarabax Beetles. The swarm covered the floor of the corridor from wall to wall. When the beetles were small they weren't much of a threat - they could easily be trampled. But adult Scarabax shells were hard as rock. Gresh quickly stepped back, causing a violent commotion amongst the insects. If he didn't move quickly, he would not be heard from again. Suddenly he heard a roar in the tunnel, and a Sand Bat burst out of the darkness, heading right for him. Anyone who had been through the desert knew the Sand Bats were something that caused panic and fear. They were large predators with a snakelike body and bat wings. They preyed on creatures by leaping from the sand and quickly dragging their victims into the depths of the desert. Now Gresh had two problems to worry about; the beetles and the Sand Bat. Gresh stumbled and fell back towards the bug infestation. Kirbold and Tarduk hurried to help Gresh. Strakk hesitated for a moment, but immediately ran after them. He knew that if he didn't succeed in saving his companion, he too would

end up as just another meal. The Sand Bat lunged at Gresh. The Glatorian's memories flashed before his eyes; he remembered his people, the faces of his friends, Kiina and Vastus. He instinctively closed his eyes as the Sand Bat rushed toward him, baring its teeth. For a moment nothing happened, then he heard a furious whisper that suddenly echoed through the cave. The noise drowned all other sounds, all except one... the desperate cry of the Sand Bat.

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Fero reined his steed to a stop. He wanted a closer look around this area. He knew there was a mystery to be solved here. Fero belonged to the desert raiders known as Bone Hunters. He was one of the best, but recently a target had managed to evade him. The attack on the village of Vulcanus had ended in failure - a handful of Glatorian had been sent to stop him, and had succeeded. He wasn't sure how this had happened, but he was humiliated in front of his tribe. Pride wouldn't allow him to live with such shame. Shortly after the failed raid he'd left his camp, although he had no intent to hunt or plunder the Agori caravans. No, Fero would track juicier prey - the Glatorian who had beaten him days earlier. He had vowed to himself that he would pursue them. His revenge would end when the desert sand consumed them all. Fero followed Strakk's trail since leaving Iconox. He wanted to wait until nightfall, to attack and destroy the Glatorian, leaving his knife embedded in Strakk's flesh, as a warning to others. However, during his watch he'd found that Strakk was with Gresh, a Glatorian of Tesara. They were both escorting a load of Exsidian. Fate had given him the opportunity to defeat two enemies and gain a substantial reward in one stroke. He needed a plan.

Many experienced Bone Hunters wouldn't have run the risk of facing two strong Glatorian, but Fero was patient. The two Glatorian had gone on a long journey, and Fero would wait for the right moment to attack them by surprise. The Black Spike Mountains had made them an easy target, but the Skrall had interfered with his plan. Furious, he had watched the group of warriors escort their prisoners and their valuable cargo towards the village of Roxtus. Then there was an escape attempt that ended with an avalanche. They left the debris - the purported resting place of the two Glatorian, two Agori and several tons of Exsidian - Fero understood why the Skrall didn't believe anyone could've survived the catastrophe. However, something told him that appearances could be deceiving. Perhaps the instinct of Bone Hunters, honed for years in the harsh desert, led him to conclude that Gresh and Strakk were still alive. Of course, he hadn't gone to confirm this by digging through tons of stones; this type of work was not something Fero would've enjoyed doing. In addition, the Skrall could return at any time. This brought Fero to another possibility. The only way to avoid death in an avalanche was to be in a cave. Caves often had a second exit; perhaps the road that the Glatorian were taking would bring them to it. Fero intended to find them and wait for them. He turned his steed and headed off the road. He knew where he would be going. If Strakk and Gresh emerged from the cave, Fero would make sure his defeat in Vulcanus was avenged.

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Gresh opened his eyes. The Scarabax swarm had emerged from the ground like a miniature tornado and flung themselves toward the Sand Bat. For a moment, the beast

disappeared under a thick black cloud of insects. When the cloud disappeared, Gresh noted that the spot where the Sand Bat had been was now empty. Soon the beetles scattered in all directions, and Gresh, still in shock, stood up.

“What just happened?” Gresh asked hurriedly, while checking to see if any of the beetles remained attached to his armor.

“You ran straight into a Scarabax swarm. That was stupid,” Strakk explained. “Then you fell amid a Scarabax swarm. That was also stupid. The Sand Bat was smarter than you.”

“And that's what I did wrong?” Gresh gritted his teeth, trying hard not to fire back a harsh response. Kirbold intervened, preventing Strakk from making things worse.

“The Scarabax react to sudden movements. When the Sand Bat flapped its wings it caught their attention, so they forgot you and went after it instead.”

“Then why did they flee?”

“Who knows, maybe they went to take a nap after lunch? At least they're gone,” Tarduk shrugged.

“That's not even the most interesting part.” Strakk sighed.

“No? What is then? Enlighten me,” - a curious Kirbold responded.

“Sand Bats don't live in the caves,” Strakk voice was riddled with impatience. “They live in the desert, buried in the sand where they hunt things on the surface. In places like this, there's no food for them. Get it?”

“They came here from abroad, like us,” Gresh guessed. “Except that Sand Bat flew from the other side, and that means...”

“... That means there must be an exit!” Kirbold concluded. “We just have to find it!”

“Well, wise man,” Strakk said. “Can we hurry before those bugs appear again?”

The team continued down the corridor. The passage twisted, it rose and fell, but Tarduk was more interested in the inscriptions on the walls, hoping he'd see more of them. He still no idea what they might mean. He couldn't tell if they were symbols or numbers, walking too fast and had no time to see well. “I think I see something,” Kirbold said. “There, up ahead.”

Tarduk stared into the darkness. Kirbold was right - ahead of them shone a dim light. Without thinking, Gresh moved in that direction. Kirbold had the Spikit run faster to keep pace with him.

“What is it?” Strakk cried. “A door? Is it the exit?”

Gresh went down the path. Through a narrow slit in the middle of it was a faint stream of sunlight. Touching the wall

with both hands, Gresh tried to find a button or a lever to open it.

"I think so," he replied. "If only we can find ... Aha!"

The Glatorian pushed a square stone slightly embedded in the wall. After a moment they heard the echo of an old mechanism working. However, it did not open any door. Something completely unexpected happened.

"This doesn't look good." Strakk said.

Tarduk jumped from the caravan. Strakk was right; the corridor walls were starting to approach each other. At the rate the walls were moving, they only had a few minutes to live before the walls crushed them. Gresh and Strakk desperately groped the wall in search of something that could stop the walls from closing. However, they found nothing. Kirbold rushed to help, ignoring the growls of the Spikit, which, by nature, were terrified of enclosed spaces. Tarduk kept searching for another button on the wall. However, he was following the signs engraved on the wall. He was sure they hid a suggestion to help them out of this problem. Every one had a circular shape. Many of them had lines in it, others had smaller circles. Some were words, but he could not identify any. They were in a language he didn't know. *Wait, wait*, he thought. *This symbol, here... this is possible?*

A signal was at a distance from the others - a simple circle, with no extra lines or other patterns in the middle. Given first, associated with zero or the letter "O".

*It couldn't be that simple*, he thought, then hesitated. *Could "O" be "Open"?*

Tarduk jumped and punched the symbol. The stone shook! The rock that was blocking the road slowly moved aside, and the hallway filled with light. The walls continued approaching each other, but finally an escape route had opened.

"Run!" Tarduk screamed.

Kirbold took the reins and urged the Spikit toward the exit. Behind the carriage ran Tarduk, followed closely by Gresh and Strakk. Only moments after they left the tunnel, they heard the sound of the corridor walls colliding behind them.

"Phew!" Strakk let out a breath of relief.

"We'd better look around." Whispered Gresh.

They were at the foot of the mountains. They could see the mountains gave rise to the desert, and the dark waters of the Skrall River fell with a steady echo. The road through the Black Spike Mountains was over.

"It's a shame that we can't go back the way we came," Kirbold said. "Well, unless we all lost a lot of weight."

Gresh turned, having heard the impact of metal on rock. Seconds later something fell from the rocks above them and landed with a crash at his feet. Before them lay the body of a Bone Hunter. Gresh approached him carefully.



“It’s Fero,” Gresh said in amazement.

“Is he dead?” Strakk asked.

“He’s still alive, but badly wounded. It looks like he’s been in a rough fight.”

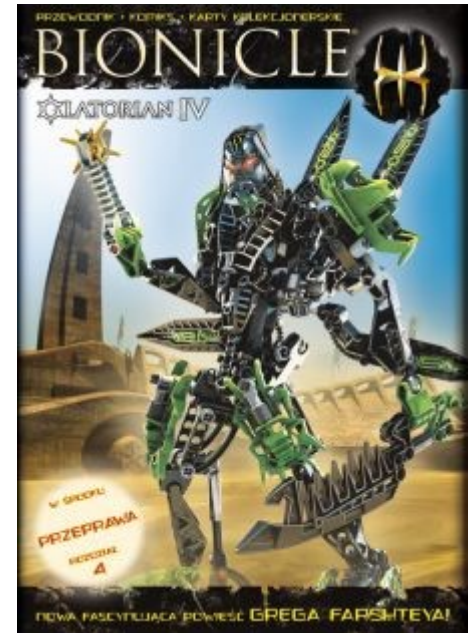
“But look at him, he’s a Bone Hunter. Who could have done this to him?” Tarduk asked, surprised.

Soon the reply came, though not in the form of an audible voice. In seconds, the team was surrounded by a group of Vorox. Amid the quiet circle appeared a warrior clad in red armor. Strakk and Gresh recognized him instantly. It was Malum.

“We did this to him,” Malum said. “The only question is whether or not we should do the same to you.”

## Chapter 4

One of the first things Strakk learned as Glatorian was "read the situation." Was his opponent confident or fearful? Was he a fan of the audience or did they not care? Could the characteristics of the arena be used to gain an edge? These questions must be answered before the village leader



announced the start of the fight. This technique was useful for keeping silence and organizing thoughts. It allowed him to forget the fear and focus on the challenge he faced. The tactic allowed him to hide his fear. But now, considering all the facts, options and risk factors... Strakk was ready to panic. Being surrounded by Vorox as he was, Strakk believed he could be forgiven for experiencing such an emotion.

“And what shall I do with you now?” Malum said. “I have a huge amount of Vorox to feed.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you everything,” said Gresh. “We have nothing for you. We just want to go to Vulcanus. Take what you want from us, and let us continue.”

“What are you talking about?” Strakk whispered. “He will take the Exsidian.”

Malum laughed. “I’d listen to Strakk. Our senses in the desert are very sharp. Your lives depend on them.”

“Listen to this...” Gresh said suddenly, pointing with his launcher. “I’m a pretty good shot. If any of your Vorox shoots us... I’ll do the same to you, Malum. They may beat us, but you will die first.”

The tone of Gresh's voice caused anxiety among the Vorox. Several of them began to growl menacingly, wagging their tails, ready to attack.

“Quiet, aggression is not the answer,” Malum replied indignantly. “I came here to kill a small group of old friends.”

“What did I say?” Strakk muttered under his breath.

“I do not want your Exsidian. What would we use it for? The Vorox aren’t toolmakers. What they cannot eat, drink or use in a fight is not useful. For me, either.”

“What do you want?” Gresh said.

“The Skrall have something that belongs to me,” Malum said calmly. “I want it back.”

Strakk laughed. “Is that all? They have the strongest army in Bara Magna, Do you want to knock on their door and ask for a refund? Then go have fun with that, and I’ll do the same with your Vorox.”

“Shut up, Strakk!” cut in Gresh. “What do you mean, Malum? Why are you here? The Vorox live in the Dunes of Treason. The Skrall have not entered that territory.”

Malum climbed on a rock. Two Vorox left the circle and grabbed Tarduk and Kirbold. Strakk and Gresh wanted to respond, but they were cut off.

“Pathetic heroes. I will ensure that your friends will not leave without saying goodbye... I would not want something to happen, right? With regard to your question, Gresh... the Bone Hunters recently attacked one of our camps. We managed to beat them, but they stole a sword. Then they sold it to the Skrall. We came to retrieve it, but since you're here, you can do this favor for us.

“You're crazy!” Strakk cried.

Malum's eyes flashed with anger.

“No! I'm surrounded by friends who want to rip you into pieces! I am the owner of the fate of your two small friends and your Exsidian! So I advise you to think how to retrieve my sword before my Vorox lose patience.”

---

Gresh and Strakk watched the Skrall city from a hiding space. It was night, but Roptus was always in motion, like a hive. The soldiers kept watching, or returning to the city. The Agori monitored or repaired weapons. From inside the walls they could hear the sounds of the warriors in training.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Strakk said.

"I know," said Gresh. "You've said that three times."

"There are at least a hundred Skrall there," Strakk continued. "Not to mention that Agori with glowing swords, whom I have never seen in my life. The walls are two feet thick, probably to stop an attack by a great army, and anyway, I see no invitation for two Glatorian."

"Well," finished Gresh. "That means they do not expect us."

"And how do we get in, genius?"

Gresh looked toward the desert. A caravan approached the city filled with Rock Agori. Each wagon was pulled by two-headed Spikit, with a torch strapped to the front acting as a flashlight.

"They're probably transporting food and water," said Gresh. "We only have to enter a carriage and get through the door."

"Did I say that I had a bad feeling about this?" Strakk asked.

The two Glatorian ran to the carriages. They were beyond the reach of the torchlight on the walls of the city, so they were invisible to the guards. They saw a small Skrall group returning from their rounds, but at the last moment managed to hide behind a dune. When the caravan slowly crept by, Strakk climbed under the wagon. When the vehicle stopped, he used a rope hanging from the rear of

the vehicle and hid inside. Nobody could see him unless they deliberately looked inside. Gresh had a more difficult task: hiding under the carriage. Moving quickly toward it, he prayed that Spikit wasn't hungry enough to take him as a potential meal, and then he mimicked Strakk's feat, hiding under the carriage with his companion. Upon reaching Roxtus, the village's gate opened, which took longer than expected. Gresh's muscles were burning from the effort required to stay close to the sand. When he heard the voice of the guard - an Agori named Atakus - allowing entry of the caravan, he was relieved. The first part of the mission was successful. The carriages stopped. The Glatorian left the caravan and hid in the shadows, hiding from the Skrall guards approaching. They waited until the carriages finished unloading, and then entered the city.

"Do you have any idea where to look?" Strakk asked.

"I think so," Gresh said. "The largest building in town, Malum's sword must be a spoil of war. Such things would be kept in a safe place."

"Only one guard in front ... and unless you know how to get rid of him," Strakk grabbed a piece of rusty chain that was lying in the sand. "Wrap this around your hands." They went to the building with their hands chained. They walked slowly, hunched, with their heads between their arms.

"What are you doing here?" said the guard. "You must remain in your cells. There is no fight today."

"Oh yeah," Strakk said. "I forgot."

The Glatorian rushed to the surprised Agori. Strakk silenced the Agori with one punch, who was knocked unconscious.

“Good job,” admitted Gresh, dropping the chain. “Where did you learn that trick?”

“I learned to lie and deceive, with practice,” Strakk grinned. “The two things Glatorian practice regularly, don't you think?”

“Then start to look around,” said Gresh. “When the dawn breaks...”

“... we will not be able to get out of town. I know.”

The Glatorian efficiently separated to search the room. In no other village was there a place like this. The Rock Tribe didn't use the room for sleeping or eating, or to store inventory. Apparently, all their treasure was gathered here. Gresh noted a map of Bara Magna placed on a large table. Was it used as a source of information, or a mapping out a war plan? It was Strakk who found the treasure. There were a lot of different things. Some of them - helmets, armor and other that objects disappeared long ago - were easy to recognize. Others he had saw for the first time in his life. Malum's sword was under a pile of objects unknown to him, surrounded by six stones with symbols, which were of no importance. Strakk wanted to take everything he could. But, after a moment's thought he quickly abandoned the idea. He had nothing against robbing the Skrall, but all the baggage would seriously hamper his escape. Strakk looked at his discovery. The sword was unique. Its elaborate ornamentation looked like a flame. The sword was made of

Exsidian and the handle had been carved from volcanic rock. No wonder Malum wanted to retrieve such a beautiful weapon. He must have been attached to it, as even his name was written on the handle. But something was wrong. Strakk looked at the sword closely. The inscription on the sword said... "Ackar".

*Whoa, Malum is a thief, thought Strakk. He dared to steal the sword of his fellow Glatorian Ackar, and when the Bone Hunters stole it, he asked us to steal it back for him! Did he stab Ackar in the back just for spite?*

“You found it?” asked Gresh, entering the room with his shield, and a large sword in his hand. “I thought this might be useful, for retrieving the weapon.”

“Of course I found it ... look,” Strakk showed Gresh the inscription on the sword. “Now what do we do with it?”

“We will return it to Ackar,” Gresh replied without hesitation.

“Maybe he will give us some kind of prize,” Strakk proposed. “But on the other hand, if we give it to Malum, perhaps the Agori live long enough to see Vulcanus again.

“First, we must leave Roxtus,” Gresh said.

“I saw something that could help,” Strakk said. “Give me the sword.”

The two Glatorian left the building quietly. Gresh followed Strakk to a smelly yard - something common for Spikit Pens.

“The Skrall have a weakness for monsters with two heads,” Strakk whispered. “Probably because they are the only things uglier than they are. Let’s see how they like them running loose.”

Strakk brandished his axe, breaking the gates with a single blow. Seeing the open structure, the animals hesitated, but after a moment they began to run through the city. Stopping a herd of Spikit would not be a problem for the Skrall. Block off some streets, kill a few Spikit, and quickly and easily it could be controlled. Unfortunately, the Agori feeders had forgotten to feed them. The hungry Spikit were devouring everything, or everyone, within reach of their claws. A dozen wild and furious hungry Spikit ran throughout the village. Chaos engulfed the city. The Agori ran in panic as the Skrall used Thornax Launchers to try to subdue the creatures. Gresh saw one of them trip and fall right in front of the pack. He did not rise again. Taking advantage of the confusion, Gresh and Strakk climbed a wall near the gate of the city. The closed door kept the Spikit and the Glatorian from escape. On the other side, Atakus was still on guard, with orders to attack them. Strakk jumped on him from above, stunning him and then resting the guard unconscious against a wall. The Glatorian ran into the desert as fast as they could. They paused for breath when they were at a safe distance from the Skrall city.

“Do you think this was too easy?” Gresh mused.

“Don’t worry. We have a sword, and let some Spikit enjoy a meal. And besides, why should we worry about the Skrall? Do you think they will want to retrieve this sword?”

Gresh shrugged. Maybe he was worrying too much. However, he had a bad feeling.

“Give me that sword.”

The moonlight was not enough to see with, but all he needed was to check the sword. The sword was not anything special, but at the base of the handle Gresh felt a little atypical depression. When he pressed it, a small compartment opened, which carried a small metal object.

“What is it?” Strakk asked. “Exsidian? Ice crystals? Answer me!”

Gresh looked at it a good while before he recognized it. Suddenly, he threw it into the sand and crushed it with his heel.

“What are you doing?” Strakk protested. “That thing could have been valuable!”

“Our lives are worth more,” said Gresh. “We better get out of here.”

They ran. Gresh occasionally looked anxiously behind him to see if someone was chasing them. But he did not see the Skrall following them out of the city.

“I saw something like this before,” said Gresh they ran. “Once in the desert, I saw an Agori fleeing something. He had a metal collar. He mumbled something about being enslaved by the Skrall... it sounded like nonsense. I took the

collar and saw that in the middle was a foreign object. It sent a signal..."

"A tracking device," Strakk concluded. "But why would one be on the sword?"

Gresh climbed some rocks. He saw the Skrall approach the place where he had destroyed the transmitter. Even without the advantage they had before, they continued to give chase, following the steps in the sand. However, daylight would be needed to find the footprints that belonged to the armored feet of Strakk and Gresh.

"The Bone Hunters sold the sword to the Skrall. I don't think they knew what they had accomplished," pondered Gresh. "Perhaps they thought that the Bone Hunters captured it from Ackar, and that he would come to get it. Maybe it was a trap for Ackar."

"But why would they be interested in him? Ackar was a champion of the Arena, but lately I have hardly heard of him. I have no idea why anyone would be interested in him."

"Maybe it was a plan for Skrall hunting practice..." said Gresh.

They managed to finally reach the Vorox camp. They saw no one chasing them. Recalling the great sense of smell that the Vorox had, they approached the cave with the wind in their favor. They climbed a small hill that was near the camp and hid in the small cave. At the camp Malum was standing next to the caravan and the two Agori.

"We also need to rescue the Agori," reminded Gresh. "You take care of Malum while I distract the Vorox."

Gresh approached some stones glittering in the depths of a cave. Their brightness meant that the stones were a mineral that emitted light. Gresh broke the stones, and covered his armor with the dust. After a moment, he began to glow in the dark.

"Give me a minute, then you go for the caravan," Gresh said and then walked away.

Strakk occupied a good position, and waited for the right time. Suddenly he heard a scream so horrible that even he jumped in fear. Gresh was as bright as the stars when he jumped from behind a rock and ran straight into the camp. The Vorox fled. Superstitious by nature, they mistook him for a vengeful ghost who had decided to stay in the desert. Malum was not fooled. Gresh came to disperse the terrified Vorox.

"Do not panic," he growled. "He isn't a spirit... but soon will be."

Strakk felt that this was the right time - the caravan was not monitored. He took a breath and entered the camp. He jumped on the wagon, took the reins and had the Spikit gallop. The caravan moved forward so violently that Kirbold and Tarduk almost fell out the wagon. Before Vorox discovered that the caravan was gone, they were already far away.

"Where is Gresh?" Tarduk cried. "He was back there!"



“That's your problem,” Strakk said.

Tarduk grabbed an Exsidian doubloon, ready to strike Strakk.

“Now you're in trouble too. Go back.”

“No need,” Kirbold announced. “Look!”

A shining being was running toward them with a group of Vorox at his heels. Gresh leaped forward desperately. Strakk reined in, slowing the Spikit enough that the Glatorian was able to jump on the wagon.

“Come on! Hurry!” Gresh shouted.

However, the Spikit could not pull that much weight and the furious Vorox approached rapidly. Strakk frantically sought a way to lose their pursuers. Then he saw a hope of victory. If they could reach the other side of a hill they were approaching they would be out of the sight of the Vorox for a moment. They could leave the carriage hide somewhere and wait until dawn. Strakk took the reins and had the Spikit run faster until they disappeared behind the hilltop. Then Strakk realized his mistake. It was not a hill; it was the deadly Dark Falls, leading the Spikit, cargo and passengers to their doom.

## Chapter 5

*It's true, in crisis situations, everything seems to slow down,* Gresh thought. After all, he was, along with two Agori, one Glatorian and a wagon with valuable cargo, plunging into the depths, probably to their death... and yet, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The water



was drawing closer inch by inch and he felt every breath he took – in, out, in, out. In his mind raced madly, even though he seemed to have all time in the world before impact. Below them was the headwater of the Skrall River, in which the melting water of the Black Spike Mountains came together to feed the oasis of Tesara with the live-giving liquid. The river ran south, but thanks to the great heat, it already evaporated before reaching the region of Atero. Gresh braced his body. Even if he hadn't spent all his life living near water, it would have been clear to him that all his bones would break during the impact, so he had to submerge cleanly. Headfirst he split the water's surface, but he had forgotten that even here the Skrall River wasn't very deep. His head hit a rock at the bottom of the river and everything went black. Then the darkness was pushed away by lively colors. Gresh stood



amidst the Sea of Liquid Sand, and despite the quicksand that surrounded him; he managed to remain on his feet. Not far away the village of Vulcanus was burning. The Agori and Glatorian burned, too, but walked around as if nothing was happening. He looked to the right. Malum lead a horde of Vorox to Vulcanus, but instead of attacking they passed through the village and charged into a group of Bone Hunters. Nearby sat a troop of Skrall watching the action. Once both sides were tired from fighting, the Skrall overwhelmed both, the Vorox and the Bone Hunters. Then something even stranger happened. A shooting star crossed the sky and lit up the desert night for miles around. It fell down and burned a crater into the sandy floor. Smoke and flame rose and finally a figure rose slowly... one Gresh had never seen before. At first he thought it was a Glatorian, but the creature kept growing and growing and soon towered miles over Bara Magna. The figure grew and grew... or was it Gresh who was shrinking? He looked down at himself and noticed that his legs were half sunken into the quicksand. He was sinking! He called for help, but the Agori in Vulcanus were too occupied with the fire and the battle with the Skrall. Only the giant figure stood over the chaos below and called Gresh's name.

"Gresh... Gresh... Gresh!"

The Glatorian's eyes snapped open. The burning village, the quicksand, the Skrall and the giant were gone. He was lying in the sand and looked up to the two Glatorian - Ackar and Kiina. Strakk, Tarduk and Kirbold sat nearby in the shadow of a precipice.

"You gave us quite a scare," Kiina said, laughing.

"Don't try to get up," Ackar advised. "You hit your head really hard."

"What... how did you get here? Gresh asked, and tried to get up despite Ackar's warning. Immediately everything began to spin and he had to lie down again.

"When the Exsidian ore didn't arrive in Vulcanus, Raanu grew nervous," Ackar replied. "If it is not delivered, Iconox can't pay their debt to Vulcanus for the lost match."

"Ackar convinced Raanu to wait a little instead of acting too hastily", Kiina said. "He said we would either find you and the Exsidian or try to prove that Iconox sent the cargo on its way. We just arrived when Strakk fished you out of the river."

Gresh gave his fellow warrior from Iconox a surprised look. Strakk and he were anything but good friends and he knew that he never did anything without wanting something in return.

Their gazes met. "Tarduk promised me a part of his next artifacts trove when I find you and get you out of the water", Strakk explained. "Thus it was only reasonable to..." Kiina stared angrily at Strakk as if she wanted to teach him a lesson with her trident. Ackar had walked over to the shores of river and stared into the water.

"At least we found you, but according to Kirbold, the Exsidian is lying at the bottom of the river. Raanu won't be happy about this."

“Worse”, Kirbold said, “if we don’t have a safe route anymore to send cargo from Iconox to Vulcanus and back, then it is of no use that both these villages challenge each other in the arena. When a village has got something the other one wants there’ll be confrontations.”

“If we manage to get the Exsidian to Vulcanus we may be able to avoid that,” Ackar said. “But your Spikit ran away, the wagon is shattered and the whole area is teaming with Vorox and Skrall... the situation is serious.”

Gresh forced himself to get up. Everything was spinning for a moment, at first fast, and then slower, that way he didn’t get sick. He staggered over to Ackar. The Exsidian had probably buried itself deep into the riverbed. It would be possible to recover it with the proper equipment, however, without the wagon; they could only transport a few ingots anyway. Even if they loaded a few ingots onto Ackar and Kiina’s Sand Stalkers, the expedition would be far from being a success.

“Maybe we should get a wagon from Vulcanus?” Tarduk suggested.

“We probably could save you that effort”, Kiina said. “What do you think, Ackar, there may be someone around who would be very eager to get some Exsidian?” She nodded her head towards the north.

Ackar smiled.

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“This is an absurd idea”, Strakk grumbled while trudging through the sand. “Not only absurd – suicidal, too. And of course they chose me for it.”

He kept himself from looking back. Strakk knew exactly where Ackar and Kiina were watching him from up between the rocks, allegedly to cover his back, but he knew the true reason. They wanted to make sure he didn’t make a run for it. Strakk marched from the Dark Falls to the southeast, in the direction of the open desert. Gresh had proposed to head north, to Roxtus, but Kiina had been against it.

“On that way he’ll never make it past Malum and his Vorox”, she said. “Additionally, the Skrall are not stupid enough to think a Glatorian would voluntarily come to them if there was another solution. No, the encounter has to look accidental.”

Thus Strakk was wandering through the desert, beneath the burning sun, without any equipment. If he was “fortunate”, a Skrall patrol would cross his way. If not, he’d fall victim to the bone hunters or some hungry desert creature. Not for the first time he asked himself whether the Match with Ackar he had been promised was worth all this. Strakk stopped to drink something. During the accident he had lost his water canister, but he had insisted that Kiina would give him hers before he moved out. Kiina was afraid that the Skrall would not believe his story when he was carrying water, but Strakk refused to leave without water. He took a large gulp. When he took down the water canister, he saw something in the distance. He saw riders coming towards him. He couldn’t make out whom they were through the heat waves rising from the sand. He counted about half a

dozen armed figures on Sand Stalkers. Strakk felt a surge of relief. Bone Hunters rode Rock Steeds, so the riders were probably not raiders. He at least didn't want to fall into the hands of the wrong criminals. He forced himself to stop walking. Even though his mind called at him "Run!" Strakk in no way was a coward – after all, one couldn't be a successful Glatorian if one had fear. But he thought practically. Should something happen to him, his compensation would at least have to be generous... If it would still be of use to him... The riders had now come close enough that he could make them out. It was a well-equipped Skrall patrol eager for a round of "punch the Glatorian". Strakk felt how his knees grew soft, but he kept himself together. He had to look exhausted and afraid if his plan was to succeed – *At least that is not hard*, he thought.

The leader of the squad was an elite warrior Strakk had met before. His name was Stronius. He had watched many Skrall matches in the arena, with unmoving features and without saying even one word. Rumors say he came to supervise the Skrall Glatorian. Should one of them, by some miracle, lose – or simply not win fast enough – he had the permission to punish him.

*Like the Skrall need even more motivation to really punch someone*, Strakk thought sarcastically.

Stronius rode directly towards Strakk and looked down on the Glatorian with a self-assured smile. "A long way from home... Glatorian."

"I am..." Strakk began.

Stronius cut him off. "Maybe you need a meal and a bed. I am sure we'll find something for you in Roxtus."

Strakk had to gulp. He has heard a lot of rumors about Glatorian that were on their way to Roxtus – or were taken against their will – and were never seen again. They said they were used as "guinea pigs". That was the least creepy version. Other speculations on why they were brought to Roxtus and what happened to them there were far worse. "I was on a journey with a few others", Strakk explained. "Our wagon plunged down the Dark Falls. I... I am the only survivor."

"A wagon?" Stronius asked. "What was the cargo?"

Strakk hesitated shortly before answering, just long enough to seem believable. "Exsidian, we were on our way to Vulcanus. But it is now at the bottom of the river." Stronius smiled. His eyes were gleaming with greed. "You are aware, Glatorian, that we could finish you off now and take the Exsidian for ourselves?"

*At least he's honest*, Strakk thought.

"But we don't do such things", Stronius continued. "As honest citizens of Bara Magna we will do something else instead. I'll send one of my men to Roxtus in order to get a wagon and you will lead us to the spot where the Exsidian sank. And then we will...get it out for you and send you and your cargo on your way again."

This can't mean anything good, Strakk said to himself. The Skrall don't exactly have the reputation of being a charity organization.

The Glatorian looked down at the sand, then up at Stronius. If he would agree to this proposal too fast, this would not seem authentic – the Skrall knew that no Glatorian could seriously believe they would let him go – either with or without cargo. Strakk pretended to struggle with himself and finally resigned to accept. “Agreed.”

“You made a wise decision”, Stronius said, which was supposed to mean about as much as: *Had you said no, you'd already be dead now.*

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It took a few hours until the Skrall returned with the wagon. Stronius didn't let Strakk out of his sight. Once or twice the Ice Glatorian was tempted to betray the plot, hoping that the Skrall would let him go home. But his intelligence won – by telling the truth he would ensure that he would never have the opportunity to lie again. When the Skrall finally returned he brought the message that Tuma, leader of the Skrall, had doubts about Stronius' plan. However, he agreed under the condition that the “job” would have to be done as fast as possible and any “excessive material” would have to be disposed of immediately. Strakk had heard many names for him, but “excessive material” was new to him. They made their way to the Skrall River in silence. Strakk hoped the other Glatorian had stayed true on their word and were waiting for him. Should they have thought twice of it and had left for Vulcanus; he'd be in great trouble. When

they reached a rise, Strakk saw the spot. Not Gresh, Kiina, Ackar, nor anyone else was to be seen. First he started to panic on the inside – they had betrayed him! Then he noticed that no tracks could be seen in the sand at the shores. He calmed down a little. They wouldn't have had any reason to cover all tracks when they were only on their way to the fire village. The plan was still valid and he had to keep playing his role.

“I don't see any trace of your comrades,” Stronius said. He didn't sound distrustful, but rather bored. After one year in Bara Magna he no longer found the tricks of the Glatorian amusing.

“The river carried them away”, Strakk replied a little too fast. “I am the only one who survived.”

“I see,” Stronius said. “So if I send one of my men downstream, he'll find them where the water loses itself in the sand.”

“Sure,” Strakk responded. What else would he have been supposed to say...?

Stronius gestured to three of his men. “Go and see whether you find something in the riverbed – and be thorough. The life of a Glatorian depends on it.”

The three Skrall descended and stepped into the water. Only a few moments passed until their armored heads reappeared at the surface. One of them swam to the shore and climbed into the sand. In one hand he was holding an Exsidian ingot.

“Down there are the remains of a wagon,” the Skrall reported. “And more ingots like this one.”

“Very good,” Stronius said. “All of you go down and get that stuff up. Meanwhile, I will keep an eye on our ‘friend.’”

The Skrall warriors went to work. As with every labor they tackled, they were fast and thorough. Again and again they would emerge with new ingots that were loaded onto the wagon. The higher the stack got, the broader grew Stronius’ smile. Without a doubt he was already thinking of how Tuma would welcome him when he returned with such a treasure. When the wagon was fully loaded, Stronius and his men got back on their Sand Stalkers. The elite Skrall grinned to Strakk and pointed his Thornax launcher at him. “Thanks a lot, Strakk. We will forever remember your services for the village of Roxtus... on your memorial stone.”

Strakk closed his eyes. The shrill whistling of a fired Thornax could be heard and shortly afterwards a sharp cry. But it didn’t come from Strakk. The Glatorian opened his eyes and saw Stronius lying in the sand.

“Drop your weapons – now!” Ackar bellowed down from the nearby rocks. “Get away from the wagon!”

The Skrall warriors opened fire with explosive Thornax ammunition. Strakk used the mess to run to the river. He wanted to cross it and make a break for the desert beyond it. He had already come to the opposite side when Kiina appeared behind a sand dune.

“Where are you going?” she snapped at him while she kept firing Thornax barrages at the Skrall.

“Out of the line of fire,” Strakk answered. “I am unarmed, in case you missed that.”

“Being unarmed will be your smallest problem when you abandon us,” Kiina shot back. “For example, when we make you one head shorter. Here!” She gave Strakk her trident. “Start being useful. And remember – point the sharp end at the villains.”

Even though the enemies outnumbered them, Ackar had managed to keep the Skrall away from the wagon. Stronius had sent a warrior that was supposed to stop the Glatorian. He had already managed to get around and halfway up the rocks when he crossed paths with Gresh, who hurled a well-aimed stone at him. The Skrall fell tumbling back into the sand.

“Are you ready?” Ackar yelled.

Kiina nodded and took aim. “Go!” she cried.

The two Glatorian fired their Thornax launchers parallel onto the sand directly in front of the Skrall. The explosive projectiles collided nosily and whirled sand through the air and into the eyes of the Skrall. Temporarily blinded, they could not stop the Glatorian. Gresh, Strakk and the two Agori raced to the wagon and climbed aboard. Ackar rode over and brought Kiina her Sand Stalker, which she rapidly mounted.

“Go!” Kiina yelled when she drove the Skrall’s Sand Stalkers apart. Gresh spurred the Spikit on with his reins and the wagon was rapidly racing away. Ackar turned around and fired at the Skrall who were reemerging from the sand cloud.

“I can’t believe it worked!” Strakk said.

“It’s not over yet”, Gresh reminded him. “We have yet to reach Vulcanus.”

“And I’m afraid they still have a score to settle with us”, Kiina said, pointing back.

Gresh looked over his shoulder. The Skrall had recaptured their Sand Stalkers and were in hot pursuit of the wagon. Spikit were fast and enduring, but not as fast as Sand Stalkers. It was only a matter of time till the Skrall would catch up.

“Any good ideas?” Strakk asked the assembled group.

“Kiina and I could search for cover and stop them”, Ackar said, “While you keep riding to the village.”

“No way”, Gresh said. “This has been our task. I won’t let anything happen to you because you helped us.”

“I don’t think we need your permission for that, little one”, Kiina replied. “Look for a suitable spot, Ackar, where we can take them into crossfire.”

“Wait a second”, Strakk interrupted. “There is someone up ahead – red-armored. Maybe Vulcanus sent some rookie warriors as support?”

“Whoever it may be, I hoped they are well-equipped!” Ackar said. “We are about to have a rough confrontation.”

They quickly got nearer to the figures. When the sight became better, Gresh felt his stomach becoming as tight as a knot.

“Oh, I don’t think you have to worry about that. They are well-equipped, that much is for certain.”

Strakk stared ahead. “I don’t believe it. We can’t possibly have that much bad luck.”

“Who are they,” Ackar asked while his gaze was still fixed on the Skrall closing in behind them.

Gresh wanted to answer, but the words stayed stuck in his throat. After everything they went through he couldn’t believe their mission was about to end... and more than that... “They are not coming from Vulcanus”, he finally said. “The red armor... it is Malum. He and his Vorox are expecting us.”

“And the Skrall are right behind us”, Kiina remarked.

“Around us there is nothing but endless desert”, Ackar said to himself. “No hiding place to be seen. We can neither escape nor defeat them, least of all do both.”

"I bet we have good chances to be trashed," Strakk said.  
"And we're about to find out..."

## Chapter 6

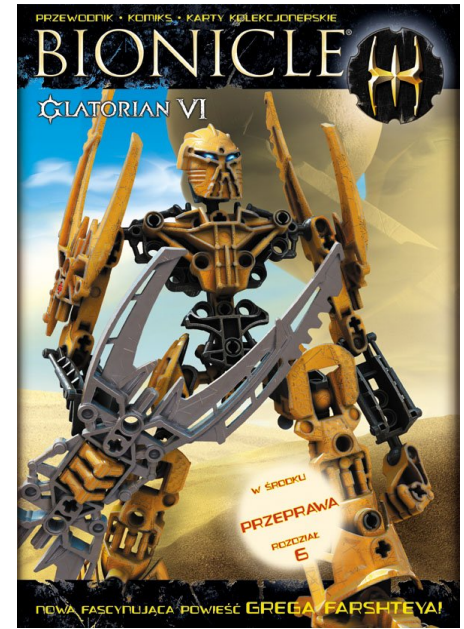
Gresh looked back. The Skrall were nearing them. He looked forward again - with Malum and his Vorox also approaching. Four Glatorian and two Agori with a cart full of Exsidian between two opposing groups didn't have much chance of survival.

"This is not good," he murmured.

"Let's abandon the caravan," Strakk said suddenly. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but ... I don't care about the Exsidian."

"Think about it." Ackar shook his head. "You deceived Malum, who you promised to get his treasure from Roxtus... just now; we deceived the Skrall to help us get the Exsidian from a river. It seems to me that you appreciate his talent in recognizing opponents, Strakk."

"It's funny when you say it that way," Kiina answered "But the Vorox are ahead of us and the Skrall are behind us. Maybe we should fight?"





"I have a better idea," Ackar said. "Gresh, Strakk, who do the Vorox hate more than anyone?"

"The Skrall," Gresh said.

"And who do the Skrall considered as vermin to be eradicated?" Kiina seized.

"The Vorox," Strakk smiled, guessing the intentions of Ackar. "Oh, no. This will end badly... I like it!"

Ackar ordered his Stalker to gallop faster, going directly to the Vorox group. When he got close enough to the Vorox, he stopped in front of them. Ackar quickly turned and headed toward the Skrall.

"Our Vorox friends arrived just in time!" Ackar shouted with all the force in his lungs. "At the Skrall!"

Hearing this, the elite Skrall screamed in anger. Stronius despised the Vorox with all his soul. The fact that these creatures allied with the Glatorian only make him angrier. *These wretched creatures of the sand act boldly against us? Stronius thought. They will pay for it!*

Malum also heard Ackar's words. Immediately he understood what his old friend planned. He also knew he couldn't escape from the trap that he had developed without a fight. Ackar had used the eternal hatred between the Skrall and the Vorox. Now, the Skrall only had enough time to shoot Thornax at the Vorox.

"Shoot them!" Stronius cried. "Destroy them! The Glatorian and the Vorox alike."

His warriors fired toward the Vorox with their launchers. The Thornax made direct impact with the Vorox, seriously wounding three of them. The rest forgot Ackar quickly. They had been attacked by the Skrall - their instinct told them they should hit back. Infuriated, the Vorox rushed to the warriors of the Skrall. When the Vorox pack attacked their most hated enemy, it was an appropriate time to flee from the battlefield. The Glatorian, Agori and the cart left quickly. The sounds of exploding Thornax and moans of the wounded soon died out.

"You thought we would lose," Kiina was delighted. "So you wanted them to fight among themselves."

"No, I wanted this to end differently," Ackar admitted. "We may not have good relations with the Vorox, but they did not deserve to die at the hands of the Skrall. But today our lives were at stake."

"After all, the life of a Glatorian is more important, right?"

Ackar reined his Stalker and turned around. Behind them was Malum, mounted on a Stalker, and armed with the sword and shield of a Skrall. He was alone. Ackar immediately drew his sword.

"I see that now you gather with thieves," Malum said.

“We are not looking to fight you,” Gresh cut in. “You found us, remember? You asked us to steal the sword in Roxtus. And we did, after you snatched it from Ackar.”

“How goes the battle?” Ackar asked.

“Both sides have suffered heavy casualties,” Malum said. “But the struggle continues. My Vorox know when to quit. I know the Skrall don’t know how to pursue us. We are very numerous.”

“I did what I had to do,” Ackar said. “I am sorry that your warriors have died. But they, at your signal, would have killed us.”

“I have no grudge against you, Ackar. Escaping from ambushes is your specialty ... that talent both you and the Vorox have. But these two, Gresh and Strakk, entered in our territory without an invitation. One of these days we will end our affairs.”

Gresh jumped from the caravan, with sword in hand, ready to fight.

“We can solve this here and now. Is that what you want, Malum?”

“We will in time,” Malum smiled coldly and shook his head. “The desert is unpredictable, Gresh. Once beautiful and pleasant, sometimes cruelly murderous. One day brings water to quench your thirst. The next day, feeds you when you’re starving. But the third day ... my sword snatches your life.”

The former Glatorian took the reins of his Stalker and ordered it to turn around and left. Then he disappeared in the distance.

“Is that all?” Spoke Strakk, surprised. “He let us go?”

“Do you want to fight him?” Kiina shrugged. “If I remember correctly, he doesn’t like you.”

The Ice Glatorian knew Kiina was right. Malum once almost took Strakk’s life during a match, which caused his expulsion from Vulcanus.

“Even if the four of us faced against him, we may not win. I know him,” Ackar sighed. “The important thing is that we must now carry the Exsidian to your destination. When the Skrall finish up with the Vorox, they’ll probably return to haunt us.”

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The team traveled to the south. Ever vigilant and careful, everyone slowly getting used to the idea that they might be able to reach Vulcanus. Kirbold promised himself to propose to Iconox’s elders that Ackar and Kiina receive the same pay as Gresh and Strakk. Without their help, this mission could have ended in the Skrall River.

“We will probably have problems ahead of us,” Tarduk said. “I’m not sure when we finish this trip we can say that the route we took was better than the route through the Dunes of Treason. What do you think?”

“You're kidding, right?” Kirbold laughed. “We passed Bone Hunters, the Skrall, Malum with his Vorox, along with desert bats, snakes, a deadly cascade ... right now I might go for the Dunes of Treason.”

Kiina approached Ackar.

“What are you thinking?”

“I see no sign that we are being pursued. If we maintain this pace, it will be good for us. In the worst case scenario, we may find the Bone Hunters.”

“You mean them?” Intervened Gresh, pointing forward.

What they saw gave them chills. Before them, a short distance, the desert had been torn by a huge crater. Around it laid the bodies of several Bone Hunters, as if a tornado had passed through there. Among the dead were several survivors, but their condition did not prophesy a long life. Ackar sought unsuccessfully for Thornax traces or remains of Vorox spears. Something that would leave traces of this size would have to be a monster.

“When you think it happened?” He asked Kiina, who had already dropped from her Stalker to examine one of the hunters.

“Maybe an hour ago.” Kiina approached a hunter and asked. “What happened?”

The Bone Hunter barely raised his head and his lips moved noiselessly. When he could speak, Kiina leaned closer to

him. He uttered a word before dying. Kiina looked up to her teammates, saying: “Skopio.”

“Let's get out of here,” Strakk didn't need to know any other information then he had to.

“An hour ago? Maybe the Skopio is already gone now,” Tarduk asked, hopefully.

“Or maybe just hidden in the sand beneath you and waiting to attack,” Strakk snorted.

Ackar thought. Skopio were the largest and most dangerous creatures of Bara Magna. The giant scorpion-like creatures were not very fast, but thanks to their size a step moved them several meters. They didn't know all the beasts' instincts, so it was difficult to predict whether the Skopio was in the same place that it had appeared or whether it had gone to seek new territory. If the Skopio who had made this disaster had left, supposedly they were safe.

“We'll go to the south,” Ackar said. “Assuming that the Skopio doesn't follow us, we'll go that way. I hope we'll get to the village.”

So they went directly to Vulcanus. After a few minutes had passed, the ground beneath their feet began to tremble.

“Oh, no...” Strakk moaned.

The first tremor was quite weak. The second was more intense - Ackar's Stalker went haywire, almost throwing its rider. Then there was an earthquake. Gresh fell face first in

the sand and soil before it split open with a bang. The crater was starting to suck in sand, and soon would do the same to Gresh. Kiina, just in time, grabbed his hand and threw him into the wagon. The desert exploded. A cloud of dust rose into the air and the Skopio appeared. It was ready for the next battle. And then everything became worse. When the sand and dust fell Ackar saw a figure with golden armor riding the beast. That meant that the beast they would fight was actually a machine. They stood in the way of Skopio XV-I and its pilot...

“Telluris!” Ackar cried.

Strakk shot Kirbold a look of anger.

“When we get back to Iconox, I’m asking for a raise!”

“If we return to Iconox,” Kirbold corrected him.

The Skopio XV-I was built to resemble a real Skopio. It was faster and more dangerous. The lunatic Telluris had improved it over the years, using parts from other vehicles. Due to a plague that ravaged his tribe 103,000 years ago, Telluris was obsessed with oppression and torturing others. The XV-I was ideally suited for that. The team ran to escape. Vulcanus had many Glatorian in training. Their support would be needed in battle against this giant machine. But Telluris had no intention of giving them that chance. Pressing a button on the control console, he changed the way his vehicle was traveling - leveling all four legs of the vehicle, so that now the XV-I could move thanks to its treads. The vehicle did not look so impressive now,

but could reach a much higher speed. With a mischievous smile on his face, Telluris hunted his new victims.

“Split up!” Shouted Gresh. “He can’t chase all of us.”

It was a good idea. Gresh and the Agori took the caravan, and the others were dispersed to the sides. Regardless of whom Telluris decided hunt, the others could go around and attack from behind. Watching the Glatorian flee like a startled scarabax swarm caused great pleasure for Telluris. Which would he destroy first? A carriage full of Exsidian did not interest him. If he had been interested in the Exsidian, he would have taken from it Iconox and nobody could have stopped him. But the red armored Glatorian apparently had a brain – he was shouting orders, and others were listening. It would be useful to silence him. Telluris pointed his gun, mounted on the tail of the Skopio, at Ackar and fired. Ackar heard the Thornax whistle through the air. He shook the reins on his Stalker, forcing it to turn quickly to the right. He escaped in time, but the force of the explosion caused the rider and the Stalker to fall into the sand.

“Ackar!” Kiina cried when she saw her wounded friend.

“Gresh, help him! I will take care of Telluris.”

As she made sure that the Tesaran had reached the wounded Ackar, she began to attack. To escape the rain of Thornax, she rode directly towards the Skopio. Telluris accelerated, trying to run her over with his vehicle, but Kiin, ingeniously, evaded it. The Glatorian jumped from her Stalker and landed on the armor of the Skopio.

“What is she doing?” Ackar stared in amazement.

“We can divert Telluris’ attention. What do you think?”  
Gresh said.

Both Glatorian galloped towards to the Skopio. Ackar shot at it, although he knew that Thornax were unable to damage the shield of the machine. All he wanted was Telluris to focus on them rather than Kiina.

“Look out!” Ackar cried. As Telluris fired at them, Ackar’s Stalker managed to dodge all the Thornax rounds from the Skopio.

“I have an idea,” said Gresh. “Head to the caravan.”

The Glatorian rushed into the caravan. Without stopping, Gresh leaned over on his saddle and took two Exsidian bars. When he was near the Skopio, the Glatorian jumped to the ground, stepped aside and immediately put the two bars between the treads of the vehicle. On the other side Ackar did the same. The Exsidian was prized for its exceptional hardness and durability. It did not corrode or deform as other metals. Stated another way, the Skopio's metal chassis could not compare with it. The screaming and the collapse of parts from Skopio's treads announced the duel between the XV- I's chassis and Exsidian, with the Exsidian being the winner. Meanwhile Kiina climbed into the Skopio's cab. Once she slipped and almost fell. Kiina grabbed the stinger and climbed back up, and when she was high enough, she jumped directly to the XV-I's cockpit, landing just behind Telluris. Without hesitation, he tried to escape but was caught by the ankle and hung upside down.

“I'm too tired to climb, you know?” Kiina said while keeping Telluris’s head down. “I guess you can’t hold on for long. As long as you fight us; my launcher is aimed at the console of your toy.”

“You know what will happen if you shoot?” Telluris laughed. “There will be a big boom and we’ll all die. You, me and your friends down below. You will die, you know that right?”

Kiina raised him up and could see his cold stare.

“Do you think I care?”

Telluris showed no fear. Either he was immensely brave, crazy or possessed. He spoke calmly, as if talking about the weather. “What will you do?”

“I'll let you choose” Kiina said. “I kill you and keep your vehicle, or my teammates destroy it and leave you wandering alone in this wasteland, or...”

“Or what?”

“Not far from here there are many Skrall warriors,” continued Kiina. “You turn back, you trash them, and return from where you came, and take our deal settled.”

Telluris hesitated. He had not had to deal with these visitors in the far north. He knew that the Skrall were tough opponents.

“Well, what do you choose? Are you afraid of those silly Skrall?”

“Not at all,” Telluris said. “I’ll deal with them. But when I find you in my territory again, you will not escape so easily.”

Kiina smiled and waved Telluris to the edge of the vehicle.

“What are you doing? You said that I would be let loose!” Telluris protested.

“I never said I would not do this,” Kiina said. “You had a choice between leaving your vehicle and using it for my benefit. Deciding whether to release you or not, was not part of the deal.”

Saying this, she let go of his leg. Telluris cried for a while until his body fell into the sand. Ackar immediately approached him to see if he was alive.

“He’s alive,” he said with relief.

“Sure he’s alive. He excelled in the arena,” Kiina said, who jumped down from the Skopio. “At least he’ll not trouble us.”

“I don’t understand,” Gresh said. “I heard what he said. He pledged to fight the Skrall.”

“Oh, rookie,” Kiina shook her head. “When will you learn? He said: ‘I’ll deal with them,’ but thought ‘as soon as I take care of them, Glatorian, I’ll come after you.’ If you want to

negotiate with a Glatorian, you need to learn the language of the scam.”

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A few hours later the characteristic shape of a large building in the center of Vulcanus appeared on the horizon. Soon after, the team approached the first building, where they received cheers from the guards. Although Strakk never liked the fire village, never he was this excited in all his life. Raanu, Vulcanus’ leader, was the happiest Agori in town that day. Ackar knew that his reaction was associated mostly with the Exsidian that had finally reached its destination. But it was also something else: Iconox had paid its debt to Vulcanus. The Glatorians’ victory for the Fire Tribe was only the beginning. No war with the Ice Tribe. The Glatorian system had worked perfectly, and nothing had changed. Metus went over to congratulate Strakk, Gresh, Kirbold, and Tarduk. After a moment of celebration, Metus pulled Strakk from the group, and, speaking softly, said:

“It’s all set up. Immediately after the Great Tournament you’ll fight with Ackar. Raanu insisted that the fight take place here, so...”

“He saved my life... saved all our lives,” Strakk interrupted. “But I feel the satisfaction of a victory and a good pay. Deal.”

At the edge of the village, Kiina and Gresh watched the sunset over the desert.

“We’ve seen that the northern route is too dangerous,” Kiina said. “So, mission partly failed. Was it worth going through all this?”

“Yes. I think so,” the Tesaran said. “It’s true that I had to flee from the Skrall, fight the Vorox, and endure Strakk... but I found that I have friends. You and Ackar.”

“You’re right. You have much to learn, but you’re really talented. If one of these days you’re in Tajun, we could practice together.”

“And you’ll teach me the move you used to get onto the Skopio?” Gresh smiled.

“You’ll get a lot of lessons,” Kiina laughed, as they returned to the village. “We’ll talk about how to survive the first round of battles during the Great Tournament.”

“Agreed. But you know what?” Gresh caught an Exsidian block thrown by an Agori. “Surviving a real fight is what truly matters.”

**THE END**