

From the Mounds (A Tale of the Sa'ba Taalor)  
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They sat around the fire at the edge of the Blasted Lands, a small gathering. First there was Andover Lashk, citizen of Fellein and now, apparently, emissary of the Empire. With him were Drask Silver Hand, Delil—who even in her thick furs he found distracting—and Bromt. The three were not from the empire. They were Sa'ba Taalor and he wanted to know more about them.

The winds were cutting across the land and their fire was blazing hard inside the metal container they'd placed around it. The cage was not to contain the fire, but to stop the ashes from too easily escaping into the darkness.

Andover's stomach rumbled as Bromt opened the cage around the fire and checked on the meat roasting within.

Drask Silver Hand, still one of the largest men that Andover had ever met, looked toward Andover and shrugged. "Ask your questions. This is the time for them."

"Questions?"

The light of the fire only added to the odd silvery shimmer from Drask's eyes and from the others of the Sa'ba Taalor. "Questions. I can see them on your face, but I cannot read them. You have to ask your questions if you would have them answered."

Delil tilted her head and he found himself nearly lost in the glow from her eyes. To avoid making an ass of himself he looked away from her and asked the first question that came to his mind. "I saw the head of that monster, the Mound Crawler. I saw how big the skull was. Did King Tuskandru really kill that thing all by himself?"

Drask chuckled. "Best you ask that question here. If you'd asked it in front of Tusk he might have answered by taking your head for doubting him."

"I didn't mean-" He was horrified. If he offended Tusk he was a dead man. There was simply no way around that. The scarred giant would eat him alive and spit out his bones.

Drask laughed again and the others joined in. When they had finished and Andover was fairly certain he would not melt away in his embarrassment, the man shook his head and spoke. "I will tell you the story of how Tuskandru killed the Mound Crawler. It might help you understand our people a bit better."

He leaned closer to the fire until his gray skin took on the warmer tones of the heat and told his tale.

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Within their valley the Sa'ba Taalor were safe. That had been true since the Daxar Taalor had raised the great mountains from the ruined remains of the lands and embraced the people who lived there. Sa'ba Taalor: People of the Hearts of the Gods. Their name reminded them that the gods were responsible for all that was safe in their world.

From birth they were surrounded by the bounty their gods offered them. From the time they could walk, they learned to appreciate that bounty and to work for it.

That is the way of the Sa'ba Taalor.

Tuskandru was raised on the northern slope of Durhallem, the mountain named, as they all were, for the heart of the god. Durhallem chose obsidian as his symbol. The other Daxar Taalor chose the metals of the world as their sign, but Durhallem chose instead to reflect on the unyielding force. Obsidian. Durhallem is also called the Wounder, for he is merciless and unforgiving. Those who offend him must pay the ultimate price.

His followers often adhere to that simply philosophy.

Tuskandru, even in his youth, was a very strong follower of the Wounder. That is all you need to know to understand Tusk, the warrior.

Listen now, and hear how he became a king.

When he was only twelve years old, just starting toward adulthood, Tusk was sent by his father to the edge of Durhallem. It was his time to prove that he was faithful to the god and so he walked up the slope to the very highest edge of the great black mountain and he stared down into the core of the fire within.

The walk was long and brutal, as is often the case. Those who would speak with gods should prove their worth. The Daxar Taalor demand loyalty and they believe that their children must earn every right, every privilege beyond mere existence.

Tusk was already a strong warrior. His father was as unyielding as Durhallem and insisted that his son be prepared for a life of hardships. To that end Tusk was sent out into the Blasted Lands to hunt from the time he was only five years old. There are many stories of how he thrived in the harshest environments, but those are for another time.

Tuskandru climbed the mountain carrying only the clothes on his back. His task was to speak to Durhallem and ask the favor of obsidian. The slick black stone is common enough, true, but the legends say that obsidian favored by Durhallem never breaks and cannot be dulled. There are those who might argue against the truth of that claim, but they are not here at this time.

What is said between gods and their followers is not for prying eyes to discover or prying hands to record. It is enough to know that on that day Tuskandru walked to the very top of Durhallem's chosen mountain and stared into the Heart of the Wounder. No soul has ever done so and come back unchanged.

Tuskandru was gifted with the great scar that day, and blessed with obsidian as well. He came down from the mountain a warrior in the eyes of all Sa'ba Taalor.

He did not come down to greet his father as he had expected, however, because the gods did not permit that.

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While Tuskandru climbed Durhallem, his father and a hunting party charged across the Blasted Lands in preparation. They would either feast when his son came back from the Heart or they would celebrate the life of a boy who died honorably while speaking with their god. Either was acceptable, but being a proud man, and proud of his son, Tusk's father preferred the former.

The gods were generous and the hunters caught and killed two Pra-Moresh. The great beasts were well fed and fat with their kills. By the time they had dragged the bodies back to the village where they lived and then cleaned and cooked them, Tusk's quest was done and he was walking back from the top of Durhallem.

Even from a league away he could smell the roasting meats and the scent of the meat made his stomach roar. He had not eaten for three days in preparation for his journey and now he intended to handle the matter.

Tuskandru did not run to join his people. He walked, and he carried the heavy piece of obsidian with him, a long sliver of black stone that already sported an edge sharp enough to easily cut hair and hard enough to cleave bone. Tusk was not yet grown but already a large lad. He stood a full head above most of the people his age, and had the scars to prove himself a warrior. The new scar, the Great Scar upon his cheek, ached and bled, but that was to be expected. No one gains without first suffering. Those who feel otherwise have not yet earned what is theirs. The gods had always made clear that no matter when a prize was awarded, before or after the fact it would be earned.

Durhallem had spoken to Tuskandru and told him that his blade was well-earned. The Obsidian God did not grant awards before they were deserved. Not ever. It was not his way.

He stopped short of the village to relieve himself and then to drink from one of the small creeks that constantly run down from the top of Durhallem. The waters were cold and sweet and refreshed him.

He thanked Durhallem again for all of his blessings and then he headed toward the village.

Just in time to see his father die.

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They had all heard of Mound Crawlers, of course. One did not live in the Seven Forges without hearing of the many beasts that dwelled outside the mountain range. The Blasted Lands were cursed. They suffered the woes of endless spirits and the Cataclysm that had destroyed fertile lands, boiled away a sea and brought forth the plague-winds, the burning-winds and the cutting winds. The air itself shredded weaker people and froze them in place. The winds carried diseases, the chill of the dead and the cries of tormented souls. How could any such place offer solace?

Still, far beyond the mountains, toward where the great enemy had once come to attack, the Mounds waited.

There was only one command from the Daxar Taalor when it came to the Mounds. Stay away. The Sa'ba Taalor are a faithful people. They did not disobey.

They could be seen on days when the winds were calmer and the grit and ash were not so very heavy in the air. Great shapes, towering across the landscape at a dozen different angles, a silhouette of monstrous size that, when one left the Seven Forges, could be heard rumbling in the distance. Sometimes the Mounds let loose a low, keening moan. Other times they roared.

The Mounds were forbidden. The Daxar Taalor did not forbid without cause.

The gods did not tell the things from the Mounds the same thing about the Seven Forges.

How did the Mound Crawler enter the valley? That is for the gods to know. There are ways in, and they are known to the Sa'ba Taalor, but they are not easily found and they are guarded. The guards at the entrance under Durhallem's Heart did not give alarm and did not see the crawling horror.

The feast had been set and the people of the village gathered together and it was Tuskandru's father, King Grathmis, who saw the beast first. While the family prepared the meat and laid out breads and wines and a bounty of fruits from deep in the valley, the great thing charged along the side of the mountain, knocking trees aside and crushing stone beneath claws as large as a man's body.

Grathmis drew his axe and called out Durhallem's name. He did not need to consider what the monster wanted. It did not belong and it wanted to take from him. That was enough.

Grathmis charged and beside him others drew weapons and headed toward the great Mound Crawler. The nightmare screeched and the sound was enough to make ears bleed. Grathmis did not hesitate. Instead he brought his great axe around and cleaved the blade into the Crawler's side, aiming to find and remove its heart.

The blade dug deep. Grathmis did not have a chance to smile before the beast pinned him under one of its feet and pressed him into the stone. His skin and bones broke and the king died as a bug crushed under a giant's heel. The Crawler roared and the woman closest to him hurled a spear into the left eye of the beast. The spear struck true and the eye was opened into a bloody red trench. The monster lurched forward and the woman reached to ram the spear deeper into the wound, and bit her in half. Perhaps it preferred the meat of Pra-Moresh; it cast her remains aside and roared again, calling for all who dared to attack.

The followers of Durhallem are not known for cowardice.

They came to meet the monster and several of them died for their courage. Drammul, the brother of Drualla, and both Truatha and Loarth, the older brothers of Tusk, they all died in that fight. But they caused their damages before they died. Several wounds bled the monster before Tuskandru reached the scene.

What? Yes, he saw his father die. I said that. But you do not understand combat yet, so I will explain. He saw his father die from above. He was still a distance away when Grathmis and Drualla were killed by the Mound Crawler. It took him several seconds to reach the combat and by that time seventeen villagers were killed.

Most fights do not last for long. Battles may last days, and wars can take hundreds of years, but fights last only seconds in most cases. Why? Because when you seek to kill an enemy, you do not take your time, especially if that enemy is also trying to kill you. You fight hard and you fight fast and you kill that enemy or you die. Simply telling you that much takes longer than it took Tuskandru to reach the monster that killed his family.

Now allow me to finish the story, yes? Yes. Good.

You saw the Crawler's skull. You know that it took four men to carry that skull before your emperor. The head of the Crawler is less than a tenth of its size. Yes, it is that big. It was also covered with scales as thick as my shield, and had eight legs along its serpentine body. It was a terror. The followers

of Durhallem are strong warriors, and it killed many of them and would have continued killing if not for Tuskandru.

I cannot say what went through his mind. I do not know how he might have felt when he saw his entire family slaughtered. I know only what he has shared with me, he and other survivors of that day.

Tusk came down the mountainside roaring. He called out Durhallem's name and charged the great Mound Crawler and the beast turned to face him and roared back. The voice of the monster was enough to deafen its enemies and at least a few claim that the sound made eyes bleed. Think about that. The sound must have been like a wall he had to fight his way through.

Still, Tusk did not stop. He ran forth and as the Crawler reared up to fight him, he leapt down from the side of the mountain and swung his only weapon, the obsidian shard Durhallem had granted him. The blade was sharp and it worked well. The edge cut along the great monster's neck and chest and opened a wound longer than Tusk's body. The Crawler was wounded, but it was not killed. The obsidian blade was left inside the monster's chest, stuck in bone and scales. Tusk was without a weapon.

It cried out in pain and clawed at Tusk, but he dodged the great talons and sought a weapon to kill the beast. What he found was the bodies of the Pra-Moresh. The meat was cooking on the spits, roasting and burning. But nearby the hides had been set aside and with them the chains that hauled the great corpses back from the Blasted Lands.

Tuskandru took up one of the chains with the great barbs used to hold the fur and hide of the beasts and he attacked the Mound Crawler. The first strike only annoyed the creature and sent it after him, hissing and screeching. The second lash of the chain's links did no damage and Tuskandru took a cut across his chest as the claws struck him. The blow would have killed him, but he was fast enough to step back and survived.

The third time he swung his great chain, the hooks caught the wounded eye of the Crawler and sank deep into the very wound his mother had created on the beast. Oh, how it roared! It rose high into the air and shook its head, trying to get free from the pain, and Tusk held onto the chain and rose with it. His feet struck the monster in the belly as he climbed and then across one of its legs. And then his feet landed on the cut he had opened in the Crawler's chest and belly, and he held onto the chains though they cut and bled his arm. Yes, the scars you saw on his arm were caused by his own weapon as he used it to hold onto the monster. The hooks of the chain were buried in the eye of the Crawler and around the arm of young Tusk and every move the thing made as it thrashed and sought to free itself hurt both the beast and the boy.

Tuskandru's feet braced on the chest of the Crawler and he reached with his free arm and he found the great obsidian blade where it lay stuck in the monster. Tusk could not pull the weapon free. It did not have a hilt yet and the edge was too sharp for him to merely grip. To draw the weapon from the wound would have cost him his fingers if not his entire hand. There was no choice save one. He used his booted foot and instead of pulling the weapon free, he pushed it deeper into the gash he had carved into the beast.

Oh, how the Mound Crawler roared. It rose higher still and lashed back and forth, trying to dislodge Tusk, but he would not let go of the chain and his leg was pushed into the wound he had created. He roared back, and kicked into the bleeding cut he'd opened, driving the obsidian deeper still until it touched the black heart of the Crawler and cut deep.

From what I was told the blood from the monster was hot enough to blister skin. Tuskandru was bathed in that blood from the bottoms of his feet all the way to the top of his head.

The Mound Crawler fell back and crashed to the ground and Tusk rode the monster down into the earth, holding the chain and bleeding himself even as he bled the beast. His skin burned and blistered and his leg broke as the monster rolled and pinned him for a moment, but still Tusk did not let go, did not stop until the monster was dead.

Burned and bloodied and broken, still Tuskandru killed the evil that had slain his family.

We do not choose our kings. Our kings speak with the voices of the gods. The gods choose our kings, that is the only way we can know that the words they say for the gods are not lies.

All who were present saw the way the wounds on Tuskandru's body were healed and heard Durhallem speak with Tusk's mouth. You will never doubt the voice of a god should you hear it, believe that if you believe nothing else from my tale. Tuskandru was healed, true enough. His broken leg was mended, and his many wounds scabbed over. He was able to stand and to walk. He was able to order his people to aid him in burying his family and carving the flesh from the great Mound Crawler.

The beast was named. It was called the Kingmaker and the Kinslayer. Tuskandru was named the king of Durhallem's followers. It is a title he has earned a hundred times again.

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Andover looked across the fire at Drask Silver Hand and shook his head. He had never seen a Pra-Moresh or, before seeing the skull, imagined a creature as vast as the Mound Crawler might exist.

Drask leaned back and then reached into the grate over the fire to test the meat. It was done to his satisfaction and a moment later he was carving meat for all of them and for the moment all questions were forgotten. The appetite for food overrode the appetite for knowledge. If only for the moment.