

The Artifact

It was the spring planting season. The weather had been favorable and for the past moon cycle enough rain had fallen. If the summer was to be like the previous one, the wheat harvest would be generous and there would again be a surplus to barter for skins, fruits and cutting stones from some of the neighboring communities.

Today though, the labor was hard. The man, thick shouldered, black hair flecked with silver down his broad back, struggled with the plough which churned through the tilth behind the sloped back of a snorting, refractory bison while the woman, wiry and quick, guided the beast with a sharpened goad. As was customary in their village, they had trained the bison as a valuable draught animal after it had been castrated at 6 months old. Now the animal was seven and approaching the end of its useful life. This would be its last year. The meat would be appreciated by the village in the coming winter.

Nicking the bison with a flick of his leather switch, the man urged the beast to the final furrow that they would plough this day as the woman prodded its flank. Reluctantly, the animal leant its great weight into the rough wooden yoke and the plough slipped smoothly through the moist soil. Insects skittered to avoid the oncoming stone. Steam rose from the animal in the cool late afternoon air.

The sun was descending behind the nearby range of low, wooded hills and the evening promised to be cold. A breeze from the south reminded the pair of the glaciers that lay a day's walk beyond the hills. The glaciers had advanced

noticeably in recent years and within a lifetime would probably reach the hills. The fire and the company of their neighbors in the village center would be welcome. They could see several other couples finishing their work. Some were handling bison and others were driving oxen. All were heading now in the direction of the village, a collection of low yurts and rough barns on high ground above the lake.

With the final furrow complete, the man unhitched the bison from the plough and the woman used the prod to urge the animal towards the communal barn where the village kept their draught animals. They drove their complaining beast through the thicket of sharp stakes which protected the outskirts of the village. Others joined them in the barn with their charges and chatted easily about the day's work as they tethered the animals, brought them fodder and settled them in for the night.

The couple were treated respectfully. He was "The Learned One" and she was "The Healer". They were among the oldest couples in the barn. He had seen forty-two summers, and she had seen forty-one. They had been together for twenty-six of those summers and had four sons, two of whom were now tending their own animals in the barn.

His oldest son, taller and thinner than his father, approached with a question, "It is Rest Day tomorrow, are we to go to the excavation again?"

“Your mother and I will go. The Elders have asked that we continue the work. We were able to clean up the site well after the Thaw during the last moon. There was not too much damage during the winter. You know that it is our family’s duty. I hope that you and your brothers will join us.” He glanced at the woman who nodded her agreement.

The youngest son, two full heads taller than his sibling, joined the conversation, “I will join you tomorrow, Father.” His brother nodded in agreement, “I, too, will come, Father, with Elani’s permission. She can perhaps teach the children for a change. However, I think that Morlon and Pednar will be too busy repairing their yurt.”

As was the custom, after sunset the women of the village gathered around the central fire. The men had been banished from the gathering many generations before. Those not engaged with settling down younger children were in the goat barn milking. No-one knew why the men were not permitted at the evening fire, but it was rumored to have to do with the personality of the Head Woman at the time.

Darna, “The Healer”, sat in a circle of about forty women, each the head of their household. The fire spat and crackled while it illuminated the faces with their distinctive epicanthic folds. The oldest, Lesori, had recently become Head Woman having gained the position partly by her seniority, but more from the respect she had as a weaver. Much of the cloth in the woolen garments worn by villagers came from her yurt.

“Darna”, the Head Woman, addressed her friend across the flames, “ you and your man will go to the dig tomorrow?”

“We will. The clean up during the last moon went well. With two of our sons we should be able to make good progress. We think we are close to an important layer. The digging was hard last Fall. We encountered many rocks, but we also kept finding shards to encourage us.”

“Shards of what?” enquired Lesori.

The other women around the fire listened closely to the conversation. All other talk had ceased above the spitting fire.

“Broken rods of hard material. My mother used to call it “metal”. I remember that we used to find it here around the village when I was a child. We don’t see it anymore. The pieces from the dig are generally rough and sharp. They are dark red in color, but pieces of them will flake off and crumble,” explained Darna.

Astari “The Hunter”, face pitted and nut-brown, asked, “what do you think they are?”

Darna went on, “It’s hard to know, but my man believes that together they were a part of something much, much bigger many moons ago. Sometimes we find pieces which look as if they might join or fit with another piece, but they have

been underground for so long that they do not have anything like their original shape. They are unattractive and worthless, so we have never brought them back to the village.”

“If the pieces were together at one time, do you think they were made as one thing whatever that might have been?” Lesori interjected.

“Possibly, but I doubt it because the skill to form that type of material does not exist. Perhaps it did long before the village, but I do not believe it.”

Several men appeared from the gloom beyond the fire carrying wooden trenchers bearing goat meat and piles of roasted root vegetables prepared at another fire behind the large barn. They went around the circle of women. Each picked the food they wanted and placed it on the wooden platters they had brought with them. The nightly routine was reassuring. On rare occasions, when the shaman indicated that the stars were propitious, the men were permitted to join their mates at the fire, but tonight was not one of those times.

The goat meat was gristly. After all, the goats were also hard working. No-one complained. The day’s labor had brought its usual appetite to the women and to the men now eating their own meal at the other fire. Borni, a stout, elderly woman who had helped herself liberally to the offered trencher, reopened the discussion of the dig after appreciatively licking her fingers clean, “so, Darna, for the benefit of our young neighbors who have joined us for the first time tonight,

why have you and your family been digging for so many years? And, why in that particular place?"

Darna answered, "The dig was begun my man's father. My own father was his friend and helped him. They had been bear hunting and had been gone from the village for no more than a day on the way to the land near the glaciers where there was a good population of bears at that time."

"Not many bears now", interjected Borni, "some find their meat strong, but I like it. I could also do with some more skins. They make the warmest night coverings. With no offense to Lesori and her weaving." The Head Woman did not appear to take offense.

"Anyway," continued Darna, "as they approached the hills that we can see to the south, they took a slightly different path to the river and saw across the stream a flat area above the trees, a small plateau overlooking the river and the lake. There was an odd-looking mound on the plateau, and they wanted to investigate."

"So, after they crossed the river and got there, why did they start to dig?" insisted Borni.

"Well, they didn't have much time that particular day, but they went back there one moon later with digging tools because they were both curious. On that first day they had seen some interesting things as they dug a little into the earth."

Darna's animation as she retold the story was obvious in the firelight.

“The older ones here know what interested them, Darna,” said Borni, “but tell our young friends.”

“As I said, they weren’t able to find much that first day except that the rocks were unlike any that we see around here. But, on that return visit with a blessing from the Head Woman and the shaman, they had brought better tools. They dug and found some rods of this metal. Thin, like a girl’s finger, and some as long as a forearm. All were flaking and red. They stayed and dug for two days.” Darna took a breath before she went on, “As they went deeper, they found pieces of a very different material. You all know it since we have it in the village now in almost every hut. It is the hard, clear material we have called “water-rock” because you can see through it. None of us has a piece bigger than the nail of a thumb, but we know its value and we know also that other villages covet it. How it came to be remains a mystery to us all.”

“So,” Lesori interjected “you and your family since your father’s time have been going to this dig a few times each year not just to find water-rock and what you call metal, but for a bigger purpose. Remind our young neighbors.”

“That’s true”, continued Darna, “we continue to excavate when we can depending upon the seasons because the Elders back then believed that the mound might help us to learn about our origins. All that we know today is based on the legends we have from travelers. Some of these stories suggest our people were born from fire while others claim we came after a great flood. I have also

heard that we are really moon people who arrived here when time began on vessels we no longer know how to construct.”

Murmurs of agreement were heard around the fire, which was now little more than glowing coals. The ancient debate had been re-opened. In twos and threes, the women began to speculate again about the beginnings of the people. The discussion almost always occurred around the time of the first, or second, dig after the Thaw.

When the fire had become no more than hot ash with a few glowing red embers, the women stood up and straggled off towards their yurts in the penumbral light of the half moon.

Shapes of men could be seen in different directions gingerly arranging the thorn branches amid the wooden stakes. It had been a long time since the last animal attack, but no-one was inclined to dispense with the precautions. A hyena had carried off a three-year-old boy on that awful occasion two summers previously. Now, the second fire would be kept alight by the responsible family throughout the night. It was deterrent and tradition in one. As the village settled down for sleep, distinct cackling reminded all that the local hyena clan was still a potential threat. The threat would diminish, of course, once the great migration began.

Astari's mate, Bulnar, had the responsibility of rekindling the central fire in the morning. This was begun as soon as the sky began to glow above the eastern lake. By the time that family groups began to emerge from their huts, the fire was

ablaze. Breakfast was a communal time; men and children were permitted to congregate around the warmth. Goat cheese, berries and coarse loaves were shared.

Darna and Auron arrived at the fireside with their two sons. The parents were laden with digging tools, but also carried cloth bundles containing the food they would need for the two or three days they were expected to be away. In an earlier generation their equipment and food would have been carried by pack horses, but the last one had died when Darna was a young child. The sons, Folgar, the older, and his younger sibling Zagnar carried food bundles in addition to long wooden clubs embedded with obsidian blades, the weapons of choice for defense against marauding animals. Together with Zagnar's three gigantic wolf hybrids, which now mingled easily with the small crowd at the fire, they would feel well protected against most dangers. The group exchanged a few words with their neighbors as they breakfasted quickly in the early light. The wolf hybrids eagerly accepted handouts from the children at the fire, who clearly knew the great beasts well.

The sun edged above the lake which had only recently melted. The spring morning was crisp as the four travelers moved the thorn branches aside to leave the village and head south. The older son took the lead while the younger brought up the rear.

The going was easy on the savannah. They followed the tracks of the herds as they aimed for the southern hills. Distant herbivores occasionally lifted their

heads to look at them, but they kept a steady pace for the morning with the wolf-dogs flanking them and investigating every possible burrow for a potential meal. When the sun was as high as it would get on a spring day, they rested under the baobab, which always marked the mid-point of their trip. Once more, Darna took her obsidian knife and etched the trunk with her mark. Hundreds of marks circled the giant trunk. Some were hers, but many more were older cut by their parents who had also traveled this path to the dig.

They resumed their journey aiming, as always, for the gentle cleft in the southern hills. The vegetation grew thicker as they drew closer to the river. The path wound its way between scrub bushes and deciduous trees exhibiting the early green shoots of their spring foliage. Suddenly, a hare bounced across their path and their canine companions set off in pursuit. The brothers shouted after the animals, but the chase instinct was powerful, and the beasts were soon gone into the surrounding scrubland.

Folgar warned, "They may take time to come back and find us, so we had better be on our watch for other animals. We didn't have any trouble last time, but you can never be certain. Especially now that we are close to the river."

His mother assented, "I will never, ever forget the first time I took this journey with my mother and father. I was only fifteen. We were trapped at the river by the hyena clan, which was much bigger back then. Lucky for us that Auron and his parents were with us and we were a large group. Now, I am not so worried about the hyenas. They are not ambush predators. You can always hear them coming.

What frightens me are the ligers. They would love to lie in wait in a place like this.”

Every thick bush, or tree, beside their path was a reason for caution. Their weapons were held ready. However, as they approached the river, the wolf-dogs returned, sides heaving and panting with the exertion of the fruitless chase.

The river was no deeper than a man’s waist and sluggish, but they avoided going in the water because of the ever-present leeches. The small plateau that was their destination was visible across the stream. It overlooked the bend in the river a short distance downstream from where they were about to cross. The strange mound lay towards the rear of the plateau, close to the slope of the hills. It stood as tall as the biggest trees at its rear.

They used the stepping rocks which had been placed across the stream their parents. The dogs happily swam the short distance and shook dry their thick, gray-black coats. The brush was much thicker on the other side of the river and they were glad of the presence of their guardian animals. To the right of the small band, the sun began to decline behind the deciduous woods marking the lower slopes of the hills. The green of the early foliage was still vivid in the late afternoon.

The path they climbed was mostly human-made, but many animals had obviously taken advantage of it over time. The river dropped back below them as they

trudged upward. A herd of woodland deer had clearly passed along the track fairly recently since their droppings were fresh.

“Look at this scat,” Zagnar pointed with his club, “what do you think? Seems pretty fresh to me.”

His family members gathered round to inspect the brown pile, quite distinct from the deer pellets. The dogs came close as well, sniffed, but soon lost interest and preferred to investigate the nearby rabbit burrows.

“Pretty sure that’s bear dung”, averred his father. “You can see the remains of berries within it. Still, we had better keep our eyes open.”

Dusk was almost upon them by the time they arrived at the plateau. The mound, a huge, shrub-covered pyramid, was close to the steeply rising wooded ground behind it. The dig covering was visible at the far side of the plateau where the distant edge of the pyramid plunged into the earth.

The party went over to inspect the excavation.

Boulders from the neighboring mound secured the covering, which was made from a large number of bison skins sown together and impregnated on each visit with a malodorous liquid specially distilled by the shaman and intended, usually very successfully, to ward off any curious or hungry animals. It was supported

across the hole by a huge trellis. The four wrestled the contraption away to one side.

The pit was as deep as four tall men. And half as wide. Three sides were lined by interwoven branches of the local vegetation. These wattles kept the walls of the hole secure and minimized earth falls. The rock pile extending at an angle downward into the ground constituted the fourth wall. The pressure of the rocks above ground and roots in the shallower areas locked the rock wall in place. The sun, now a half circle beaming through the woods at the top of the hillside, still provided enough light to show that the bottom of the pit was no more than a little muddy.

“Before we dig tomorrow, there will be repair work on the earth walls”, instructed Darna.

“As always,” grumbled Zagnar.

They laid their bundles close to the firepit in the usual camping place. There were several gaps in the circle of thorn bushes surrounding the area. Animals had disturbed the defenses since the last time that they had been at the dig. It did not take long to gather new bushes which would deter most animal night marauders except for the ligers. A good fire would provide additional protection. The surrounding woods were generous with fallen branches. It had been more than ten days since the last rains, so the kindling was dry.

They had brought no cooking implements with them. Their stay at the dig-site would not be longer than two days. Spring planting would allow no more and besides the Head Woman had been explicit with her instructions. They ate the dried goat meat and shared with the hounds. While they had been gathering firewood, the animals had profitably run down a large nutria which had strayed too far from the river. It had provided an excellent meal and the goat meat was no more than a welcome bonus.

Their night was marked by reassuringly distant animal sounds from the plains below, but little was heard from the woods around them save the occasional crack of a falling limb. It was almost windless, but infrequent wooden creaks told of a light breeze.

Dawn broke over the lake as a skein of white geese in flight honked their way towards the water. The humans and the dogs were already awake and taking their morning meal around the embers. Thorn bushes were gingerly moved aside and the four carried their digging tools to the side of the dig.

The routine was clear and the same as on hundreds of previous visits. Two would remain on guard at the top of the excavation and, using a lowered bucket made from animal hides, would help to remove the rocks and soil loosened by the others within the hole. The dogs were allowed to forage close by while performing their guard duty.

Repairing the wattles took little time. Although a full moon cycle had passed since the first visit after the winter, the spring rains had caused only minimal damage and there was no great accumulation of soil and rocks at the bottom of the excavation. Fortunately, the area was very well drained. Zagnar and his father descended the wooden ladder to the floor of the excavation as his mother and brother looked down. Midway through the day the pairs would change position.

“See these earth layers, Father?”, he enquired when they reached bottom, “you have told us that they show the passing of the years. You said that it’s possible to see whether a layer was from a dry period or from wet years. So, as deep as we are now, can you guess how many years have passed since this earth was topsoil?”

“In the Council of Elders we have debated the matter of the origin and the age of the mound,” Auron responded, “but we have no better answer still than that provided by my father when the hole was no deeper than his waist and digging had been carried out no more than two to three times per year since he had discovered the mound.”

He went on, “At that time he tried to count the layers. Most often one layer was difficult to separate from another. He believed that three opinions or more would be better than one. So, he marked a rock close by with the number that was his opinion. Then, before any more digging occurred, he asked your mother’s father who was with him to make his own estimation and mark it on another rock. He did so. The Head Woman had joined them with a third man. Both counted the

layers and marked them without sharing their knowledge. When all was finished, they compared and arrived at a common opinion. Waist deep represented about one hundred and seventy-five years, they thought. So, if they were right, these layers right here may have been topsoil more than one thousand years ago and perhaps as many as three thousand years. Indeed, we have no certain idea. They could be much older than that.”

Thick muscles worked under their bison skin cloaks in the cool depths of the dig as their antler picks gouged the loam. Wooden spades lifted the detritus into the bucket. The soil was somewhat sandier at this depth which explained the good drainage, but the clods still held together. Two figures at the edge of the hole squatted on their haunches waiting for the bucket to be filled.

“Here are two pieces of water-rock, Zagnar. Wait until the bucket is full, then place them on top for your mother to collect,” the older man instructed.

“Father, perhaps the mound goes on and on deep into the ground and we dig for generations and find nothing more than a few pieces of water-rock. It’s valuable I know, but more valuable than our lives and the time we could spend with our people and families?” His youngest son was valued for his strength and the way he had helped to protect the village during the last raid by the herding people, but he was not known for his patience. The elders frequently had reason to reprimand him.

Testily his father answered, "I have been doing this for all of my adult life. Certainly, it's only possible to dig a few times each year, but I have been here more than seventy. You have only been with me on only about nine occasions, so you have little cause to complain. Who knows, but perhaps you'll be doing this when you have sons of your own and I am gone."

"So, what will allow you, or me, or my yet-to-be born children to stop?"

"An answer. We don't know what form that may take, but the whole village, except you it seems, believes there may be an answer here to our origins."

Huffing and unsatisfied, the young man continued to bend, dig and fill. The bucket went to the surface hauled up by Folgar. Irritated, he seemed to put extra effort into his work as if to prove something. Apart from the grunting and heavy breathing, silence occupied the pit for a while. Bucket loads rose and fell.

As the sun rose almost high enough for its light to penetrate to the depths of the excavation and it grew warm enough for the group to shed one layer of skins, the time came for the group to swap roles. Father and son climbed the ladder to the surface. The hounds, well fed now after revisiting the nutria carcass, greeted the pair with their bushy gray tails thrashing energetically. Mother and older son descended into the excavation. The wolf-dogs whined to see them go and be unable to join them.

While Darna kept the bottom of the pit as clear as she could, Folgar began to dig efficiently using the broad muscles of his back. The antler-pick rose and fell. Their first bucket went to the surface pulled up by Zagnar. Then, a large rock of a material seemingly different from the wall which was the downward extension of the mound, blocked his efforts.

“We need the thickest, strongest branch you can find,” Folgar yelled up to his brother.

In a short while, they could hear the unmistakable chopping sounds of the obsidian axe being put to use cutting and trimming. A straight branch cleared of unnecessary twigs and leaves and as tall as Folgar himself was lowered into the pit.

“I need you down here, brother. Let Father stay with the dogs,” shouted Folgar.

Using the branch as a lever against another rock they dislodged from the wall, the siblings moved the obstruction upward a small amount.

“Can we get it out of its own hole, do you think?”, asked Darna.

“Perhaps with father’s help, but it’s going to be very hard to remove from the pit. That could stop the dig completely,” said Zagnar with a small degree of satisfaction in his voice.

Ignoring his brother, Folgar asked his parent, “While Zagnar and I lift the rock, Mother perhaps you would look as far as you can underneath so we can see what we might have to do to make progress?”

She lay flat on her belly in the pit and stared into the gloom beneath the rock as the brothers groaned in unison with the effort.

“I think I can see something and I’m going to reach in to touch it if the two of you promise not to crush my arm by letting go, “she wriggled forward in the narrow space alongside her sons. She managed to stretch her arm to its fullest extent in the temporary cavity beneath the stone.

“I have something. I can feel it. It’s small. Much smaller than my palm. It’s something different, I think. Let me grab it.”

The brothers, red-faced and straining, could see her concentrate as she sought to get hold of the object.

She pulled her arm from the cavity. Relieved, the brothers let the rock fall back into its hole with a moist thump.

“What have you got there, mother?” The brothers craned their heads to inspect the object in the deepening gloom.

But, Darna kept the thing hidden in her small, clenched and grimy fist.

“No. This may be something. We will share it with your father. Climb! I will follow,” she ordered.

In the afternoon light at the edge of the pit, the three men waited as Darna, fist still clenched, climbed awkwardly from the excavation. The dogs edged close, also eager to understand.

“What have we got here? Your mother is acting as if this is Zagnar’s answer,” laughed Auron.

“No! We need to take this seriously. None of us has ever seen such a thing. Take a look,” said the Healer opening her fist as the others leaned in. “Could it lead to an understanding of who we are?”

