

The Anomalies; an excerpt

Brax paced. As a Leveler, the Traum Colony's elite peacekeeping force, he wasn't usually prone to nervousness; he'd been in too many stressful situations to let much bother him. But this was different. He and UrOl, a member of the Vakna's Watchmens Guild and fellow guardian on a joint expedition, had gone missing while searching for an object they'd caught spying on their camp. Brax and UrOl had split up and the Vakna was late checking in.

"UrOl! Do you copy!"

"Yes! Stop shouting!" UrOl said as Brax's voice rattled in his ear. Usually, the communications device the Traum equipped him with did a fair job of regulating volume; apparently, it fell short when it came to Brax's panicked baritone voice.

"Where the hell have you been, man?!"

"I went for a stroll in a pleasant, flower-laden meadow; where the hell do you think I've been, you buffoon!" UrOl hadn't meant to snap. He was being rude and unfair. It wasn't Brax's fault he'd stumbled into a cave filled with crazed bloodsucking man-things.

A pause, then, "How would you like a paralysis bot up your ass, hero," Brax said, matter-of-fact.

UrOl sighed and gritted his teeth; *I deserved that*. "To answer your question..."

UrOl told his partner about falling in a sinkhole and encountering horrific creatures within it, ending the story with a harrowing escape. Still, it was obvious the Vakna was more annoyed than injured.

"And now, I'm sitting on my ass wondering where in the hell that spy could've gone," said UrOl.

"Maybe it has something to do with those things you fought? I just entered the canyon, stand up so I can see you."

UrOl stood and easily identifying Brax's large bulk running across the desert floor; he looked like one of those tanks he'd seen in the archives but moved far quicker. In moments he was standing next to UrOl, then jumped back with a look of disgust on his face while a forefinger and thumb pinched his nose tight.

"Phew!" Brax exclaimed in distaste. "You smell like you lost a fight with a skank!"

"A what?"

"Skank. Smallish rodent-like animal. Genetically engineered by those assholes from our past. They were crossbred between something that stank to high heaven when you pissed it off and something else that fires off these crazy sharp needles; also when you pissed it off. The jungle around The Colony is teeming with 'em. Trust me, you see one, you kill it quickly and run; or, just run," he explained, nose still crinkled severely.

"Thanks for the explanation. Can't say I appreciate the comparison, however," UrOl said in a short tempered tone.

"Is what it is, bro," Brax said and shrugged. "Looks like you took a beating down there too." He gestured towards wounds on UrOl's forearms and shoulder.

"It's nothing. I'll be fine." UrOl rose then sighed. In the interest of maintaining peaceful relations, he needed to make amends. Besides, even after the initial shock (and revulsion if he were being honest) of seeing what the Traum were, his attitude changed after meeting the bear-sized Leveler. Brax may be a fellow warrior and protector of his society, but he was also as docile and friendly as the pets common in his own city, The Patriciate. Even still, while

Brax's nature wasn't exactly a deception, underestimating his skill could prove fatal; their training sessions attested to that. "I apologize for my earlier remarks. I was angry at those humanoids for having the audacity to attack and delay me," said UrOl.

"Perfectly understandable," Brax said, hiding a chuckle. UrOl had a reputation for being arrogant. That he made the statement with a straight face confirmed it.

"But no, I don't think the creatures in the sinkhole have anything to do with our quarry. They're both alien, yes, but not in the same way. Those man-things are only as alien as the many mutated animals in our jungles, because our ancestors made them that way."

"Maybe they were once apes..."

"Maybe they were once men," UrOl said in disgust. "Regardless, the spy is different; otherworldly."

"Well, let's keep searching. I'll boost the power on my radar."

"And I'll enhance my senses. Perhaps between the two, we'll find this elusive...thing."

By "enhance my senses" UrOl meant using MindSelf. A concept Brax and his Traum brothers still had a hard time wrapping their minds around. After the wars that destroyed the world's civilizations, the Traum embraced and perfected technology. Through the Neurological Interface Singularity Core or, NISC, their bodies not only accepted technology but thrived on it. Nearly every Traum's physiology incorporated some form of bionics, cybernetics, nanotech, and a multitude of other specialties.

But as far as Brax was concerned, if there were an opposite to Traum culture, it'd be the Vakna. They'd spent long years after the war learning to harness consciousness energy by accessing the distinct point in the human psyche where a junction existed between the conscious mind and the physical brain. They called this point the Nexus. Having control over the Nexus released the Vakna from a number of earthly constraints, in particular, the laws of science - physics, nature, quantum, etc. These concepts simply no longer applied to them. As complicated as these ideas were, the Vakna classified their talents in three broad areas - telepathy, which the Vakna dubbed MindSpeak; manipulation of the outside world, known as MindTouch; and direct enhancement to the one's abilities and attributes designated MindSelf.

Brax didn't understand the details, but it was easy enough to surmise that UrOl would use MindSelf to somehow scan the area just as easily and efficiently as his internal radar.

After determining the object they sought was no longer in the canyon, the two guardians returned their attention to the forest. It was growing late and Brax used specialized optics for night vision while UrOl made use of similar MindSelf techniques to alter his own eyes. Brax looked over to his companion and chuckled.

"I almost hate to ask, but what's so funny?" UrOl said.

"Those creepy bulged out eyes of yours," he responded with a smile.

UrOl laughed. "I suppose it's a strange sight, but haven't you seen similar features on nighttime wildlife in the jungles around your home? We derive our methods from these very creatures."

"Oh, I've seen them. Makes perfect sense. And they look just as ridiculous as you do right now!"

UrOl snagged a loose twig from an overhanging branch and threw it at his partner. Brax knocked it easily out of the air. "Hey, it's not my fault you have a built-in cockblocker!"

They both burst out laughing. Brax liked UrOl despite their society's rather precarious past. Neither trusted the other and putting together this excursion was surprising and, many

would say, an invitation to disaster. But it seemed a mutual threat sometimes produced interesting bedfellows.

UrOl was preparing a retort when the sounds of an animalistic skirmish broke their banter. It was distant, but no less brutal, and a sharp reminder of the nocturnal activities in the jungle.

"I know the scouts had their reasons for conducting this operation in the middle of the night, but right now, I have to question their wisdom," Brax said as a triumphant roar bellowed from some large beast while ripping apart another.

"I agree. We'd better be careful," UrOl said, enveloping himself in a low-power, yet effective, shield of consciousness energy. Likewise, Brax had his nano-enhanced exoarmor, but he made a small adjustment for extra protection.

They continued through the dense forest for a time when Brax halted so he could find a secluded area to urinate. When he returned, UrOl was preoccupied. The Watchman's expressions and gestures indicated he was probably using MindSpeak. UrOl looked up and nodded in his direction, but Brax was no longer paying attention. Eyebrows scrunched tight, he was obviously distracted by something above the Vakna's head. UrOl began to follow his partner's gaze but Brax gave a curt shake of his head, ordering UrOl not to move.

UrOl ended his conversation and did as directed while reaching out to the Nexus to add more energy to his shield. He also expanded his awareness and suddenly knew exactly why his companion was so concerned. There was a presence in the foliage above him. It descended at a snail's pace down a tree trunk behind, and right above him.

Brax refrained from sudden movements. But as he reached towards the upper side of his exoarmor, UrOl gaped in amazement. The armor, black as night and as durable and solid as granite, seemed to dissolve and part before his eyes, exposing a hidden compartment. It was the nanos, of course, but UrOl still gawked, just as he did upon first meeting the Traum.

The Levelers, in particular, intrigued him since they appeared to be the equivalent of his own sect, the Watchmens Guild, protectors of his people and their home, the Patriciate. Watching the Levelers move about with their exoarmor, that seemed to increase their size twofold without sacrificing mobility, fascinated him to the point of distraction. Once, purely out of curiosity, he used MindSelf and altered his vision to penetrate one of the Levelers' outer layers. Despite being told about their cyborg nature, he still wasn't prepared for what he saw - muscle, sinew, bone, and skin weaved together with unrecognizable synthetic materials, metals, wire-like substances, and a multitude of other elements he couldn't begin to identify. Some internal organs were clearly organic, whereas others were as foreign as the world outside the Patriciate's walls. All in all, their biological bodies worked in perfect concert with technology and UrOl, and the other Vakna were awed.

As silent as drawing aside silk curtains, Brax's exoarmor split like liquid metal, and he reached in and produced a wickedly sharp looking dagger. Brax hadn't taken his eyes off whatever was in the trees, and it took every ounce of willpower and trust on UrOl's part to remain motionless, and somewhat defenseless, despite his shield.

Brax slowly maneuvered the knife into a position UrOl recognized as one used for throwing. Why the Leveler chose such a mundane weapon over an energy emitting device was a mystery to his partner. Not that he didn't respect bladed weapons; a study of history revealed they played a key part in nearly every war.

The thing that had been ruffling the leaves and branches above finally became visible in Brax's night vision. It was thin, only seven centimeters or less, with a thick hide covered in

bristling hairlike stems. Brax suspected the hairs were some kind of sensors, which meant whatever was snaking towards his partner probably had a much larger yet to be seen body.

The proboscis inched downward, and as it did, the tip gradually opened, revealing hundreds more tiny follicles. They waved about as if each had a mind of its own. They were dark green, with bright red tips; *like they were dipped in blood*, thought Brax.

"Get ready to hit the dirt," Brax said through his NISC to UrOl's comm device. The Watchman nodded slightly and watched as his partner flicked his wrist so discreetly that had he not noticed the dagger was missing from Brax's grasp, he would've questioned his vision.

"Now," Brax whispered a fraction of a second after the knife left his hand. UrOl dropped to the ground, releasing his shield from underneath him so it wouldn't hinder the movement. Like a falcon chasing a pigeon, the blade sailed through the air directly at the snake-thing, amputating it just above the lower tip.

An ear-splitting scream like metal against rock blared from the tops of the trees as a large mass of unrecognizable fur and muscle crashed down towards the two guardians. Despite the creature's seemingly erratic and accidental movement, Brax wasn't fooled; whatever it was hadn't fallen unintentionally, but dove at them with purpose.

"Roll!" Brax shouted, knowing without having to see that his confrontational partner was probably rising, ready to deal a heavy blow to thing about to assault them. He was on the move himself, having anticipated there was something much more deadly attached to that living vine, and the last thing he needed was UrOl rising and getting in the way.

He leaped, cyborg legs covering the distance in less than a second, energy weapon already in his hand. Rows of jagged teeth and a nose the size of a melon greeted him, but Brax barely noticed as he rammed one armor laden forearm underneath the beast's chin and pushed upward. At the same time, he fired into the monster's midsection; point blank range. He gagged at the smell of charred flesh and burning hair. A high pitched scream accompanied the foul smells, followed by a gurgle.

He holstered his weapon and grabbed the knife which had embedded itself in the trunk of the tree. In one swift motion, he dragged it across the creature's neck. His bionic strength, combined with the knife's nanos, dug in and easily separated the unknown animal's head from its shoulders. The bleeding skull fell and bounced twice before settling on the ground.

He stood up and looked at the decapitated head, a grimace reflecting frustration and pain it couldn't possibly feel anymore. Drawing his attention away from the dead-eyed creature's gaze, he let the carcass drop to the forest floor and searched for his partner.

He froze.

UrOl stood with hands thrust out. Brax could barely make out a shimmer in the air in front of the Vakna; a forcefield of sorts, keeping the same type of creature Brax had just beheaded at bay. A mate? If so, it was probably furious.

Now that he could get a good look at the beast, Brax brows rose in astonishment. The creature had thick fur, black as ink and was at least two and a half meters tall and half as wide. Brax recognized it as a gorilla, but several mutations were obvious as well. The snake-like tongue for one, but it also had enormous ears, like those of a bat. Did that mean the beast used echolocation? It had enlarged eyes, similar to the ones he'd teased UrOl about. That the first creature almost nabbed UrOl without them having a clue, and the second one materialized out of nowhere, suggested they were exceptional nocturnal stealth hunters.

The ape glanced in Brax's direction but took him in as though simply weighing his options then, dismissed him. The monster returned its attention back to UrOl.

“Stand down, Brax. I can handle it,” said UrOl in a calm tone despite the vulnerable position he was in.

UrOl stood up slowly then pushed out with his shield, testing the beast's strength. It moved, but not much. The creature seemed unperturbed by an invisible force pushing it slightly, but its eyes were also red with fury and every heaving breath increased its bulk, a show of unmitigated rage. As if reading UrOl's thoughts, the ape glanced at the decapitated head of the other, then back at him again.

This isn't good. He had applied a fair amount of force but the monster brushed it off like a troublesome gnat. UrOl's energy wasn't limitless and he'd already used the bulk of it during the day's activities. He'd have to manage the remainder of his resources carefully.

"Keep an out, Brax; my energy reserves are dangerously low."

He'd barely gotten the words out when the ape rushed him with a howl, dirt and debris flying in every direction as the beast's massive claws tore through the ground.

UrOl was an experienced warrior and wasn't caught completely by surprise, but once his opponent slammed into his shield, it was obvious he'd have to end the battle quickly or risk facing it without the power of the Nexus.

Focusing, he used MindSelf to charge his arms with added strength. He shoved hard and the beast rolled across the forest floor when it stopped a few meters away.

Brax didn't waste the opportunity and fired multiple energy bursts towards the ape. But the animal was smart. The moment it gained control of its momentum, it leaped in several directions, avoiding the blasts, then disappeared into the brush.

UrOl immediately reinforced his shield and seconds later the monster had its python-like arms around him, trying to crush the life out of him. The shield held, but UrOl felt it weakening with every passing second. Desperate, he sent more power to his arms then grasped the beast's wrist before it could gut him, just in case the barrier gave out.

He held the creature at bay for the moment but it wouldn't last. It was time for drastic measures. Typically, using MindTouch to manipulate the elements in the air took little energy, but if done right, could be a powerful and effective force.

UrOl gathered and condensed the particles around the beast's head, enclosing it in an invisible bubble. It sealed shut, and while suffocating the creature was an option, the move could be risky. UrOl had no idea how long his opponent to hold its breath. What if outlasted his strength? No, he'd have to destroy this enemy in all haste.

The slight disturbance in the area surrounding the ape's head was a telltale sign to Brax that UrOl and his kooky mind-thing was up to something. It wasn't until the beast screamed while its skull seemed to slowly implode that he understood; pressure. The Vakna sealed the creature's head in an airtight chamber of sorts and was using molecules and other particles to squeeze the monster's skull.

Brax's eyes widened while his jaw dropped; It was a gruesome and horrific way to die. True, the creature sought them as a meal, but it was merely an animal, following its nature.

The two combatants shuffled on the forest floor, but Brax was an expert marksman, and certain he could get a shot without harming the Vakna. He wanted to end the beast's suffering but had no idea if the abrupt move would complicate things for UrOl. Worse, he didn't know how his partner would react. That UrOl chose to execute their enemy in this fashion shed a new light on someone he thought he'd gotten to know.

I better watch my back; and everyone else's. This dude is dangerous; probably a psycho!

The beast yanked its wrists from UrOI and was now desperate to be free of its prison. The eyes bulged and bled. Blood also poured from its mouth and ears. The top of its head was clearly indented and it was just a matter of time before their enemy's skull shattered like a dropped coconut.

Brax had seen a lot of action in the field. Plenty of blood and guts even, but had no desire to watch the beast's head cave in like a stomped on melon. He raised his weapon to end the misery, but UrOI glared at him and gave a curt shake of his head that practically screamed, *don't you dare!*

Brax lowered the energy weapon; he had no intention of poking this particular hornet's nest despite being certain he could easily subdue the weakened Watchman. They still had a long journey ahead and it was important they build trust. If he crossed UrOI now, could he rely on him in the future? Besides, if he soured the relationship between the two cultures, the Senator, the Colony's leader, would put his robotic boot up his ass.

He was about to turn away and let UrOI have his sadistic fun when the creature yelped in surprise and jumped back.

It was free.

UrOI was exhausted but held his ground; he needn't have bothered. The monster didn't linger. It took two inhuman bounds and disappeared as though it never were there.

The Watchman sat on his rump and sighed.

"Damn man, that was close," said Brax.

UrOI nodded, finding it difficult to talk while breathing so heavy.

"Good thing you beat that monkey enough to give it second thoughts before you ran out of juice! From the looks of it, you'd have been defenseless and I would've been struggling for a shot without hitting you!"

"Yes, good thing," UrOI said, finally breathing normally as he rose and brushed dead leaves and dirt from his clothes.

Brax's exoarmor looked worst, stained with blood, gore, and muck from the other beast. "Bet that'll be hard wash out," said UrOI.

"Wash?"

A second later the debris dissolved until nothing was left but dull black armor. Brax held up his knife, one of his favorite weapons known as a nanoblade, and in moments it had stripped itself of ripped flesh and blood.

"Impressive," said UrOI, brows raised.

"Nanos. They increase durability and in the case of my blade, also improves sharpness. Doesn't hurt that they clean up after themselves too."

UrOI chuckled then said, "Speaking of cleaning up, I better take care of these wounds..."

Brax's brows scrunched up as UrOI used MindSelf to close several minor lacerations. Despite the brutality of the attack, there weren't very many injuries, but that's not what caught his attention. He'd assumed the beast broke free of UrOI's psychic grip because the Vakna's energy was depleted. But if UrOI had enough power left to treat his wounds, then...

A broad grin broke across Brax's features; perhaps the Vakna wasn't so bad after all.