

Groundwork

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An extract pp 5-15

Original title Grondwerk
Publisher Atlas Contact, 2025

Translation Dutch into English
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I

I'm awaiting the briefing. I have been for longer than I can recall. No doubt they've kept track of precisely how long and turned it into an enlightening infographic, plotting it against other variables: my walking speed, my weight, the sounds I produce, how often I'm sighted above ground. I wonder if you too monitor my behavior with such precision when you visit me.

By now it feels like so long ago, the day I made my nest here beneath this square, beneath the gravel and the grass, between the playground and the sandbox, the dog potty park and the glass recycling bins. Everything was so strange then, so different. I stood in the tunnel I'd just dug, exhausted. One last layer of soil separated me from the overworld. I was too tired to lift a finger, but I'd traveled so far to achieve this. So I gave myself a pep talk and sunk my hands into the earth above. Wet clods between my fingers, the scent of toadstools, an opening that gaped wider and wider with each sweep of my arms—and then the outer air burst into my tunnel, fighting its way into my nose, my trachea, my lungs.

I prefer to remain underground, as my species has for millions of years. But I had a mission. So once I had more or less adjusted to the high concentration of oxygen, I forced myself to thrust my head through the hole, into the overworld.

The light was not as bright here as at home, but that consolation was trivial compared to the tsunami of information that came crashing over me. I steeled myself, trying to resist, raising a mental barrier meant to filter the stimuli. All for nothing. Wave after wave of data rammed into me. The roar of engines, crackling electricity, smog, the babble of simultaneous voices, the weight of vehicles on the ground and in the sky, the roots of trees worming their whispering way through the asphalt, meat sizzling in a pan, rattling wheels, a raindrop rolling slowly from a chestnut leaf, metal over cobbles, the penetrating odor of tar, blossoms, and gasoline.

I spread my arms and legs wide on the floor of the tunnel and clung with all my might to the earth, since I had nothing else to hold onto. There was no way I could cope with all this on my own. I couldn't handle it. Not yet. So I turned around and retreated into my tunnel. Before I explored the surface, I needed to spend a little more time in the darkness I knew so well.

The first few days after my arrival were taken up entirely with digging a burrow. A carefully concealed entrance led to a first level of corridors, barely beneath the surface. From there, a few tunnels slanted down to a deeper system of passageways. There I dug a storeroom (where I have nothing to store but second-rate foodstuffs), four toilet areas (although one is enough for me, of

course) and a meeting room (in anticipation of the briefing). What I worked on longest was the nest chamber, for which I used traditional masonry, an exceptionally soft floor, and a triple-security door. I've recently added an additional layer of protection, because now that I know they're on my trail, I don't take any risks.

Yes, I dug my hole all by myself. And before you take me to task, yes, I know that's not the protocol. For centuries our digging has obeyed a finely coordinated choreography, a dance in the dark of our ever-expanding burrows. When we go in search of food, we form a long train of bodies. The first digger pushes the earth back toward the worker who has positioned himself just behind. The second likewise propels the earth back with a well-aimed kick, the third does the same, and so forth, until the exit has been reached. It is next to impossible to accomplish this on your own. But I had no choice. So I dug. Alone.

Even now, it still takes a great effort of will to make myself go above ground. But after weeks in the solitude of my tunnel system, I finally managed to overcome my fear. Although now I can more or less deal with the constant deluge of stimuli and interpret most of the sense data from my surroundings, it feels unnatural. But I have no choice. So each day I drag myself out of the nest chamber again, traverse the tunnels, and enter the overworld. There I take in the outer air and walk a short distance through the dewy grass. My tactile hairs once again sense the burning vibrations of the many familiar footsteps. The humans hurrying down the paths, gravel crunching beneath their soles. The young ones laughing as they push each other into the bushes. The tired groups waiting on the edges of the square to be taken away.

A tremor passes through the earth. Can you feel it? No, of course not, you're hardly aware of that kind of thing. I'm accustomed to it too by now. At regular intervals I feel the square shake, down to the deepest chambers of my burrow. The walls quake ominously; clumps of soil I had carefully stamped into place come tumbling down. When the ground begins to tremble for the umpteenth time, I feel nothing but irritation.

The first time I felt the quaking, shortly after my arrival, a shiver of alarm ran through my gut. I had just finished leveling the walls of the storeroom when everything around me started to shake. I lay down on the floor and threw my arms over my head. So this was it; the mission ended here, before I'd been able to carry out even a single step of the Plan. The quaking grew more powerful, drawing ever closer—and then dwindled away with the same speed, like water seeping into the soil. But an instant later, a new quake rolled in, only to vanish with equal alacrity. And then another. And another. Since there were no other signs of danger, I cautiously stuck my head out of the hole. I tested the air, forcing myself to remain there as the fifth quake approached.

Something enormous was headed straight for me. A snake? I had no time to duck away. As I saw its gleaming eyes approaching at top speed, a second one hurtled toward me from the opposite direction. I shot into the burrow. With my nose aimed at the entrance, I waited for one of the beasts to shove its flat head inside. I exposed my incisors, determined to defend myself tooth and nail.

But the beasts never came. In line with the burrow, on opposite sides of the square, they came to a halt. My hole remained inviolate. Were they waiting in ambush? Or had they already eaten and come here to rest? A few animals—people, dogs, blowflies—were reckless enough to approach them and even tried to draw their attention. But oddly, the hungry mouths did not swallow them up. It was the flanks of the snakelike creatures that opened, on one side, to gorge themselves on animals that went meekly to their own demise, while spewing out other creatures through the same orifice. What sort of world was this in which I found myself?

Two humans—one adult, one pup—strolled out of one of the beasts intact. From the other side issued a clutch of children, jabbering away. They too appeared unharmed. A human and a dog passed close to the entrance to my burrow. The dog turned around. To him, of course, my burrow was full of new aromas; he sniffed the trails of scent, which led this way and that, and then lifted his

head, his nose pointed in my direction. Could he smell me? I backed away. The dog started to stiff at the gravel a few yards from the entrance, but the human tugged on a cord around his neck; he yelped, turned around, and the two of them crossed the square and disappeared into the trees.

After the first two snake-things, a long series followed. Not one of them attacked me. These were not the sand boas or red-lipped snakes I had always feared, but unknown creatures that rolled up at regular intervals, mimicked each other's movements, and habitually swallowed and spat out groups of humans. As long as I didn't get too close, I didn't seem to be in any danger. Their faces never opened to let out tongues, so no forked tips could seize molecules from the air and transmit my location to their brains. Did they even possess consciousness? I doubted it. The constant earthquakes in the square seemed to be caused by these creatures, who kept making the same loop, devoted, almost slavish.

By now I recognize the rumble of the trams all too well. My fear faded long ago, or at least, my fear of them. For as you know, there are very different dangers here. Even now, the ground is trembling beneath my feet—and yours. Time to shore things up, fast. Wait here. I'll be right back.

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Far from this square in your country, a tangle of leaves grew. Countless flowers drowsed among them. They were still closed, but a few hours before dawn they would open, pumping their fragrances into the world. Soon afterwards, a swarm of busy insects would descend, buzzing, to collect their pollen, their wings warmed by the sun's first rays.

Flowers and sunshine are all well and good, but most members of our species never reached the surface. We went after plants' underground treasures, which grew a foot and a half below, in the eternal darkness of days and nights beyond number. An edible root, long and slender, bursting with sugars. Connected to countless other tubers by a network of threads that transported thick drops of juice. You would doubtless have wanted to talk about the tuber's colors—hues ranging from soft yellow to pink, from orangish-red to purplish-brown—but they didn't interest us. We couldn't even see them. What we wanted was what lay hidden under the peel: the flesh of the sweet potato.

The train of bodies came to an abrupt halt. Once we had kicked away the last clods of earth from underneath us, the sweet smell wafted into the passageway. A shiver ran through the colony. Seeing the root protruding from the wall, we grinned with relief, tapping our noses together in satisfaction. In just a moment we could claim our reward. We had worked hard for it; I could feel the acid burning in the muscles of my fingers. The first worker placed her hands on the root and began to gnaw. Her incisors deftly pierced straight through the flesh, which broke free with a juicy snap and thudded to the floor at her feet. The second worker picked it up and passed it on to number three, who turned around and climbed over us, after which we all shifted one place forward. One by one the workers marched over our backs, their mouths crammed with chunks of sweet potato.

She and I were the last. We were each supplied with a piece of the root, which we wedged between our teeth. We turned around and walked back down the passageway. Behind us we heard the first worker licking the earth into mud and carefully spreading it on the broken root, a compress of clay that would help the tuber to heal and regenerate—until the next colony came by.

"What's keeping you?" she shouted.

She was fast, very fast. Without a doubt she was destined to become one of the burrow's fastest runners. As young girls in the colony, we'd been inseparable, but whenever I lost yet another impromptu footrace to her, I'd felt a stabbing in my stomach. Now I had accepted the situation; I

could never match her pace. I followed the vibrations of her footsteps on the floor, which receded into the distance.

From those remote passageways just beneath the surface, we descended deeper into the burrow, she and I, to the galleries where the oxygen level dropped and the air was filled with the work of the colony. The tunnels overflowed with language: the sniggers of cleaning crews sweeping the passageways, the chirps of young children at play, the warning growls of the teachers grabbing them by the scruff of the neck and dragging them back to the children's chambers, the murmurs of recyclers gathering pellets with undigested nutrients, a knot of grumbling soldiers back from a patrol—three privates and a major, a lanky female for whom everyone stepped aside—bureaucrats squabbling their way from one office to another, and columns of gatherers who, just like us, were returning from the far reaches of the burrow to the nest chamber, laden with fresh roots. I smelled the sharp fragrance of celeriac, which mingled with the tones of the sweet potato between my teeth. My mouth watered, but I dutifully left my tuber in place.

I thought back to the first time that she and I had brought a tuber to the nest chamber. We were running ecstatically through the tunnel network, each carrying a piece of root in our teeth. She stopped short, and I crashed into her. My chunk fell out of my mouth and into a secondary branch of the tunnel.

"Ow! What are you doing?" I cried.

She turned around.

"Shouldn't you go and get your root?" she asked.

"It fell because you stopped so suddenly."

"Pick it up, then."

Suppressing a growl, I went into the side tunnel, following the smell of the root. I could feel her breath caress my tail. She had followed me. When I'd picked up my chunk and was about to continue toward the nest chamber, she blocked the way.

"Why don't we stay here a little longer?" she asked.

"The others have probably almost reached the nest chamber by now,"

She laughed, a musical sound, surprisingly deep for her age. "Why so stressed? It's our first tuber. Shouldn't we celebrate? How about tasting a tiny sample?"

"You can't be serious."

"You don't want to bring the colony a rotten tuber, do you?"

We were nose to nose in the passageway.

"Too scared?" she asked, more softly.

I sniffed at the tuber, ignoring the knot in my stomach, and bit into the flesh. The rough texture, the sweet juice, the energy it sent coursing through my body. I gulped down the fibers and picked up the battered tuber. "Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here."

She stood frozen and seemed uncertain what to say.

"Wow," she said. "I didn't think you would really do it."

Then she spun around and started to run. She was soon far ahead, her root untouched between her teeth, and she disappeared around the corner. Suddenly I heard a chirp from behind me. I stopped and turned around. It was one of my old child carers.

"Is that your first tuber?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Good work," he said. He sniffed the peel and stiffened.

"Have you been eating this?"

"No," I said softly.

"Well, someone's been nibbling on this side," he said. His tone was grim now. I took a step back. "If one of the others had done it, it wouldn't surprise me, but you?"

The carer came closer. Then I felt quick vibrations, and a minty smell filled my nostrils. "It was me!" she shouted. She had retraced her steps and was heading down the passageway toward us.

The child carer turned around. "What?"

"I tasted her tuber," she said.

"Let me feel yours."

She dropped her chunk of flesh to the floor. The carer scanned the edges with his tactile hairs. An icy silence hung over the passageway.

"What were you thinking, biting into someone else's tuber?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

The child carer nodded his head at me. "Give it here." I pushed my damaged chunk toward him. With a single swipe of his teeth, he split it in two, and he gave me the piece I hadn't gnawed on. "Go to the nest chamber now," he hissed.

I wanted to run away, as fast as I could, but she lingered there, even stepping closer to the carer.

"Aren't you going to punish me?" she asked.

"No. But if it ever happens again, I'll report it to the quartermasters at once."

Then he whirled around and vanished into the darkness. For an instant we stood motionless in the passageway, and then she threw her arms around me. I tried to say something but couldn't find words; the sweet taste of the forbidden flesh still clung to my lips.

Now—an eternity later, it seemed—we were once again walking those passageways, she and I, holding flawless chunks of tuber between our teeth, as we always did ever since that first time. We ran past the toilet chambers, picking up the scent of the pellets, and heard the shuffling of the beetles inside, the only tenants we permitted in our passageways, because their small hands were perfect for scrubbing them spotless.

We turned a corner and descended a steeply sloping passageway that was teeming with movement. Again and again, we had to stop and wait there. Young gatherers like us were expected to yield to our elders in the colony. We pressed ourselves as flat as possible against the floor. Once the elders had clambered over our backs, she wiped the dust off my shoulders and we resumed our journey through the tunnel network.

Now we were in the central passage, smoothed by the comings and goings of hundreds of hands and feet, where there was more than enough room to pass each other. Sappers and scouts, diplomats and soldiers, chamber boys and clerks, we all chirped out a greeting when our paths crossed. At the end of the passageway, we joined the line for the gate to the nest chamber. The guards stepped aside and let us in.

The overwhelming smell of hundreds of workers, over, under, and beside each other. A throng of warm bodies, large and small, young and old. The buzz of conversation, jokes, and gossip. *Some buffalo stuck its clumsy hooves through the surface again, and now everything's ruined, of course, the left wing needs rebuilding, will you join us? – Don't push, there's plenty of room! – What do you call a bonobo with a tuber up its ass? – Uh... search me! – Any idea why that patrol returned to the burrow so fast? – The word in the storeroom is that they had to flee a red-necked falcon. – Is there a nest again? – Yes, but they're trying to hush it up for now.*

"What have you brought us?" A quartermaster wrung his way over to us, chewing casually on a pellet.

"A sweet potato!" the two of us replied in excitement.