



RALPH F. HALSE

THE RISE OF
RHYKA HAWK
WING - BOOK 1

SCAVENGER LORD

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**THE RISE OF RHYKA
HAWK-WING
BOOK 1 - SCAVENGER
LORD**

BY

RALPH F. HALSE

DEDICATION

To my wonderful wife of 28 years, Cathy for her continued faith in me and this project. To our two children, Ric & Rebecca for their inspiration and for my grandson Mitchell for keeping me amused during periods of extended Writer's block.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LEGEND UNFOLDS

Dried blood spiked the diminutive Priest's unruly dark hair into uneven clumps. Framed by a crumpled cowl resting across his shoulders with his pale, angular face crusted with oblique spatters that at a distance took on the appearance of fresh scabs. Breathing hard, he hung his head while he fought to slow his heartbeat and to regulate his breathing. Exhaustion, a lack of sleep and frustration fuelled the anger seething through his being. His heavy dark green cassock did not improve his temper for it was made of prickly, homespun wool. Standard temple fare for Priests, but a winter garment and ill suited to this environment. Within the confines of the temple's cool, bluestone walls, it was perfect to ward off the chill that pervaded the place. However, out here, it performed more like a miniature oven. In an effort to cool himself and settle his anger, he chanted the mantra of Logga, Keeper of the Gate to the Seven Hell's.

It was the beginning of a hot summer and the dawning orange fireball climbing the lilac horizon promised a warmer than usual day. He must dispense this tedious business as soon as possible. By all the gods in paradise, he longed for a shady spot to rest in and to sip a cool, refreshing wine. His entreaties for Logga's blessings appeared to have fallen on deaf ears for he continued to swelter. Well, Logga was a fickle god at the best of times.

He detested the oppressive heat that would soon settle over this ochre land like a stifling blanket. The swarms of annoying bush flies and deadly array of venomous snakes and spiders that infested the countryside made his skin

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crawl. His eyes flicked to the surrounding hills of never ending stunted mulga trees overshadowed by sway topped palms and then they settled on the blood-spattered courtyard and narrowed. Even more passionately, he despised the hicks and dullards who dwelt in the dreary outback. Preferring the enticements the Brizarian capital to this kangaroo infested backwater, he served here only under sufferance. Deliberately, he had set aside his natural urges to forgo any time to amuse himself with the prisoners since this business must be finished quickly.

To deflect the intensity of the rising sun, the squatting Priest who went by the name of Scovar Borkazee, shaded his eyes with a lazy left hand to examine in minute detail piles of steaming bodies for sign of the missing Acolyte. Barely out of his teens, the Acolyte had eluded his Activists search parties for hours now. He had had enough of the games these inbreeds were playing with him. Eyes fixated on the bloody mound beside the makeshift chopping block, he ignored the flyblown organs, lopped off hands, ears and noses that spilled across dewy ochre dust as he searched for his quarry.

He had delivered to Brizaria's pantheon of god's long since before this dawn—how many souls. He performed the equivalent of a mental shrug. It wasn't important really because not a one of the arrogant ruling class Scavengers or their lick-spittle Priests would give the Acolyte up. He assigned twenty monks, experts in ancient artefact identification, sorting and smelting to this protectorate, and by all the gods in Paradise, he would have them all. He suspected that the Acolytes, who one of the deluded trading families had disguised as their own, had already met his fate. Well, this was the tale he would relate to the High Priest back in the comfort of Brizaria.

In the meantime, he was determined to carry out his sworn duty and continue the search. If he wanted to avoid

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the tedium of duties like this in the future, he had to make an impression on that doddering fool of a High Priest and receive his blessing for a permanent city post. Somewhere, where he could relax, plot and scheme his way to a higher position.

Glancing briefly at the makeshift gallows, a sense of deep, abiding satisfaction swelled his weedy chest with pride. So far, all had panned out as he predicted. Few surprises there. The ruling Scavenger family, house servants and nineteen of those interfering monks of Lud swung side by side. Purple tongues, twisted necks, bulging eyes, limp hands dangling beside their thighs, and...excrement pooled at their feet. He grinned. Now that was a job neatly done, something to mention when he next lit a candle to T'uki. He grimaced, hawked and tried to spit, but his throat and mouth were too dry. Twenty wagons laden with artefacts, some allegedly containing the dark power of the ancients, were waiting to depart. However, not before he had that Acolyte's head on a stick. If the boy escaped and word of this raid spread to the Acolyte's order of Lud, the consequences for Borkazee's own order of T'uki could be cataclysmic.

He rested his forearms on his knees and clasped his short sword loosely between thumb and forefinger. The bloody instrument swung contemplatively back and forth like a pendulum as he mulled this matter of the missing Acolyte over. Perspiration stung his eyes. He licked a lazy bead of salt from his upper lip and wished he had a water bottle close by. Putting his thirst aside, he wondered. If not already dead, where could he have scarpered? The Activists searched the Keep and fortress from top to bottom. They had discovered every bolt hole, secret passage and escape tunnel leading out to the scrubland. So where was the Acolyte hiding? Escaped, doubtful, but maybe? His Activists had surrounded the Protectorate shortly after midnight. They

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did not observe anyone sneaking off prior to the raid. Dead with the rest of them and too mutilated to identify? A possibility, a damn good one, too. By T'uki's beard, he must know for certain.

Blood pooled around his calf-length boots, attracting small green flies, not one drop his but that of the servants, bondsmen and Scavenger warriors foolish enough to resist his regiment of battle-hardened Activists. His first mission to confiscate artefacts containing the dark power of the ancients from under the noses of those inept Priests of Lud and their followers would not see him reporting empty handed to the Brizarian temple hierarchy without exploring every avenue of inflicting pain and bloodletting in his quest. He stared suspiciously at the patrolling Activists and their ever-present lurking Acolyte supervisors. He never knew which scheming novice might whisper venom and spite in the High Priest's ear about his efforts this day.

"Borkazee," bellowed one of the surly Activists, "we're ready for you."

Straightening his back, Borkazee rose to his feet. He glared balefully at a knot of prisoners surrounded by twenty or so jeering Activists. He grasped his sword firmly in his right hand. Tucking in his chin, he marched resolutely toward them with a grim set to his jaw. The female's screams of terror were lost to a boiling rage of bloodlust fed by self-righteous indignation pounding in his ears.

Thirteen years later...

Steadying the tiller from a cramped stern quarterdeck, crouched Ordon, chief monk and Oar Master, to the ancient and battered transport vessel. Dawn approached and Ordon was thoroughly glad of it. Throughout the night, the big monk had, with unerring accuracy, steered the massive watercraft through a maze of sandbars and submerged trees. The skimpy grey hair that stubbornly clung to his bulbous

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head wafted about like two-tattered crow's wings in a rare morning breeze. Vainly, he smoothed his hair back in place with a calloused hand while he called the beat in a steady, but low rasping voice. He admonished the crew as was his want. "Pull hard, brothers," he croaked, "together now! Keep your oars low'n steady like."

Torn by centuries of civil war resulting from one of many schisms within the priesthood commencing in the fifth century AD—After Disaster—the holy Brizarian Empire was a dangerous place. For four hundred years the holy and sacred order of Lud, god of toil, had selflessly dedicated their lives seeking out and smelting artefacts containing the dark power of the ancients. This Brother Ordon's sect of Lud did without exception, recycling waste products for peaceful purposes and strictly enforcing the four principle laws upon which all Brizarian customs extended...

—No human may develop a machine to perform any function performable by a human, unless by Holy Sanction.

— A machine shall not beget a machine.

—No device, no invention or artefact may be designed, redesigned, actuated or improved upon, unless by holy sanction.

—No disturbance of the Earth Mother, her animals, plants, insects, internal works or waterways without Holy Sanction.

However, Priests, dedicated to the worship of T'uki and his chief servant, Logga, interpreted these laws somewhat more liberally. Within the priesthood, a Priest of T'uki was more commonly known as a Viro. To compare the description of a Viro, a Priest, with other Brizarians would be a highly generous description indeed. Primarily, the sect of Viros provided foot soldiers and mercenaries to enforce the holy tenants. Truth was though, the holy men of T'uki maintained an illicit trade in unsanctioned goods and oversaw a thriving trade in stolen artefacts. To this end, they

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practised murder and deception to their own profit. It was the Viros' intent to have artefacts brought back into Brizarian society. For the good of mankind they said, only those artefacts that benefited humanity could receive their blessing they said.

The truth of the matter was that the Viros sanctioned most illicit artefacts that any Brizarian with coin could pay for. The monks of Lud were in a constant battle with the Viros as they were forever seeking out artefacts containing the dark power of the ancients and destroying the evil things. Sadly, the monks of Lud were losing brothers at an alarming rate to the ruthless raids, ambushes and false accusations of the Viro hierarchy.

* * * *

Only the monk's long oak oars dipping rhythmically into the turgid depths broke the flat river surface. Squadrons of mosquito hunting dragonflies swooped across the vessel's path. Rowing on the starboard side, one monk, known to his shipmates as Rhyka, detected a nervous strain in Ordon's coarse Durian accent. Wiping beads of sweat off his chin with a quick shoulder swipe, Rhyka glanced anxiously toward the prow where Brother Modda hung over the bow beside the arching figurehead of Yarra, the fearsome River God. The scowling, carved image of Yarra was depicted from the navel up as a longhaired, muscular god clutching a shield and a trident. Modda had just cast a lead weight secured to a knotted rope into the muddy waters. Every tenth oar stroke Modda called the depth.

"Two'n a bit, brother," Modda hissed as loudly as he dared hauling the rope in.

The brooding Ordon stood with folded arms before the mast. A windless sail flapped uselessly above him. Ordon was a stout monk with the hard, flinty eyes and a mashed

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nose, broken more years ago than he could recall. Since leaving the continuous muscle grind of the oarlocks to skipper a vessel some ten years ago, he had turned into a solid, lump of a man. He was battle-scarred from dozens of encounters with the Viros, river pirates, tavern brawls and dockside skirmishes. He had a bull neck and hands the size of small dinner plates.

The atmosphere aboard the darge was tense. The monks had strayed into unfamiliar waters and by rights, the ruins glimpsed through patches in the forest shoreline had spear-throwing tribesmen infesting them. Instead, dead silence greeted them. As a general rule, Ruins dwellers should appear now and then to watch the darge pass or to rush the banks and hurl poorly aimed spears along with unintelligible insults. Even more disconcerting was the absence of wood smoke from village breakfast fires. A dozen or so ear-twitching kangaroos tracked the skimming darge with nervous brown eyes, ready to bound away at the slightest sound.

Many monks considered Brother Ordon's purchase of an old-time map from a one-eyed Priest of the order of Yarra a lapse in judgement. Guaranteed, the devotee of Yarra oily assured to guide the brothers safely through nests of pirates and hundreds of uncharted river channels back home to the Brizarian Docklands. All the good brothers had to do was follow this map and the monks of Lud would save three days travel. Blessed by the Head Priest of Yarra it was, the wizened monk assured rubbing his hands as he eyed Ordon's gold with a gleam in his eye. Oh, the map was pre-disaster all right. It was so old in fact that the channels and tributaries had long since silted up, disappearing to earthquakes and shifting desert sands a hundred years or more after the useless thing was dug from the ruins. Now, Ordon stood on the deck cursing all Priests of Yarra. Every single monk straining at the oarlocks had sworn a blood

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oath to hunt down and kick the traitorous map seller's arse until his nose bled the second they docked again in Duria.

Unbidden, each monk slipped into leather body armour and set his boarding axe and short sword within easy reach. Rhyka cocked his head to port. It was the same red, clay riverbank crowded by a foreboding forest filled with millions of ear-splitting cicadas. He shifted his focus lower. Judging by the tidemarks, he guessed less than a metre of water flowed under the keel. If river pirates were to charge from a secluded cove, they were fish bait for sure. This water was far too shallow for a vessel this laden with cargo to perform fancy evasive manoeuvres. Two kookaburras sat together on a gnarled branch that poked out of the murky depths. Their haunting laughter pursued the vessel as the crew rowed on.

A wispy, mist hovered between the tree-rooted bank and water's edge. Through intermittent gaps in the rent fog, Rhyka glimpsed scores of wallabies crowding the riverbank to slake their morning thirst. In shallow pools, long-legged jabirus competed for cod fingerlings. Every monk understood the rewards in capturing a fat prize like the Gabba far outweighed any risks. Aside from questionable artefacts, the hold was crammed with a mixed cargo of delicate, red Durian wine. Bags of coarse brown salt drawn from the mines at Weegun rested atop crates of crushed, raw sugar from the Northern provinces. A selection of rare and exotic spices from the western protectorates took up the remainder of the hold. Expensive products destined for exclusive Brizarian markets they would fetch a small fortune for the order.

Eight days had passed since they had last sighted port Duria and three days since they had followed that treacherous map into tributaries that consistently led nowhere. But last night, whatever mischievous god was guiding them, well and truly played out his joke for it was

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just after midnight when they barely dodged the charred remains of a gutted vessel.

To the absolute horror of the Priests, bloated, maggot-ridden bodies sprawled across blackened timber decks. Recalling the odour of cooked human flesh made Rhyka's unsettled stomach churn. Using lamps extended on billhooks, the crew searched for clues to the vessel's origins. The only thing revealed were charred timber planks piled with the corpses of Activists. An hour or so after the vessel disappeared, four bodies sprouting broken spear shafts thumped against the hull.

Swearing profusely, Ordon wrapped a wet cloth over his nose and mouth before he took up a broken spar to push off the bodies. He prodded too hard though. A corpse burst open like a rotten fruit spilling purple, yellow and red entrails across the water's dark surface. The subsequent vile stench had most of the crew retching over the side. Those that did not throw up immediately did so after hearing a soft slapping and thrashing in the water as something gorged on the rotten flesh.

Rhyka, well muscled from ten years at the oars, gnawed on his lower lip as more bloated corpses spin drifted around a bend. He was a tall rangy, young monk of twenty-three summers with deep blue eyes, a slightly protruding brow, broad cheekbones, thin lips and bushy eyebrows. Rhyka owed Ordon his life. If not for the Oar Master hiding him aboard the darge, Rhyka would have had his neck stretched along with the Scavenger family he was sent to serve thirteen years ago. A powerful clan living on the frontier, they employed twenty monks.

Split into parties, the monks would inspect artefacts dug from the mines, catalogue them from an album of known artefacts and mark anything not listed for smelting. For a small fee, the monks transported, smelted and traded the artefact remnants into coin or other goods for the Scavenger

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ruling class. As an Acolyte, Rhyka's job was to count the crates at the protectorates' modest docks.

Working late one night, he had convinced Ordon to let him sleep onboard so that he could start early next morning and lucky he did. For when the killing started, Ordon hauled up the anchor and the Gabba glided soundlessly off the protectorate's pier and into the thick fog without the murdering Viros or their Activists even knowing they were there.

A lingering thought gnawed at the back of each monk's mind like a rat gnawing on a discarded fish head—that whoever killed the heavily armed Activists of T'uki was certain to turn twenty lightly armed Dargemen into mincemeat. Activists were a ferocious lot, recruited almost exclusively from the ruins for their fighting prowess. If the Gabba blundered into a river blockade of temple darges this far from Brizaria, the thieving Activists would almost certainly seize the cargo and slaughter the crew.

Rhyka prayed to Yarra for a breeze to spring up and swell the sail. In the very next breath, he vehemently cursed all river demons for guiding them to this channel of doom. As the oars scudded through the water, he scanned tree-lined banks. Magnificent red gums crowding the river's edge plunged thousands of tentacle-like roots into the shallow waters. Up ahead, the river was rapidly narrowing. A broad sandbar choked the approaching bend. The chill morning air smelt strongly of wet mud. The tide was at its lowest ebb, providing the perfect place for an ambush. As he braced his legs and pulled, he glanced up and cursed afresh. The sky remained devoid of clouds. The rising sun would rapidly bake the mudflats hard and their brains, too.

As the Gabba rounded the bend, Ordon hissed urgently, "Back oars, back hard, back."

Without thinking, the monks reversed momentum and strained with all their might until the vessel slowed.

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“Not a word now, brothers,” Ordon urged, duck walking in a half crouch between the benches, “easy does it. Not a sound now and we might just live to see another day,” he whispered.

As the Gabba slowed, above the tree line, they could see a giant of a fortress straddling a pass between two mountains shrouded in mist. In the broad river at its base, was a sprawling system of piers and wharves, all charred and smoking. The prows and masts of several darges poked out of the water, signalling a violent struggle had occurred here. This could only be the Gate of Lost Souls and the mountain pass straddled by the fortress must be the entrance to the Ark. Rhyka’s bowels almost went to water. This was the most heavily guarded place in all the Brizarian Empire and the Activists said to be serving here were the worst of the worst.

Pitched forward, suddenly all the air expelled from Rhyka’s lungs. Landing in an untidy heap on his elbows and knees, he scrambled awkwardly to his feet as the darge listed onto her port side. A loud groaning sound escaped from the Gabba’s keel as it grounded into the sandbar with all the force of her forty tons.

“If we’re to get out of this one with our heads, it’s quiet as temple mice we go,” Ordon whispered.

In a well-practised manoeuvre, the portside rowers upped oars, then slipped into the sluggish water carrying towropes, Ordon along with them. Scanning the riverbank, Rhyka crouched between two decorated shields. He fitted a shaft to his bowstring and waited. Ever so slowly, the crew heaved the vessel’s nose into deeper water and back the way they had come. Rhyka padded to the stern when the bow swung away from the bank. His skin prickled. The wildlife had fallen silent. He returned forward to lean over the side and hissed, “Father Ordon, we may have company ashore.”

Ordon was standing calmly in waist deep water, coiling a

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rope over his shoulder. He replied with a cheerless wink and humourless smile, "We've been in tighter spots than this over the years. You'd best hush, brother! We're too—"

In that instant, two spears slammed through Ordon's broad chest with dull meaty slaps, bloodying the hull where they buried themselves, quivering like treacherous red and white worms. Ordon's head jolted back and his jaw sagged open. He stared up at Rhyka, disbelief filling his eyes. The force of the twin impacts pinned the Priest just above the waterline until the spears snapped with two audible clicks. Ordon, vomiting blood, slipped silently beneath the muddy water. Only soapy bubbles marked his passing. Rhyka hissed loudly at his shipmates to discard the towropes. Struggling through chest-deep water back to the ship, they cried out for weapons and to lower boarding ropes.

The crisp morning air hummed with the whirr of spears. Shafts smacked into the mast and oars and twanged off shields with such rapidity and force that Rhyka thought they must be facing an army. The sharp stink of fear was on the monks around him. Rhyka, targeting a flash of movement among the trees, loosened a shaft. The thud of spears striking unprotected flesh and the darge made an awful sound that shook him to the core. Cries of unbridled pain and pleas for mercy along with war whoops rang in his ears. A chorus of mad howling heralded a troop of warriors pouring down into the shallow water. These were not Activists.

Indistinguishable from the forest, their painted bodies blended perfectly with the wilderness. Rhyka watched, horrified as the warriors methodically butchered the wading Priests. Between loosing arrows, his worried gaze took in heads stuck on spear points standing upright in the shallows. Blood stained the shafts and water red. He had minutes before they boarded the darge and slaughtered her crew. Already vicious, give-no-quarter hand-to-hand combat

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raged on the tilted bow. With the icy grip of fear tugging at his stomach, he cried, "Abandon ship! Every man for himself!"

Rhyka slung his bow and picked up his backpack. In a single leap, he went over the side, opposite the fighting. Holding the pack above his head, he took off in the direction of the nearest bank. Behind him, his home of thirteen years was ablaze from stem to stern. Her cargo and crew lost. Priests' bodies floated by like timber cutter's logs waiting to be harvested. A spear cut the air by Rhyka's right ear with a distinctive thhwwuufft. Intuitively, he put his backpack behind his head. A solid thud told him that the following shaft had almost found its mark. Cursing Lotto, the trickster god, he scrambled frantically up the slippery riverbank and turned his head. A dozen or so warriors pursued him through the waist-deep water. He cursed once before he disappeared into the bush as fast as his legs could carry him.

Rhyka was running so hard, he failed to observe his surroundings. Cicadas falling silent alerted him that something was wrong. The silence was so profound, he had the distinct impression that silence had reigned in this part of the bush for some time. As his awareness extended, he found himself leaping not only fallen tree trunks, but also dead Activists crawling with maggots. Black-faced, bloated, thick with fat blue, green blowflies, lying in misshapen positions brought on by rigor mortis, hundreds of corpses filled the scrub. Insects swarmed and streamed across each corpse, in and out of gaping wounds, open mouths and nostrils.

The next thing he knew, he was speeding through a sea of waist-high heads, stuck on spear points. The clutter of battle was anywhere. His skin prickled. Bloodstained swords, daggers, broken crossbows and stringless longbows lay next to abandoned hand-axes. Dented shields, cast-off greaves, boiled leather breastplates along with thousands of

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used arrows lay scattered in all directions.

He was certain that this was definitely not the work of your typical Ruins dweller. Ruins dwellers would have collected the weapons for trade. The most appalling stench of old blood, burnt flesh and smouldering green timber clung sickeningly to the back of his throat. He found himself approaching the outskirts of the ruined stone fortress at a dead run. Tumbled stone and broken beams lay in piles before breached walls. Bodies littered smashed battlements. As he approached, he could see filth and blood covering the limbs that protruded from the rubble. The barbican was nothing more than scattered stones and old cement flakes. Two shattered gates were partially obscured by pillars of black and grey smoke.

Rhyka instantly altered direction and began following an animal trail, away from the fort. He sprinted past two tawny dingoes watching him with cunning eyes before they returned to feast warily on a blackening arm. Halting behind a broad eucalypt, he sucked air deep into his oxygen-starved lungs. As he listened for sounds of pursuit, he could hear the war pack tracking him. What was the matter with these Ruins dwellers? He had never heard of such a thing before. Pulling in one long ragged breath, he turned and bolted up the mountain pass.

Several hours later, he had left the war pack far behind. They still followed, but were far enough away for him to slow to a steady trot. A strange drumming drifted down the valley. Rhyka redoubled his effort. Every so often, the low, thin cloud cover gave way to a breeze, offering a glimpse of a spire surrounded by ominous dark clouds, thick as treacle. The approaching mountaintop had the look of a misshapen face. He glimpsed a cavern through the clouds. Above it, indentations resembling ghoulish eyes and a smashed nose appeared to stare down at him.

Rhyka needed a long rest, food and water to rebuild his

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energy reserves. If he could make those caverns, maybe he could shake his determined pursuers. Hands braced on his knees, chest heaving, he came to a stop beside a dog-sized cave in the side of the mountain. In a heartbeat, he drew his dagger. Cutting a limb from a shrub, he swiped away his back trail and then plunged into the narrow opening. He pulled the limb in to disguise the hole.

It was dark inside. Suffering numerous wounds to his elbows, arms and legs from sharp protrusions, he wriggled desperately forward. The tunnel smelt of dingo urine. On bloodied elbows and skinned knees, he emerged into a cave large enough for him to stand upright. Streaks of sunlight from cracks in the rocks overhead glinted on exposed panes of perma-glaz like those on old-time buildings. Rhyka wrapped his cape around his arm and gave a pane several shoves. It soon buckled and an opening appeared. He stuck his head through the gap and into the darkness. He smelt clean air. He reached into his cape pocket and produced flint, striker and candle stub.

The wavering candlelight revealed skeletons of perma-steel tables and chairs standing row upon row. Hundreds of utensils lay scattered throughout, as if hastily abandoned. A vast array of metal doors and Old World objects greeted his stupefied gaze. A door, partially ajar, beckoned invitingly. A wet, dank, earthy smell saturated the room. He knew immediately that he had entered a pre-Disaster building. But just how it came to be buried inside a mountain of rock was a mystery to him.

Overhead dusty long white tubes hung suspended from thin wires. To his left, the guttering candle flame illuminated a wide corridor set with black and white tiles beneath his feet. To his right, double doors, inscribed in old text, gaped at him. Upon the doors, someone scrawled in black, a symbol rarely seen outside the Priesthood, or Scavenger circles. The cross within a circle. This was a cache of

artefacts. Rumours of Priests secreting caches had abounded for centuries, but never before was proof put before the Lord High Scavenger. He would be bound to act and, Rhyka hoped, destroy the rogue sect of Viros.

Wide-eyed and elated, Rhyka followed a corridor down the mountain through a maze of rooms and interlinking passageways. A set of downward stairs led him to a vast open space ankle deep in foul-smelling water. In this ghostly cavern, he could make out metal hulks resembling gigantic beetles. He retreated for fear of Trogs and moved back up the stairs to marvel at the beautifully crafted artefacts scattered carelessly about.

A noise like chains rattling caused him to freeze. A fresh breeze kissed his cheek, followed by the echo of voices. Rhyka pinched out the tiny flame, drew his dagger and dropped into a crouch. Back to the tunnel wall, he silently crept toward the sudden emergence of yellow light. As he neared, he could hear voices. Holding his breath, he peeked around a column dripping with moisture. Standing outside a door bound with black straps of thick perma-steel was a Priest clad in a traditional dark green cassock. The Viro's clothing was sooty and blood stained. He was taking a huge brass key out of a crevice. Beside him, an Activist bearing an oil lamp looked nervously over his shoulder. Cuts and rough bandages seeping fresh blood told him that they were most likely the victims of the same war party that attacked his darge.

The pinch-faced Priest snapped angrily as he cranked the key in the lock. "Who are they, Tol, and what do you suppose drew them to attack the garrison so ferociously?"

The Activist raised the flickering lamp higher so his master could better see. He furrowed his soot-stained brow in reply. "Their tribal markings are not familiar to me, holy one. Most likely, they're a large raiding party out for trophy heads from deep in the Ark. This is after all why we guard

this place.”

The Priest tucked the key inside his cassock. He rounded on the battle-scarred Activist with the speed of a striking snake. An ugly snarl twisted his face. Despite his bloodied armour, battered appearance and obvious battle-strained expression, the Priest savaged the Activist for a coward.

“God’s curse your inept efforts at defence. No ordinary raiding party of Ruins dwellers would dare attack our fortress. The local tribes know too well the price they’d pay for such insolence. This was an organised assault by battle-hardened tribesmen, not headhunting Ruins dwellers drunk on stolen liquor. Not even Scavengers would do so much damage! They stormed our walls almost with impunity.”

Three skull scars either side the Activist’s hairless head pulsed with red embarrassment. “Holiness, there are stories, tales of a warrior race residing deep in the Ark dedicated to—”

The Priest balled his fist and slammed the ecclesiastical soldier hard in the mouth. The Activist’s head jolted back at the force of the well-aimed blow. He staggered sideways a half-pace, almost dropping the lamp.

“You incompetent fool,” the Priest raged as he massaged his bleeding knuckles. “You dare to tell me bedtime tales to amuse old men or to frighten children? We Viros have guarded the entrance to the Ark for nigh on four hundred years. We have permitted not one animal or human to pass through the Gate of Lost Souls, yet you believe such drivel? We gave you specific but simple instructions—to bring back as many artefacts as you could carry and to kill every tribesman you encountered inside the Ark. But I’m betting you left more than few alive to tell of your visit.”

The Activist’s silence was all the confirmation that the Priest required.

“When I give you an order, Tol, you’ll do exactly as you’re told. In the meantime, you’ll keep your treacherous

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mouth shut about what happened here these past two days.”

“Your will, holiness,” the Activist muttered, massaging his aching jaw. Blood discoloured his teeth as it trickled between his split gums.

Cursing, the Priest tossed a canvas sack through the opening, then locked the door with the key that he concealed behind a spring-loaded rock. Rhyka watched him wince as his wrist strained to push the cunningly concealed safe closed. The Activist drew his sword, and together the odd pair trudged away through the ruined building back toward whence they had come. After the light disappeared, Rhyka retrieved his candle stub and lit it. He located the key and let himself into the room.

Rhyka frowned involuntarily. It was a storeroom and a safe bet that some of these artefacts contained within possessed the ancient power to destroy life. Even after many centuries once touched, an artefact might explode, excrete a fluid that could sear the flesh from his hands or release a poisonous, choking cloud of gas that could kill him instantly. Many artefacts though were clearly inert, such as plates, mugs and eating utensils. Here was extraordinary wealth and knowledge with which he might buy an audience with the Lord High Scavenger. He set his candle stub on the floor, slipped off his cloak and spread it out on the floor. After knotting the corners into a crude pack, he crammed it with enough artefacts to make him rich. Rhyka specifically selected two objects resembling crossbows without bow or strings from a pile of like artefacts. He hid the key and retraced the Priest’s footsteps, when he heard voices. He froze.

“I told you, I heard footsteps.” An echoing voice insisted.

“Dingoes or rats maybe,” came an uncertain reply.

“We’ll see. You can’t be relied on to tell when we’re being attacked, let alone determine what vermin’s running through these ruins.”

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Rhyka heard the disenchanted Priest gruffly reply. With his senses moving into hyperawareness, Rhyka flattened himself against the cavern wall. He beseeched Lud to improve his bad luck.

The Priest and Activist had returned. The Activist clutched a sword while the Priest gripped a small weapon, unfamiliar to Rhyka. The Priest slapped the Activist on the shoulder and nodded toward Rhyka's hiding place. Then the Priest hurried down a side tunnel. Rhyka remained confident that they could not see him in the dark. However, it was only a matter of seconds before the Activist discovered him.

CHAPTER TWO

BORKAZEE'S PLOT

Across the other side of the Brizarian Empire—Brizaria's High Priest, Scovar Borkazee, wrinkled his nose as he beckoned urgently toward the shadowy cavern, indicating the open temple doors behind him. He shivered as he looked about his surrounds, uncertain of the alien place. By Logga, how he detested the disgusting smells seeping through these old passageways. What a way to spend Disaster Day? He should be presiding over a feast now, not down here. But then, duty called.

Borkazee was a cruel, ambitious man of slim build who stood not more than a metre and a half in height. Close set, light brown eyes looked suspiciously at the world above a narrow cleft chin and thin lips. He had long spidery fingers that constantly toyed with one another. His cowl gathered about narrow weedy shoulders, highlighting his small head. The High Priest's complexion was pale and sickly. Over the years, however, he had proven with buckets of spilt blood that he possessed a high degree of ruthless intelligence.

Once pristine white, the sandstone walls surrounding him blurred rust-red and blackened by tannin as centuries of water seeped in from the river running beside the protectorate. The cloying tang of sour soil and muddy water tickled the back of his throat and burned his nostrils. Even though he was Brizaria's High Priest and had little to fear of the mortal world, this place nonetheless had him feeling jittery. He glared up nervously to the tunnel ceiling and his

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brow knitted as he sought the source of his annoyance. The infernal plinking of droplets of moisture falling from the ceiling into shallow puddles was not helping his already high-strung nerves. Moments later, his messenger of death, Scul-Draith, strode into the flickering lamplight firmly gripping the shoulder of a young man whose head barely reached the former Ruins dweller's broad shoulders.

Scul-Draith's poker face and flinty stare gave nothing away. He nodded a curt assurance to his master. No one had observed the pair enter the secret passage. The High Priest's face muscles visibly relaxed. Despite news of their losses at the Gate of Lost Souls, his mission went well. For this task, his Activist General, Scul-Draith, had taken on the guise of a common caravan guard. Caravan guards were a familiar sight in Brizarian cities and therefore anonymous. Beside Scul-Draith, the bastard son of the Priest of Ordlay moved with faltering steps. His companion's head covered with a grimy flour sack, stained with fish oil and dried blood. One hand extended before him, groping his way, he tripped and sloshed through puddles of water.

Scul-Draith stared at his master with ice blue eyes. His footsteps were purposeful and unhurried. His swinging right-hand loosely brushed a holstered mini tri-crossbow, loaded with three bolts. A sword pommel was visible above his left shoulder. A long stabbing-knife and he slung a shorter skinning blade from a wide belt. The red pockmarks born in his youth glowed angrily in the wavering torchlight, giving his narrow foxy face the hardness of fresh split red gum. The hooded youth wore homespun clothing edged with grey kangaroo or, possibly, wallaby hide. Once brightly dyed turmeric-yellow, they had long faded to a dirty amber colour.

Borkazee stood between two timber doors studded with tarnished brass domes, leading to a series of natural underground grottos five metres below the keep's lowest

floor. Even though he detested the gloomy caverns and cold grottos, the High Priest recognised the need for such places.

To make this meeting, he slipped away from his bodyguard just after midnight via a secret passageway. As brutal as they were, not one of the ten Activists guarding him had the guts to enter his sleeping chamber before dawn. An erratic, dour little man, the High Priest was a strict disciplinarian who maintained a reputation for cruelty by personally supervising the torture of detainees. Extracting information with cruel and unusual methods until the prisoner begged for death was his hallmark of infamy. It was far safer for the guardsmen to sleep in shifts, gamble and drink strong draughts of locally brewed ale until the first cock crowed than to rouse him and risk his wrath.

Three hours from dawn, he was soon to be interviewing a devotee for a novice's position within the Order of Wilvos. A much higher station than the lad could have ever achieved simply by following in his father's footsteps. This ridiculous charade was necessary for he had to understand the artefact in every detail. More importantly, he could not afford loose talk of experiments with artefacts banned by a four hundred year old covenant. It would filter back to the Scavengers.

To the ignorant masses, Viros preached that the Earth Mother was made up of sacred elements that mere mortals could not begin to comprehend without divine interpreters—the Priesthood. For as long as any Brizarian could remember, the Priests delivered sermons and quoted endlessly from ancient texts stories that machines brought the Earth Mother to the brink of mass extinction. In order to achieve their goals, the Viro hierarchy believed that political, social and religious change had to be at their sole direction, in a non-secular state and not at that of the Scavenger ruling class. Therefore, the sect of Viros openly practised a policy of military interference in Brizarian life with the secretive, but sole aim to join state and temple under one supreme ruler.

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But somewhere along the way and over the centuries any good intentions the Viros harboured had given way to avarice, ego and a policy of retribution against their foremost enemies, the Scavenger ruling class and the monks of the Order of Lud.

Borkazee would see his sect's grand plan to fruition in his lifetime, or die trying. He would rule the physical and metaphysical in Brizaria and put every Scavenger pig in his grave with as many artefacts as he could lay his hands on. The High Priest made his generous offer when the lad began to brag about an artefact his father had hidden for his own amusement. He hurriedly interrupted the lad to give him absolution for his transgression, getting his hands on a working artefact of mass destruction was far more important. Borkazee wasn't too surprised though.

The Friar of Ordlay Common was bastard himself, a drunkard and a thief who pilfered parish donations for his personal benefit. Not that theft was so uncommon among the Priests, it was just that the Friar was far too lavish for such a small village. Such dullards would perish quickly once he gained total control of Brizaria. The Wilvos were of an old, disciplined order. Secular clerics, they renounced human servitude for the will of the T'uki, with whom they communed through complex rituals, blood sacrifice and the ingestion of potent herbs. Men of austere personalities who rarely spoke they commanded much respect and induced fear in all who beheld them. Commoners would fall prostrate if a Wilvo happened by. This Order was the logical choice for any novice who secretly coveted power for power's sake. The young fool had consumed too much unwatered wine after a prayer meeting last week. Boisterous and eager to impress the High Priest, he evaded his slovenly father long enough to explain with expansive gestures and slurred words how he could steal the artefact. With the cunning of a dingo, he could be gone from his father's

private chamber, then be back by dawn, undetected.

As Borkazee listened benignly to the supposed dark power of the ancients contained in the artefact, he could barely contain his excitement. This youth, who tripped over his own feet as he staggered from the prayer tent, was nothing to Borkazee in the overall scheme of things, except perhaps as fodder for Scavenger arrows, come the final battle. But the weapon. Ahhh! That was another matter. The artefact the young man carried resembled a matt-black hollow tube, impregnated with numerous square studs at a point Borkazee judged to be midway. It must be lightweight, for the bumpkin showed no sign of strain. The pair tramped through puddles of icy water, sending echoes crashing down the tunnel. From rusting metal brackets, sputtering rag torches soaked in whale oil lit their path.

Spreading his arms wide, Borkazee smiled warmly. The youth's eyes widened when Scul-Draith jerked the hood from his face.

"My boy, my dear boy," Borkazee oozed warmly, clasping the lad's arm enthusiastically. Simultaneously, he placed a warm fatherly hand in the small of the lad's back and began to usher him inside.

"Holy father... Your Reverence..." the boy stammered as he was guided, stiff legged, toward a gallery of seats. "I didn't expect to greet you in person. I-I anticipated no more than a meeting with one of the Friars, not y-y-you."

They entered an amphitheatre as they talked. The stalls overlooked a semicircular stage, complete with torch footlights and white scalloped back walls with winged side entrances.

"Nonsense, my son," Borkazee replied expansively with a paternal pat on the lad's shoulder. "Every parishioner is important to me." As they sat, Borkazee's greedy gaze travelled over every centimetre of the artefact. He had inspected many over the past year as he prepared his coup.

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Most had proved to be worthless lumps of old metal. He had studied and then hidden, several hundred working artefacts from the prying, snooping Scavenger scum who ruled Brizaria. Yet, he couldn't recall seeing the like of this before. "Is this the contribution you wish to make to the cause, my boy?" he asked in kindly tones. Beaming, he leaned back in his chair, then clasped his hands together in his lap.

"Yes, High One," the young man responded with an eager smile. His eyes took on a glassy sheen. All his dreams were about to become true. In days, he would be able to shake the village dust and the stench of sheep-dung from his clothes as he took on real power. When he replied, it was with the distinct nasal twang of the western country folk. "Holiness, this artefact has been held by my family for many generations, hidden above the mantle in the great hall since before my father's grandfather's time. From time to time, father had slaves experiment with these cubes on its surface, but always under strictly controlled conditions. But it was I, after invoking Logga, who safely unleashed the dark power of the ancients!" he declared, proudly puffing out his chest.

Borkazee put on a well-practised benevolent expression. Nodding approvingly, he pursed his lips. "The Wilvos require farsighted novices like you, my son." He leaned forward and patted the young man's shoulder, reassuringly. "You've done exceedingly well. We'll not punish your parents for this breach of the law. Blessed are the gods for guiding you to us."

* * * *

Scul-Draith grinned like a wolf in the shadows. He could well imagine what the boy meant by unleashing the artefact's true force. The lad had a cruel streak in him, just like his father, the Friar and grandfather, the abbot. If the peasant's tales were anything to go by, the old abbot met his

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death only last summer at the hands of vengeful villagers. A matter quickly dealt with, hushed up and kept from the Watch by holding a discreet family funeral, claiming disease as the cause for official records.

Allegedly, the villagers ambushed the old man as he returned from one of his infamous hunting trips. After knocking him from his mount, they had taken turns to kick him senseless. As he laid bleeding and moaning, the women tore him apart with their bare hands. His favourite past time used to be hunting old, or crippled, villagers—from horseback with a pig spear—whom he felt were no longer useful. In the early hours of the morning, before the abbot's death, his Activists had carted seven elderly villagers away for just such a hunt. Unfortunately, one of the elders was the only Healer in the squalid little village outside his keep and everyone admired him. Scul-Draith had been told that the graveyard at the end of the township was overflowing with timber grave markers, far too many for a small town, reliant on wool and sheep for income.

Then there was the lad's father, the Friar. A brutal man with a reputation for pursuing bizarre carnal delights at the blacksmith's forges late at night, with the town women. Many a torn and bleeding female sought out the Healer come sunrise. From time to time, the Friar brought hooded women to the forge lashed to the back of a packhorse. With bended head and turned-down shoulders, they would sit, swaying and moaning in the cool night air until he yanked them cruelly from the saddle by a braided leatherneck rope. The appearance of these poor souls always coincided with one of his trips to one of the major cities—P'Gusta, Duria or the capital city, Brizaria. No one had ever emerged from the smithy.

* * * *

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“And what did you discover you had?” asked Borkazee with genuine interest as he eased himself backward into a comfortable position.

“Enlightened one, this artefact hurls a shaft of pure lightning, encased in a low thunder that will turn a cartload of sheep into a tangle of sticks and bones surrounded by red jelly.”

Borkazee glanced piously toward the ceiling. “Blessed be, the gods move in mysterious ways, blessed be.” The High Priest lowered his head. Looking the youth sternly in the eyes, he adopted his kind fatherly voice. “You do understand, my boy, that after you demonstrate, this artefact it must be given over to the Brotherhood of Viros for destruction, as the law demands?”

“Of course, Eminence,” agreed the nodding youth with a wide toothy grin. He was prepared to pay any price to get out of that village.

Borkazee gestured magnanimously toward the stage floor. “Prepare to accept the mantle of Wilvo. Show me this thunder and lightning.”

* * * *

The farm boy rose and hastened toward a stone staircase, then descended to a sandstone stage floor. As he approached the stage, his head was full of vivid images. He saw himself attired in a dark green robe, hooded and omnipotent, surrounded by cowering parishioners too afraid to look him in the eye while he inspected and scorned their meagre donations and offerings. He grinned. At meal times, he would feast only upon the choicest cuts of steak and tender fowls, not those smelly old boilers his father’s scullion served. And never, ever again would he eat mutton.

* * * *

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Scul-Draith eased himself out of the shadows to sit beside Borkazee. Together they observed the stage intently. Borkazee tilted his head. Not taking his eyes from the youth, he said out the side of his mouth, "If this artefact works as he describes, then you will dispose of him swiftly?"

"Your will High One, he will never leave here alive." Scul-Draith touched his heart with his right hand, then made a slight inclination with his head. "As we speak, Holiness, three Activists disguised as Traders have taken to the trail. Reliable men who survived all that life in Ruins could deliver before taking to the Order. They will not fail the cause. One carries a potion to mix with his father's ale. The lad's father will suffer a fatal heart seizure. I guarantee you a funeral and the appointment of a new Friar at Ordlay after the next prayer meeting."

The High Priest waved him into silence as the young man positioned himself on the stage.

* * * *

The youth searched with shiny eyes for a place Borkazee might best view him. He intended this demonstration to be spectacular. This was his chance to escape his father's village and he intended to impress. He positioned his back to the wall and then hefted the tube to his shoulder. He peered along its length, seeking something to sight. He touched a stud with his right hand, apertures clicked open. The tube hummed and vibrated. It felt warm against his cheek in the cold stone room. A tiny black square rose with a mechanical whirl. He positioned his eye to it. Across its clear face raced red numerals beyond which a green dial spun left then right, left then right. He could never make head or tail of their purpose so he ignored them. Nimble fingers flew along the tube, touching studs. Instead of a bright lightning bolt

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followed by a thunderous clap of energy, a harsh metallic voice spoke close to his ear. He nearly dropped the tube in fright.

“Is everything all right, my son?” Borkazee called down to him.

He half smiled and then nodded an assurance he didn’t feel. Sweat formed on his brow and his heart hammered inside his chest blurring his vision. He positioned his eye to the square and then pressed the stud harder. His stomach churned. Then he remembered and his breathing slowed. Extending a grimy fingernail, he prised open another stud. A circular button pulsed redly. With this depressed, he tapped the firing stud.

* * * *

Borkazee and Scul-Draith observed a green beam leap from the tube to flood the theatre wall. A wall washed with green energy, a cavity suddenly appeared the width of three men. They gasped and blinked in awe and amazement. One-second there was a solid wall and the next, a gaping hole followed by an incredible boom, which hurled Borkazee to his knees. When the High Priest lifted his head, he found the chamber filled with tiny particles of white sand swirling through the air.

Borkazee coughed and spluttered. When he swiped his lips, his backhand came away gritty. His eyes watered and stung from the sand. He waved the scroll in front of his face as he struggled upright. Scul-Draith was beside him on his knees, hacking and spitting dust from his mouth. Borkazee peered over the balcony onto the stage floor. His face lit up with a smile. Without taking his eyes from the scene below, he gripped Scul-Draith by the collar and dragged him upright.

What Scul-Draith set his watery eyes to was the gaping

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hole in the wall and a stage covered in a fine layer of white sand, sparkling as if in strong sunlight. Close to the hole, at its base and around the edges, the sand had bubbled into black glass. The youth lay where he had stood moments before. He was coated in white sand. Surrounding him and extending onto the wall behind was a circular sooty smudge. A puddle of blood had formed where the youth's lower body once existed. It was snaking its way off the stage toward the seating area. Of the bumpkin's lower limbs, there was no sign. Shards of white bone protruded six centimetres from his ripped torso. His sand-coated mouth opened. A great sigh escaped his lips as his head slumped to one side.

"Well, that solves one problem," said Scul-Draith, wagging his little finger about his ear as he cracked his jaw from side to side.

Borkazee nodded as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. "See that the brothers remain after this evening's meeting. We've sufficient artefacts to take the Brizarian capital from the Scavengers as Disaster Day ends."

Scul-Draith nodded.

"Before you go, have you any more news on the slaughter of our troops at the Gate of Lost Souls?"

"Beyond the unusual facts that they left no bodies and cleared out our store of artefacts before they mysteriously returned to where they came without pushing into Brizaria proper and ravaging the countryside, no, master."

"Double the number of Activists along the border. We can't have our artefact patrols interfered with, but urge caution when searching out dig sites and instruct the Priests to dig only under cover of darkness."

Scul-Draith nodded before he hurried away.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAKING OF A HAWK-WING

A part from his warlock, the Activist's head was free of hair. As an experienced fighter should, he moved forward in a soft-footed half-crouch.

Rhyka watched him come to a stop. Every third step or so he would cock his ear and listen. Setting his pack down lightly, Rhyka freed up his longbow. All the time, his wary eyes traced the Activist's approach. With the light behind him, Rhyka was fairly certain this could affect, badly, his night vision yet it was unlikely that he would see him until he was on top of him. Nevertheless, discover him he surely would.

Deftly, Rhyka drew an arrow from his quiver. After testing the wax-coated string with his thumb, he gripped the metre long shaft between thumb and forefinger. Tipped with ten centimetres of sharpened perma-steel and fletched with pure white cockatoo feathers, the shaft would fly true. Ignoring his bruises and stinging cuts, Rhyka drew the bowstring and waited.

The moment the string kissed Rhyka's cheek, the Activist's silhouette appeared in the murky grey light. He stood absolutely still, staring hard at the inky shadows. Rhyka's arrow created a dull, drum-like sound when it punched through its target. The impact bore the warrior backward. Rhyka dropped his bow, snatched up his sword and pounded down the shaft in a mad sprint. By the time he reached his victim, the mortally wounded Activist had

cranked himself up on bony elbows to goggle cross-eyed at the feathered shaft protruding from his chest.

Rhyka's entire focus centred on the dying warrior's pleas for help, echoing through the hollow space. A backhanded sword swipe separated the Activist's head from his shoulders. Dark arterial blood coated the surrounding rock with viscous fluid. Nervous perspiration beaded on Rhyka's brow as he ran to collect to his cape. When he bent to retrieve it, a flash of light followed by a fizzing noise, momentarily blinded him. Fragments of hot rock spattered his face and arms, and pain followed.

Instinctively, Rhyka dropped to his belly. Another flash of light struck the column where he had been standing. More splinters showered his head. He realised that the Priest must have come up behind him from another tunnel. The blasphemous bastard was using some kind of ancient weapon, too.

Galvanised by fear, Rhyka grabbed his pack and sprinted past the dead Activist until he came upon a side tunnel. As he darted into it, the perfectly smooth tunnel walls revealed itself in eerie flashes of light as the Priest pursued him, firing the ancient weapon. A heavy blow to his pack sent Rhyka sprawling headlong onto the rock floor. Dazed, he felt his right shoulder give as he hit. His ribs ached dully, too. Coming to halt, he knew that if he didn't slay this heretical Priest instantly, he would not make it around the next corner, let alone back to Brizaria. But how, since his shoulder was near useless. Logic determined that he would not be able to use his blade or draw his bow properly.

Panting with exertion, he rolled onto his back. Resting his feet on the pack, he slipped the bow across the soles of his feet. Setting an arrow to the string, he pulled and aimed between his feet. With his night vision destroyed by the artefact, the Viro would see only a vague lump on the ground. He gambled that the Priest would not try to use the

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artefact from a distance. If the Viro wanted to finish him off, he must move in closer. Rhyka's arms began to shake and his chest burned as he struggled to hold the bow steady.

Ever so cautiously, the Priest came up on his victim.

Rhyka moaned softly to draw the killer nearer. He waited until the Viro was so close he could hear him breathing. A flame flared when the Priest struck a light. Without thinking, Rhyka released his arrow. He watched the shaft enter the Priest's mouth as it opened in surprise. The flame extinguished seconds after the shaft plunged past his teeth to emerge out of the back of his head. It smacked loudly into the tunnel wall, shattering upon impact. The Viro must have died instantly.

Rhyka heard his body thump hard when it made contact with the cavern floor. With great effort, he gathered his pack. In almost total darkness, he followed an incline toward twin specks of light, away from the threat of Priests and the warriors who sank his vessel. After what seemed like an hour of climbing, Rhyka emerged into a sunlit chamber hollowed out of solid rock. He guessed that he must be at the caves he glimpsed from below the spire. Massive tunnels branched into the mountain in every direction. He dropped his pack and let his eyes adjust to the light.

Unnaturally smooth walls rose fifty metres to where sunlight filtered in through a stained, but once clear, perma-glaz dome. The chamber appeared to be some three hundred metres in circumference with several openings to the outside. To his left, a broad staircase swept up to a gallery. He checked carefully for signs of Priest or Activist. Finding none, Rhyka started across the floor for the gallery. About halfway across, a harsh booming noise froze him in his tracks.

From the corner of his eye, Rhyka spied a gigantic predator rushing out a tunnel mouth, wings spread, arcing downward, thrusting with long tearing claws. His jaw

dropped. Its wingspan must be forty metres from wing tip to wing tip. Cruel cat-yellow eyes, the size of a cartwheel, fastened him with a malevolent stare. Filled with unimaginable terror, he stood rooted to the spot. With a sinking stomach, Rhyka realised that his sword would be no more than a thorn to this brute. The beast must be some sort of Priestly watchdog.

The creature's head was a metre and a half-long, supporting a bright blue crest. Its neck continuously twisted this way and that. Shades of light brown flecked the upper and under wings. From claw to blue topknot, Rhyka put the creature anywhere from fourteen to sixteen metres in height. Its beak was bone yellow as long as a small canoe and mottled brown beneath the jaw. Loose blue flesh hung about the eye pockets. Narrowly avoiding a snapping beak, Rhyka heaved himself to the right. His shoulder went numb when he hit the hard rock floor. Ears ringing, he got up and staggered through an opening to the outside, away from the beast. Weak and confused, Rhyka was vaguely aware that the creature was pursuing him.

Rapid movement caught his eye. It was the beast. He had to move faster. Startled, he started to slip and slide on the cloud-wet rock. Blind panic set in when before him, floating in and out of fog clouds on silent wings were hundreds of the creatures. He fought to maintain his balance and slow his momentum. Still sliding, he looked down the Spire to a flat outcrop directly below. It was a drop of five metres. Under normal circumstances this would prove an obstacle, but with a bung shoulder and fractured ribs, impossible. A fiery pain lanced through his foot like a sword through flesh as he twisted his ankle. His back arched involuntarily, causing him to over balance. He felt himself free falling through space. Time passed in microseconds. Horrified, he looked back to watch the creature pursuing him. It had launched into the soft-wet clouds.

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A wake of air buffeted him further into space. As he fell, he turned over just as an incoming beast skidded to halt on the ledge below him. With a bone-jarring thud, he landed directly between the monster's shoulder blades. The beast let out a squawk as it lumbered up the ramp with a sorely winded Rhyka clinging to its lightly furred back. Hissing loudly, a snakelike neck permitted that enormous beak to snap at him. As he pulled away, blinding pain surged through him. The monk's world devolved into a nightmare of pain, rock walls, rippling fur-covered muscles and cries of animal rage, accompanied by dizzy body spins as the creature tried to dislodge him. Rhyka fought to maintain control of his senses and, though giddy and disorientated, he sensed the creature pause.

Expecting to be plucked to the ground, sawed in half and munched into pulp, he instead, found himself confined to a rocky alcove twenty metres across and twenty metres high. Coned light and a moaning wind entered via circular holes high up in the wall. The brute that had taken his fall was stationary. A huge head pivoted to observe the tiny human, who must have been no more annoying than tick. A yellow eye blinked twice, a clear membrane followed by a long grey eyelid shuttered down, then up again. A bone-coloured beak speared at him.

Rhyka's heart hammered. He opened his mouth to scream. The beak passed him as the creature preened under its wing in long clacking strokes. Wide-eyed and dry-mouthed, Rhyka could barely raise a swallow as the great beak once again glided back toward him.

Paralysed with fear, he awaited his fate, but the creature simply nudged him to the floor. Unable to resist, he slid painfully down. Shaking legs refused to support him so he sank with a groan onto a brittle twig nest. When he next looked up, the creature tucked back its head and neck. A soft rumble emanated from the massive chest. The creature was

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asleep! He couldn't believe it. Was he stark, raving mad? No, he was dead and this was how he imagined life would have continued if he had survived. Rhyka's brain reeled with confusion, fear and wonder.

Suddenly, an intense buzzing invaded his head. He closed his eyes, trying to rid himself of the sensation. When he opened his eyes, it was night and he was high above a city like no other in Brizaria. He gasped involuntarily. Sheer madness! But another part of his mind calmly accepted that was the afterlife.

Twin trails of white lights shone brightly below him. Edging razor-straight highways, the lights led into a city so huge that Rhyka thought every light in the entire universe must have been burning below. He flew between tall crystal towers seared with white light. Inside the towers, people crowded perma-glaz windows. Were they dead, too? They waved cheerily as he passed. He waved back and they responded by jumping up and down, waving even more enthusiastically than before. Well, if they were dead, they were sure energetic enough. Then they were gone and below him stretched road systems. Twin white and red lights streaked back and forth in their thousands. He drew his gaze eastward. Dawn was breaking. The beast beneath him banked right, climbing high above a layer of cloud.

The whoof, whoof sound of wings beating the morning air in perfect time filled him with a sense of anticipation. Before him, a mountain spire loomed. He recognised it as the one into which he fled. Following a static crackle in his left ear, a female voice startled him for a second. A hand appeared in front of his face, adjusting a thin wire to brush his lips. Strange words filled his head and, for the first time, he noticed other creatures flying in formation to his left and right. After forming a precise holding pattern, they touched down one by one on the mountain ledge.

The ledge blazed with artificial white light. Riders and

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Flight Crews hustled, chatting easily with each other. As he dismounted, Rhyka detected an atmosphere of tension. The eyes he looked through focused on a bank of monitors fitted to a rock wall reeling off a stream of figures. He sat at a table and sipped at a brackish fluid that tasted vaguely like karfee. He saw a wrist bearing a flashing numerical instrument brought up to chest height. He studied it for a moment, but couldn't make head nor tail of the whirling digits. His vision blurred when someone slapped a helmet over his head and pounded the back of it. Raucous laughter filled his ears. He said something into the wire at his lips. Following more laughter, five energetic young men and women dressed in strange apparel surrounded him.

Each wore a black helmet fitted with a dark green sliding visor and chin microphone with white numbers painted forward and rear. Their black one-piece suits looked like leather, but felt like wet parchment and were remarkably warm. These suits had corresponding numbers emblazoned on the chest and back. There was much backslapping, good-humoured laughter and cheesy grins as the group proceeded to the flight area. Suddenly, all heads spun right. He noted half the monitors reflected what he and his companions were seeing. The remainder reflected their images as similarly clad men and women strolled around the corner. Only these flyers wore all white and their numerals inscribed in black. More noise sounded in his ear. A female voice filled with urgency snapped instructions in his ear. Two men in white coats wheeled a creature about on a strange contraption. Handlers, he guessed. Someone prodded him. He stumbled forward and stepped onto a metal platform lowered by some unseen means onto the creature's back.

The images faded into a muzzy grey light. His next sensation was of a breathing sound loud in his ears. He found himself in the air. The sky was blue and the dawn sun

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cast long red fingers across the landscape, turning the tall silver buildings a blood colour. Riders like himself filled the cool morning air. There was utter confusion in the sky. Riders flew their mounts with visors down, making them look like sinister insects. High above, two creatures had locked claws in a deadly embrace. They plunged earthward in a looping spiral, screaming manically at one another. Only one retained a rider.

Hunched across the back of his creature, he turned constantly to view the sky above and below him. Out the corner of his eye, he spied a mount diving toward him in a murderous rush of claws. The creature's beak was open. It screamed a challenge. It extended long claws intending to rip him from the back of his mount. He kneed his mount into a rolling dive. Above him, he heard a sickening crunch as creature met creature. He didn't turn to see them spin out of control earthward. His ears roared and crackled with many excited voices, some panicked. Others sounded like battle cries.

Across his chest, he braced a long flexible pole. At the end of which a green ball pulsated. Rhyka power-dived at a ring of concentric, flashing red lights on the mountainside. Instinctively, he knew he was involved in a deadly battle and that his companions were running defence for him. Poles flickered. Yellow and blue lightning flashes whipped by his mount's head. The body he was in, ducked and wove. Somewhere, someone screamed. A riderless creature spun crazily by in a corkscrewing dive, wings aflame. One eye was a smoking mass of gluey brown gel. Rhyka guessed the rider had plummeted to his death.

Riders dived across his path, snapping off electric shots at each other. Some made ineffectual swipes at the pulsating ball balanced on the tip of his pole. A cold feeling enveloped him as realized that he was unable to aim or discharge his lightning pole while he controlled the ball. He must rely

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entirely on the skill of his mount and flying companions to defend him. The mountainside loomed large. If he didn't turn soon, he would be pancaked across its face.

As the creature dipped its left wing, he drew back the long pole across his right shoulder. A familiar voice cried an order. He hurled the ball with all his might toward the strobing rings of light. His knees gripped the creature's back as the ball sped away. Cheers and whoops of glee registered in his ears. He looked up to see the strobing red ring change colour to purple. Giant numerals appeared in the air across the mountainside, only to vanish seconds later. He felt elation welling in his chest but something bright and hot whizzed past his head. Desperately, he twisted his torso, trying to locate the source, but a pole caught his helm a glancing blow. Stars exploded in his head. His vision blurred, blood ran into his eyes, blinding him. His creature craned its head around to view him. More lightning flashes zipped past him.

Rhyka awoke breathing hard. Perspiring heavily, he recalled where he was. Pain lashed his body. A moan escaped his lips. Something moved. His eyes rotated to catch the creature snake its head down to better view him. It wasn't a dream. He really was in a cave with this beast. As his brain raced with thoughts of renewed death, a contented rumble, not unlike a cat purring, started up as the enormous head withdrew to resettle in the centre of a powerful chest. Wide-eyed and startled, he sidled into the passage as quietly as he could manage. But the beast noticed his furtive movements. It squawked loudly and waddled after him.

Rhyka froze in the passage outside the alcove. From adjoining alcoves, several beasts emerged, hissing angrily. Instantly, the giant behind Rhyka rose to its full height. Wings the size of a darge sail, brushed the tunnel walls. The frightened monk watched an exchange of enraged hissing, backed by several harsh booms as the creatures tested each

other. Almost immediately, the two giants menacing Rhyka, retreated.

Stunned by these actions but grateful, Rhyka made for the cavern entrance at a fast hobble with his newfound benefactor waddling along behind. He found himself back in the sunlit gallery he had fled earlier. His pack was there. The giant creature observed him in silence. Rhyka decided that if he were ever going to escape this place, now would be as good a time as any.

Leaving his protector, Rhyka painfully climbed the stairs. He was sure the creature's clawed feet would prevent it from climbing the staircase. Immediately, the brute began thrumming. It commenced hopping from one giant claw to the other in a fit of agitation. The further along the gallery he travelled, the more frantic the creature became. It occurred to Rhyka that some form of danger might lay ahead. He proceeded cautiously.

On entering the gallery, it was obvious this place was fashioned by ancient stone burning tools. Artefacts, in various stages of decay, lay strewn about the floor. Rhyka's eyes were immediately drawn to a series of yellow wall plaques, which he had previously taken to be shields. Each plaque held engravings, ancient scenes telling the cavern's story.

The tale was of humans and the giant creatures interacting. In cupped palms, one human held an egg the size of water pitcher, another held a smaller egg in his palm, while the third had a hawk resting on his forearm.

He stepped up to better observe the next plaque for it was separated into a series of cake-like sections. The first depicted several cracking eggs. In the next portion, hatchlings stretched snaky necks to human hands. The third portion was most interesting. A human with a hawk upon his arm pointed at tiny figures of humans sitting upon the backs of these creatures as they flew over a tall-towered city

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and expansive parklands. His finger was aimed directly at the under wing.

Further plaques presented similar themes, but most were essentially the same, humans riding the creatures. The next collection of discs presented men and beasts flying about a cloudy sky in various poses. The men grasped long poles from which they tossed about a ball of all things.

By a shattered grey cabinet of perma-steel, Rhyka came upon another series of wall plaques. The first was a map of the entrance to the Ark, the Spire itself and the land immediately surrounding the Spire. His trembling fingers traced the winding roadway to the valley below, to the cavern, to an inside view of the cavern, tunnels, gallery, dome, rookery and landing areas congested with milling humans and towering creatures. One disc indicated how to fit a simple harness around the creature's neck and over the ridges on its back. Another plaque stood out—a raised black cross was slashed through its centre. Each portion depicted a creature in flight overwhelming a giant kangaroo, then a variety of views as it fed on the carcass.

Favouring his shoulder and ribs, Rhyka proceeded to the balcony to regard the magnificent thrumming beast below. Where previously stood an awesome killing machine, he now observed a thing of ancient beauty. He looked back at the plaque and decided to call the creature a Hawk-Wing. He spied harnesses hanging from wall pegs nearby. He hobbled over and shook one down. When it didn't fall to bits, he knew the harness consisted of perma-glaz and was manufactured with ancient hands.

The harness consisted of extraordinarily light blue webbing and metal buckles. Sewn into the webbing were two lightweight balls, the size of a football. Excruciatingly aware that climbing down the mountain wasn't an option, he had two choices. Stay and starve or fly and live. He confronted the Hawk-Wing, harness in hand when another

dust-covered plaque caught his eye. He brushed aside eons of filth to reveal a standing Hawk-Wing, wings slightly spread and head lowered and level with a human's head.

This Hawk-Wing tilted its head at an acute angle similar to that which Rhyka observed in the alcove. There followed another series of etchings. Arrows pointed to various body parts. Below each arrow, an outstretched hand pointed to a human figure. Rhyka rubbed the built-up muck away. In the next series of plaques, those areas revealed a man scratching, rubbing or stroking the creature's body.

Hefting the harness onto his good shoulder, Rhyka descended to the cavern floor and approached the purring beast. The first movement the Hawk-Wing made was to drop and tilt its head. Golden plate-sized irises regarded him curiously. Rhyka watched the veins as thick as his forearm on its throat pulse with blood. Certain in the knowledge that giant beak could rip him in two, he reached out and scratched gently behind the jaw line. If one could say that such a hulking beast displayed signs of pleasure, this one certainly did. Its eyelids drooped, a great purple and pink tongue lolled from its beak.

The skin was soft to touch. Covered in delicate short brown hair, hard muscles undulated below the skin. Thick veins fanned blood throughout the body. As he scratched, the Hawk-Wing vibrated pleasurably. Each curved tooth in its beak was the size of a dagger and serrated for tearing. Hawk-Wings must swallow chunks of Hawk-Wings must swallow chunks of meat whole. Its head bobbed, meeting each long scratch. He swapped arms, scratching even harder.

The Hawk-Wing responded, rustling its wings as if fanned by a gentle breeze. Rhyka murmured soothing tones. It nuzzled him. Gradually, he decreased scratching and looped the harness around the thick neck. He threw the rest up and onto its back. With some effort, he pulled the straps

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down and, after some experimenting, buckled one under the chest either side of each wing joint. The two balls fitted neatly into muscle hollows where the wing and chest joined. The Hawk-Wing regarded him calmly.

Walking behind the creature, he took hold of the traces and tugged the reins. As in the plaques, the creature lowered itself in a flattened position to the floor so that Rhyka could mount. Gingerly, Rhyka drew himself onto a bended back. Ever so gently, he fitted his feet into the web stirrups, then tested his weight. The Hawk-Wing stood upright, shook out its wings, then waddled toward the exit ramp. For a second, the pair was poised over nothing. The creature spread its enormous wings, then fell into the abyss.

Rhyka's heart leapt into his mouth. His stomach felt as if it was in his mouth. He stifled a scream, blinking back wind-driven tears. He looped his arms through the harness. Lying prone, he looked between the neck and wing. His mount was plunging earthward at a sickening rate. In that same instant, the motion of his stomach changed. His eyes bulged when the ground fell away. He found himself soaring above the cavern. All about him, hundreds of Hawk-Wings hung suspended in space.

Though many swept curiously by, not one moved toward them. Rhyka now had to determine how to guide this powerful creature. The Hawk-Wing gave no indication Rhyka was even upon its back as they circled higher into the chilly morning sky. Rhyka considered the weightless balls beneath each wing socket. He gave the left trace an experimental tug. The left wing rotated, scooping air, rolling and plunging them in a power dive earthward. Rhyka screamed as an icy wind threatened to tear him loose. He wrenched on the opposite trace, the Hawk-Wing straightened out, but the rate of descent continued. Fighting back panic, he tugged both traces. Subtly, the great shoulder muscles shifted wing membrane and the blood rich

chocolate wings flattened out. After two long wing beats, the rush ceased and the ground remained at a steady distance.

Murmuring words of praise, Rhyka stroked the Hawk-Wing's neck. Further experimentation had his mount aimed back to the landing ramp. Sail-like wings rotated downward, scooping the wind. With a jar and thump, the Hawk-Wing skidded to a halt. Rather than continuing, as Rhyka expected, the enormous creature cocked its head and eyed him reproachfully. Then it croaked. Almost apologetically, he detached himself from the harness. The Hawk-Wing shook out its wings and then waddled away.

Rhyka hobbled behind, elated as never before. He followed the Hawk-Wing to a scummy water trough. Fearlessly, Rhyka approached and rubbed under the creature's furry wing, whereupon it immediately began to drum and purr as a contented cat. He rested his weary head against the muscular chest, listening to a heart the size of a wombat beat.

"I name you Sha'Eila, after our glorious Earth Mother, for you truly are a gift of the gods," he said, stroking her neck. Instinctively, he sensed that this beast was female. Rhyka spied a plaque spattered with centuries of droppings. In old-earth English, this plaque bore the inscription—PTEROSAUR ROOKERY. Rhyka retrieved his backpack, then guided Sha'Eila to the cavern entrance. This time he experienced a little less fear as they leapt into nothingness. Confidently, he steered the Hawk-Wing to the base of the spire.

Taking Sha'Eila into Brizaria was a death sentence for them both. Rhyka landed not far from the shattered fortress as he would have to make the return journey on foot. But as he alighted, he could not recall any instructions on how to dismiss the Hawk-Wing. So he set his pack aside, pointed into a purpling sky and shouted, "Go!"

Sha'Eila responded by purring loudly and rubbing her

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cheek along Rhyka's shoulder, almost knocking him flat. Rhyka tried walking slowly away, but Sha'Eila waddled after him. Rhyka paused. He strode to Sha'Eila's back. Thinking Rhyka wanted clamber aboard, she lowered herself. Taking up the traces, he tugged hard, then quickly stepped away. Sha'Eila waddled forward, spread her wings and was soon lost in the fog-bound sky.

The bond he felt for the Hawk-Wing was so inexplicably powerful, his chest welled with emotion. Nevertheless, let go of her, he must. Even with his back to her, he could see the Hawk-Wing in the centre of his head. A warm tingling feeling, like warm water pouring over his skin, filled his mind. It was Sha'Eila responding to him telepathically. No matter what the future held, nothing would separate him from the Hawk-Wing.

An outpost where he could bribe a certain official to send a pigeon message to the Assayer at the court of the Lord High Recycler was not far away. Over the next two days and two nights, he followed the river into Brizarian controlled territory. His thoughts were constantly on the Hawk-Wing for she was the secret he must keep for both their sakes.