

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, his pale, angular face was 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 heart beat 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, home spun 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. But 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. This tedious business must be dispensed with 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 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 over 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; 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. Twenty monks, experts in ancient artefact identification, sorting and smelting had been assigned to this protectorate and by all the gods in Paradise, he would have them all. He suspected that the acolyte had been disguised by one of the deluded trading families as one of their own and had already met his fate. Well, this was the tale he would relate to the high priest back in the comfort of Brizaria. But in the meantime, he was determined to carry out his sworn duty and continue the search. If he wanted to avoid 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. Side by side swung the ruling Scavenger family, house servants and nineteen of those interfering monks of Lud. Purple tongues, twisted necks, bulging eyes, limp hands dangling beside their thighs, excrement pools 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, but 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.

Forearms' resting on his knees, his short sword was clasped 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 to? The Keep and fortress had been searched from top to bottom. His Activists 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. No one was observed sneaking off prior to their 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 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, Viro priests dedicated to the worship of T'uki and his chief servant Logga interpreted these laws somewhat more liberally. Within the priesthood the priests of T'uki were more commonly known as Viros. To compare the description of a Viro priest with other Brizarian would be a highly generous description

indeed. Primarily, the sect of Viro 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 practised murder and deception to their own profit. It was the Viro's 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 simple truth of the matter was that the Viro's sanctioned most illicit artefacts that any Brizarian with coin could pay for. The monks of Lud were in a constant battle with the Viro's, forever seeking out artefacts containing the dark power of the ancients and destroying the evil things. And 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 long haired, 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 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 bore battle-scarred from dozens of encounters with Viro's, 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 should have been infested with spear-throwing tribesmen. 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.

Brother Ordon's purchase of an old-time map from a one-eyed priest of the order of Yarra was considered by many monks 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 alright. 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. And now, Ordon stood on the deck cursing all priests of Yarra. Every single monk straining at the oarlocks had sworn a blood oath to hunt down and kick the traitorous map-sellers 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 lead nowhere. But last night, whatever mischievous god was guiding them, well and truly played out his joke for it was 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. All that was revealed were charred timber planks piled with the corpses of Activists. An hour or 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 the bodies off with. 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 ruling class. As an acolyte, it was Rhyka's job to count the crates at the protectorates modest docks. Working late one night, he had convinced Odon to let him sleep onboard so that he could start early next morning and lucky he did. For when the killing started, Odon hauled up the anchor and the Gabba glided soundlessly off the protectorate's pier and into the thick fog without the murdering Viro's or their Activists even knowing they were there.

A lingering thought gnawed at the back of each monks 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.

'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.

All the air expelled from Rhyka's lungs suddenly when he was pitched forward. He landed in an untidy heap on his elbows and knees. Scrambling awkwardly to his feet the darge listed onto her port side. A loud groaning sound was heard as the Gabba's keel ground 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 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 slipped silently beneath the muddy water vomiting blood. 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 boarding-ropes to be lowered.

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 targeted a flash of movement among the trees, he loosed 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 wading priests were methodically butchered. 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 the darge was boarded and her crew slaughtered. Already vicious, give-no-quarter hand-to-hand combat 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. Priest's bodies floated by like timber cutters 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 that 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 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 across each corpse. In and out of gaping wounds, open mouths and nostrils they streamed.

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 used arrows lay scattered in all directions.

Definitely not the work of your typical Ruins dweller, that was for certain. 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 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 Viro 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 Viro's.

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. Then came 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 towards 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 that 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 redly with 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, bed-time tales to amuse old men or to frighten children? We Viro’s 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? You were given 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 mouth shut about what happened here these past two days.'

'Your will, holiness,' the Activist muttered massaging his aching jaw. Blood discoloured his teeth; 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 store room 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 Recycler. 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 was retracing 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.' 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.