



Chapter 1

Tuma woke with a start. Sleep had been welcome, but the dreams it had brought had done nothing to soothe his spirit. Now he sat up in his darkened chamber, staring out the window at the starlit sky of Bara Magna.

He had never been one for deep thoughts, doubts, or reflection. His class within Skrall society – those intended by nature to be leaders and the fiercest of warriors – did not place great value on looking inward or backward. Life was simple: move ahead, conquer, secure what you have taken, and then move on. It was this which had made the Skrall such feared warriors in the great war, and which helped them to survive as a tribe after the Shattering.

Cut off from their homeland after that global disaster, the Skrall resolved to tame the lands in which they found themselves – the volcanic, unstable, and dangerous territory north of the Black Spike Mountains. Although some parts of it remained too treacherous even for them to explore even after tens of thousands of years, they became the undisputed masters of their empire.

Then everything changed. A new breed of warriors appeared, silent, lethal shapeshifters who struck from thin air and then vanished again. Skrall warriors died by the score, as did the other members of Tuma's class until only he remained to lead the tribe. Although it went against his nature, Tuma finally assembled the Skrall army and the rock Agori and led them south through the Black Spikes to new territories and safety.

Tuma got up and walked out of his shelter. Even in the middle of the night, the city of Roptus was busy. Skrall patrols were constantly on the move, while Bone Hunters rode up to the gates with captive Glatorian and Vorox to sell. Agori prisoners taken in the desert were hard at work building new walls and repairing Skrall weapons and armor. The work never stopped ... it couldn't be allowed to, Tuma knew.

He had learned many things during those last battles, when fighting raged from the Maze Valley to the very heart of the Skrall camps. His people could never hold too much territory, be too well defended, or hesitate even a moment in their march of conquest. Although the desert had little to offer in terms of resources, it did grant its owner one thing every leader wanted – space in which to fight. And one day they would fight again, Tuma was certain ... one day, the things that stalked the northern mountains would follow them here.

For now, though, he could focus his attentions to the south. The villages of Bara Magna

were scattered, their relations with each ranging from indifferent to tense. It was doubtful they would be able to mount much resistance if the Skrall attacked now, but “doubtful” was not good enough. Tuma was not going to risk a two-front war, with the Glatorian and Agori in front of him and his other enemies behind. When the Skrall were ready to strike, Bara Magna must be ready to fall.

The leader of a Skrall patrol appeared before him. Tuma eyed him for a moment, noting the damage to his sword and shield. The warrior had seen combat this night.

“Report,” snapped Tuma.

“Bone hunter attacks have isolated Tajun,” said the Skrall. “Your representative has met with the hunters to argue against their plans for a raid on Vulcanus.”

Tuma smiled. “And so guarantees the Bone Hunters will go ahead with it. Very good. And have their plans been drawn up?”

The Skrall nodded and produced a roll of parchment from his pack. He handed it to Tuma, who unrolled it and scanned its contents. After a moment, he looked back at the warrior. “The Bone Hunters do not know we have this copy?”

“No, leader,” said the Skrall.

“You realize, if I find out you are lying ... or even mistaken ... your head will decorate the walls of Roxtus?”

“Yes, leader.”

“Who did you battle tonight?” asked Tuma.

“A Glatorian from the fire village and a pack of Vorox, leader,” reported the Skrall. “We had paused our rock steeds north of the Skrall River when we were attacked.”

“You killed them all, of course,” Tuma replied.

The Skrall did not answer.

Tuma’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“They vanished into the sand.”

Tuma leaned in close. “Glatorian do not vanish into desert dunes, warrior. Why do I not see the crimson one’s armor and sword among your gear?”

The Skrall said nothing. He didn’t have to. Tuma knew who he had encountered in the desert – Malum, exiled from the village of Vulcanus, now afflicted with desert madness and living with the Vorox. Malum was the most dangerous kind of warrior – one who did not fear death, for it would seem a comfort compared to the life he lived now. He could be a fierce enemy ... which meant he could also be a valuable ally.

“Get fresh rock steeds,” Tuma ordered, “and take a dozen warriors. I want Malum brought here to me, alive. Do not return without him ... I am sure you remember the fate of the last patrol that failed me.”

The Skrall nodded. The patrol assigned to find the book of Certavus among the western ruins had come back empty-handed. They had been reassigned to punishment duty, feeding the two-headed Spikit in their pens. Spikit being as they were, the feeders inevitably wound up also being the food.

“It will be done,” said the Skrall warrior.

Tuma nodded once, a sign of dismissal. As the warrior left, Tuma turned and gazed at the northern sky. Despite how well everything was falling into place, he still felt uneasy. For a moment, he imagined he could hear the shouts of long-dead Skrall and the sound of the invaders’ weapons, as if the battles of his past were being fought again.

Not now. Not yet, he said to himself. But one day ... after Bara Magna has fallen ... the Skrall will take revenge.

Chapter 2

The Skrall patrol moved out at dawn. Their target, Malum, was living with the bestial Vorox now, and everyone knew Vorox were night hunters. During the day, they would be sleeping beneath the sand and prime targets for an ambush.

Despite this, there was a grim silence among the members of the unit. Of all the tribes on Bara Magna, only the Vorox showed no fear of Skrall. Maybe it was because their savage brains were too dull to know fear. Or maybe it was because, living their lives in the wasteland as they did, the prospect of death simply held no terror for them.

The leader of the patrol kept his eyes trained on the dunes ahead. Vorox were notoriously good at covering signs of their presence, when they felt the need to do so, but a good tracker could still spot where they had been. Their tunnels left a telltale disturbance in the sand, as if a miniature cyclone had touched down. Sighting such a thing didn't mean there were Vorox right below ground, since they might have gone down one hole and emerged from another. But a fresh cluster of signs, as yet undisturbed by the wind, meant a good chance Vorox were somewhere nearby. And where they were, Malum would not be far away.

He spotted something up ahead. It looked like roughly a dozen tunnels had been made in a patch of sand beneath an outcropping. It was hard to tell how recent they were, as the rock would have protected them some from the wind, but it was the first sign the Skrall had seen. Even more interesting, there was a natural cave in the slope nearby. Shelter for Malum, perhaps, during the heat of the day?

The patrol leader held up a hand to stop the march. He gestured for half the troop to surround the tunnel entrances, and the others to stay back with him. It was time to set the trap.

Half a dozen Skrall rode up to the outcropping. Once they were there, they kept moving, pacing their rock steeds back and forth across the sand. If there were Vorox down there, they would sense the vibrations in the ground. Regardless of whether they thought what they heard was a potential meal or the presence of an enemy – often the same thing – they would come up to investigate.

Naturally, they would not come up the same way they went down. They would spring out of the sand behind the intruders and try to take them by surprise. That was why half the patrol had hung back, keeping their mounts perfectly still. Two could play at the ambush game.

The Skrall waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Twenty. Some of the warriors were starting to wonder if the Vorox were long gone from this place.

They got their answer, but not in the way they had expected. The ground suddenly opened up beneath the reserve Skrall, sending them and their mounts tumbling down into a pit. The Skrall near the outcropping turned and rode toward their comrades, just as two dozen Vorox emerged from their original tunnels. Howling, they hurled crude swords and spear at the backs of the Skrall riders. One spear found its mark in the side of a rock steed, sending mount and rider tumbling down into the sand. The Vorox were on the unfortunate warrior before he could rise, insuring that he never would again.

Malum appeared at the entrance to the cave, watching the carnage with a smile on his face. After the events of the night before, only a fool wouldn't have expected Skrall retaliation. He'd had the Vorox leave just enough traces to lure the patrol in, without making it so obvious that they would suspect a trap.

The Skrall patrol leader and his warriors had managed to scramble out of the pit, leaving their rock steeds behind. Dropping to one knee, they took aim with their Thornax launchers and fired. The explosive, spiked spheres sailed into the ranks of the Vorox, felling a number of the beasts. The still mounted Skrall turned in the saddle and fired a volley of their own, scattering their attackers.

Regrouping, the Skrall made ready to charge. That was when they heard a chorus of growls coming from behind. At least 50 Vorox had sprung out of the sand some 500 yards behind them. The patrol leader wasted no time, ordering the Skrall on foot to join their comrades on their rock steeds. Then they charged, leaving the small army of Vorox in the dust and headed right for the battered first wave and Malum.

"Aim high!" the patrol leader yelled.

The Skrall rode into the midst of the Vorox, striking at them with their blades. The Skrall mounted behind fired their launchers at the rocks above Malum's cave. Their shots brought down a rockslide on the ex-Glatorian, pinning him beneath a pile of stone. Behind them, the mob of Vorox was closing in.

The Skrall upon whose rock steed the patrol leader rode slumped over and fell from the mount, a Vorox sword having struck him down. The leader grabbed the reins and urged the steed up into the rocks. Reaching the point where Malum was trapped, he coolly dismounted and aimed his launcher at the Glatorian's head.

"Back to your holes," he shouted at the Vorox, "or he dies."

The beasts might or might not have understood the words – the Skrall weren't sure. But they knew what they were seeing and they comprehended the tone. The Vorox didn't retreat, but they didn't keep attacking, either. They simply stopped and waited.

"We strike now," said one of the Skrall warriors. "Make them pay for what they have

done.”

“They are vermin, no better than scarabax beetles,” said another. “Exterminate them all.”

The patrol leader agreed. He hated Vorox. They were too unpredictable and too dangerous to leave alive. But he had his orders: bring Malum back to the city of Roxtus, alive. There would be time enough later to satisfy the need for vengeance and wipe out the Vorox.

“Enough,” he commanded. Reaching down, he grabbed the unconscious Malum by the throat and hauled him out from under the pile of rubble. “We have what we came for. Malum will face Tuma’s justice ... and so will all these beasts, in time.”

Throwing Malum’s body over his rock steed, the patrol leader mounted up. Once they realized what was happening, some of the Vorox moved to attack, only to be cut down by Skrall Thornax. The rest backed away. Was it sadness in their eyes as they saw the Skrall riding away with their leader? Could beasts of the desert feel such an emotion? Or was it dread of the day the Skrall would return, for all of them?

No one ... perhaps not even the Vorox themselves ... could say.

Chapter 3

The first thing Malum saw when he opened his eyes was a pair of Vorox. His first thought was that all of it – the attack by the Skrall, his capture – had been a bad dream. He had certainly had plenty of those lately.

But, no – these Vorox were in chains. Being desert dwellers, the Vorox hated any kind of confinement. It was sheer torture for them. Malum had no doubt that a Vorox penned in too long would simply lose the will to live. Rage grew in his heart for whoever had shackled these “beasts,” and he already knew who that was: the Skrall.

He looked up to see two of that hated species standing over him. One was a warrior, like those who had attacked his camp. The other was much taller, clad in green and black armor, and obviously in command.

“I am Tuma,” said the leader. “And you are Malum, disgraced Glatorian and friend to... the animals.”

“You are the trash of the desert,” Malum growled. “And I am the one who will celebrate at your grave.”

The Skrall warrior walked over to where Malum lay and kicked him in the side.

“That’s no way to talk,” said Tuma. “I brought you here to have a conversation.”

Malum got painfully to his feet. His wrists and ankles were surprisingly not shackled. Tuma had a great deal of confidence, it seemed.

“You brought me here for revenge,” said the ex-Glatorian. “My people bloodied yours and you can’t stand that.”

The warrior moved to strike Malum again, but Tuma stopped him. “Stand down. You are... half-right, Malum. Your Vorox have proven to be an annoyance lately. But killing you, though no doubt a great deal of fun, would not change that. Believe me, if I wanted you dead, even your pets would be unable to find all the pieces.”

Malum looked around. He was in the city of Roptus, filled with rock Agori and Skrall troops. The place was notorious for welcoming Glatorian inside and then never letting them leave. He could see Agori guards all along the walls and Skrall patrols entering and leaving at a constant pace. It was not a spot one dropped by for a visit.

“Then why am I here?”

“You control the Vorox,” said Tuma, gesturing to the pathetic, chained creatures. “They do what you command. That makes you a threat... or a potentially valuable ally. But before we could make any arrangement with you, we would have to see proof that you really can make these beasts do what you say.”

“And if I refuse?” asked Malum, already sure of the answer.

Tuma smiled. On him, it was an ugly expression. “Then we send you back to your friends, of course... so they can have a funeral, or whatever ritual they do to honor the dead.”

“That’s what I thought,” Malum replied.

The Skrall had it all wrong, of course. They assumed he had some mysterious power to control the Vorox, but he did not. He had won dominance of the pack by defeating its previous leader in single combat. As long as he led them to food and water and kept them away from unnecessary danger – in other words, as long as he was an effective pack leader – they would follow him. But they did it as free beings, not as slaves. The Skrall, he knew, did not want allies – they wanted soldiers they could sacrifice without hesitation.

“Take him to the arena,” Tuma ordered. The Skrall warrior grabbed Malum roughly by the arm and dragged him to the Glatorian arena in the center of the large settlement. Chained against the far wall were two more Vorox, both members of Malum’s own pack. A plan began to form in his mind, but it would depend on a great many unknown factors. How hungry and desperate were the Vorox? Too far gone to remember him? Would they understand what he was trying to do?

A half dozen Skrall warriors appeared, ringing the sides of the arena. A seventh took a position in a box behind the Vorox. At Tuma’s signal, he released the chains that held the beasts prisoner.

The two Vorox charged toward Malum. He could tell even from a distance they had been mistreated. They were eager for prey, and might not care who or what it would be. But he stood his ground, making direct eye contact with first one Vorox, then the other. Then he raised his right arm and brought it down slowly, all the while giving a low whistle.

The Vorox slowed, then stopped completely. They sank down to all fours and looked up at Malum, expectantly. To the Skrall watching, it looked like a miracle: two savage beasts tamed in an instant.

“It’s really quite easy, once you gain their respect,” Malum said, never taking his eyes off the Vorox. “Judging from their wounds, I would say they at least respect your capacity to inflict punishment.”

“My warriors could be trained to do this?” asked Tuma. The Vorox had been a problem ever since the Skrall started capturing them. Now and then, they broke loose and did a lot of damage before they could be subdued or killed.

“They have seen me do it,” Malum answered. “I am sure they could do it themselves now.”

The six Skrall warriors advanced on the beasts, who remained motionless at their approach. "Let them go," Tuma said to Malum.

Malum gave a short, sharp whistle. The Vorox sprang to life, wild again. The Skrall grabbed them immediately and dragged them back to the other end of the arena, struggling to hold them still. Tuma ordered the Skrall who had kicked Malum forward. He would be the lucky one to show his newfound mastery of the Vorox.

At Tuma's signal, the other warriors released their bestial captives. The Vorox charged toward the lone warrior who waited for them. In a perfect imitation of Malum's action, the Skrall raised and lowered his arm while whistling in just the same tone as he had heard. The effect was stunning, at least to him.

The Vorox didn't stop. They didn't even slow down. They struck the Skrall like twin avalanches, and once he was down, headed for Tuma. Malum took advantage of the confusion to snatch up the fallen warrior's weapon. He sprang out of the arena and shattered the chains holding another pair of Vorox with one swing.

"This way, brothers!" he yelled, charging for the gate.

The Vorox fell back and started after him, the Skrall in pursuit. The Agori at the gate, seeing a crazed Malum and four Vorox headed for them, wisely dove out of the way. A Thornax blast took out one of the Vorox, and another blast wounded a second. But Malum and the surviving two made it through the gate and out into the desert.

Tuma angrily got to his feet, ignoring the wounds inflicted by the Vorox. "After them! Drag them back here!" he shouted.

The Skrall would dutifully fan out into the desert in search of the escapees, but they would not find them. The Vorox network of tunnels extended even here, and Malum and his two pack mates had found refuge underground. When night fell, they would emerge and start the long trek back home.

The desert is a place of extremes, Malum said to himself. Blazing heat, chilling cold, fierce loyalty... and deep hatred. The Skrall won't forget this day... and to their bitter regret, neither will I.

Chapter 4

Branar cracked his whip and muttered a Skrall curse under his breath. As a named warrior, he was no stranger to dangerous situations or assignments that require he get his armored hands dirty. But his task today was both disgusting and deadly, and the sooner it was finished, the happier he would be.

Tuma insisted on these “Vorox runs” once every month. The object was to drive some captured Vorox north, over the path the Skrall had used to travel to Roptus the year before. The thinking was that if the shapeshifters who had driven the Skrall out of their original territory were moving south, the Vorox would encounter them along the way. The Vorox would no doubt die in the battle, but Branar might escape to make it back to Roptus with the news. And if he didn’t escape, well, Tuma would learn just as much from his failure to return.

All of which explained why Branar and a Skrall warriors were driving a half dozen savage Vorox along a mountain trail. The twin challenges were keeping the beasts moving and waiting to see if one or more of them would die a horrible death at the hands of the Skrall’s old foes. It was hot, it was dusty, and the job was more than likely a waste of time -- combined, it made Branar about as happy as a hungry spikit.

Branar did understand Tuma’s worry, of course. He had been one of the first warriors to encounter the shapeshifters, who the Skrall dubbed “Baterra” (an ancient word meaning “silent death”). He had been leading a small patrol out scavenging for supplies in a wooded area. When the two warriors on the flanks failed to respond to hails, he ordered weapons drawn. The baterra appeared out of the darkness, struck, killed three of his troops, then vanished. Branar ordered a return to the fortress and he and one other warrior managed to fight their way back. For bringing word of this strange new enemy back, he was rewarded by Tuma with a name. For a Skrall warrior, there was no greater honor.

It was not the last time Branar would face the baterra, but none of the battles ended in a victory. Skrall were skilled, ruthless, and efficient warriors, but they could not fight a foe that seemed to appear and disappear at will. Despite their best efforts, the Skrall were never able to accomplish the first condition of victory: choosing the time and place of the battle. The baterra attacked when they chose to, sometimes multiple times in a day. Then they might vanish for weeks at a time, letting even under-manned patrols pass right by. It seemed to be impossible to bait them into a trap.

“Watch them!” Branar barked to the Skrall warrior. “One of the Vorox just wandered off the path.”

It was a constant problem. Vorox were creatures of the open desert. They hated captivity or being forced to travel one way or the other. Any chance to escape was seized upon. It wasn’t unusual to return from one of these missions with fewer Vorox than one had at the start.

The Skrall warrior glanced to his left. The Vorox was just vanishing into the rocks, so still close enough to recapture. A nod from Branar said that the squad leader would keep an eye on the rest of the herd while the escapee was brought back. Grumbling, the warrior spurred his mount. The three Skrall were riding rock steeds received in trade from a nearby bone hunter troop. Sand stalkers were not the fighters that rock steeds were, and fighters were what might be needed on this trip.

He had just left the path when he heard the Vorox scream. Thornax launcher at the ready, he rode up a steep bank of shale. From that vantage point, he could see the remains of the Vorox scattered among the rocks below. There wasn't much left of the beast. The Skrall swiftly scanned the area. There was no sign of sand bats or other desert predators. Whatever had killed the Vorox was gone.

Or was it? Remembering just what they were out here to find, the Skrall backed his rock steed down to the path, then wheeled and galloped toward Branar. "Contact," he said quietly.

Branar gestured to the Vorox, saying, "Let them go."

The warrior gave a yell and started driving the Vorox off the path. Branar did the same. Dozens of Vorox scrambled up the rocks toward where the suspected baterra was hiding. Branar and the Skrall followed behind, halting at the top of the ridge. They watched the Vorox climb down the slope, scattering in every direction to elude pursuit. But no one was following them, and more importantly, nothing was attacking them. In a matter of moments, free once more, they had all disappeared into the mountains.

Branar's expression darkened. It was either another false alarm or the baterra were playing games again, more likely the former. He turned his head to look at his remaining warrior. In the micro-second it took him to make that movement, the other Skrall was dead. The warrior fell from his saddle with a vicious gash on his back. Of his attacker, there was no sign.

"Baterra," Branar said. "Show yourself."

It was a pointless thing to say and wouldn't make very good last words, he realized. But there was nothing to attack and little point in running. With luck, the other warrior would make it back to warn the city and ...

Branar hesitated. Why was he still alive, he wondered? It had been at least two minutes since the Skrall was killed. Baterra attacked quickly once their presence was known.

Unless ...

Branar spurred his rock steed back down the shale. Nothing tried to stop him. Once back on the path, he started toward Roptus. His senses were alert for any sign of an attack. But none came. And suddenly he knew why.

They want us to know they're coming, he thought. The baterra are so certain we can't stop them that they are giving us warning. They killed my warrior, but not me ... to show they have the power to grant life or death to the Skrall.

Now the Skrall would face the same choice. Would they fight the baterra, and risk annihilation, or flee again? Only Tuma could make that decision. For the sake of their race, Branar hoped he would make the right one.

Chapter 5

Tuma sat in his chamber, brooding. The news brought back by Branar had been dire indeed. The baterra were closer than he had imagined they would be, and so his plans for Bara Magna had to be advanced. Already, he had moved up the date for the attack on Atero, and laid out ambitious plans to seize control of the other villages. If all went well, his troops would control all of Bara Magna before the baterra emerged from the Black Spike Mountains. But any organized resistance by the Glatorian and Agori would put his plans in jeopardy.

A rap came on the chamber door. One of his guards entered and said softly, "The one you called is here."

Tuma nodded. The guard withdrew. A moment later, another figure entered the room, one who was not a Skrall. Tuma had been approached by this being some time ago, with an offer to provide useful information on the villages and their defenses as well as to act as a go-between for the Skrall and the bone hunters. This arrangement had so far proved profitable to both sides.

"You took a big chance sending me a summons," the traitor said. "What if someone had stumbled on your message? Where would I be then?"

"That is not my concern," growled Tuma. "Your safety is your responsibility. The welfare of my people is mine."

The traitor looked around the chamber, then gestured toward the doorway that led to the fortified city. "Seems to me your people are doing just fine."

Tuma rose to his full, imposing height. "We attack Atero tomorrow. Be prepared."

"Tomorrow?" the traitor said, startled. "I thought you were going to wait for the end of the tournament."

"Our plans have changed," Tuma answered. The look in his eyes said he had no intention of explaining further.

"On their own, or did someone change them?" asked the traitor. "Let me guess ... your neighbors to the north are coming to pay a visit."

Now it was Tuma's turn to be surprised. He stalked across the room, grabbed the traitor around the throat, and slammed that being into the wall. "What do you know of the baterra? Speak! Have you betrayed the Skrall to them, as you have betrayed your own people to us?"

"Urrrrk," croaked the traitor, as the Skrall's hand cut off all air. Tuma abruptly let go. The traitor crumpled to the ground, hand massaging a painful throat.

"I know... a great deal... about a great many things," the traitor said hoarsely. "But if you

want the benefit of that knowledge... we are going to have to come to a new arrangement."

Tuma's mouth curled into a sneer. "Your naked greed ill becomes you."

"I don't work for free," spat the traitor. "Not this kind of work, anyway. Now let's see if we understand each other – you fled south like a pack of frightened rodents because the baterra were decimating your people. Now they're closing in on you again, so you're in a big, fat hurry to seize the desert so you can buy some time and space. How am I doing so far?"

Tuma nodded, but said nothing.

"It's an excellent plan... for old women," the traitor said, with a harsh chuckle. "Run, until you can't run anymore, and hope your enemy exhausts himself running after you. Tell me, Tuma – have you ever killed a baterra?"

"Of course," said the Skrall leader. "How else do you think we learned they are machines, not living things?"

The traitor wandered to the back of the chamber, running a finger along the arm of Tuma's throne. "I see. So you downed one by accident and saw it fizzle and spark ... and then the baterra killed how many of yours? 100? 200?"

"Your point, sand worm," hissed Tuma.

"My point, my point... oh, yes," said the traitor, abruptly sitting down in Tuma's grand chair. "My point is that I know how to kill the baterra, and you don't. And I think that puts a new slant on things around here, doesn't it?"

"You will tell me how to kill those... things," Tuma said, his voice deathly quiet. "Or I will give you to the Spikit, as a snack. But you will not die, oh, no. We will keep you alive, patch you up, and when you are healed – we will give you to the Spikit again. And again. And again."

"See, there's only one problem, Tuma," leaning forward in the chair and smiling broadly. "You don't scare me. Sure, you can torture me, kill me... but what's in my head stays there. Then it's only a matter of time before the baterra come and finish you off."

Tuma wanted to bellow in rage. He wanted to tear the traitor's head off and mount it on a pole, for all to see. He wanted to storm the villages of Bara Magna, burn them to the ground, and slay the Agori the way the baterra had slain his people, little more than a year before. Had he been but a Skrall warrior, he would surely have done that. But he was more than that – he was the lone surviving Skrall leader left alive, and he had a responsibility to the empire.

"What is your price?" the Skrall said, slowly. "And be aware... you tread on dangerous ground. Push too far, and you may find I forget what is in the best interests of my

people in favor of what would be most... satisfying... to myself."

The traitor reclined on the throne. "No need to worry, Tuma. We both want what's best for the Skrall and the rock tribe. Of course we do. And as of today, I no longer work for you. From now on... we're partners."

"Partners? In what?" asked Tuma.

"In the conquest of this pile of sand," the traitor replied. "With my wits married to your warriors, we are going to carve Bara Magna up between us. Now you had better find a chair for yourself... we have a great deal of planning to do, don't we?"

Chapter 6

Tuma and Stronius rode north over mountain trails long unused. It had been along this very route one year before that the Skrall had fled from their last fortress. The vicious attacks of the baterra had driven them south through the Black Spikes to the borders of Bara Magna's great desert. Now two of their number were going back.

"This is madness," Stronius said. "You realize that."

No one else in the Skrall legions would have dared speak to Tuma like that. But Stronius was an elite warrior known for saying whatever was on his mind. His services to the Skrall led Tuma to be a bit more tolerant of his outbursts than he would have been otherwise.

"Then turn back," Tuma said calmly. "I did not order you to accompany me."

"I wasn't going to let you ride up here on your own," Stronius replied. He turned from Tuma to look at the path ahead. "I have a duty to protect the life of my leader. And your life is doubly at risk here."

"Baterra and...?"

Stronius shot Tuma an annoyed look. "Baterra pale beside those you would visit, and you know it." "We share a common enemy," Tuma said. "They will be... reasonable."

"We abandoned them to that enemy," Stronius snapped. "They will be merciless."

The two rode for most of two nights and a day. They ran into no baterra, so far as they knew. If the rocks or the trees were their enemies in another shape, well, those enemies chose not to attack. Now and then, they paused at the sight of Skrall armor littering the path where one of their warriors had perished during the long retreat.

Dawn was still a few hours away when they veered sharply eastward. All of the Skrall fortresses in this region had been destroyed by the baterra long ago. Logically, no one here should have survived the last year. But logic had nothing to do with who Tuma was seeking.

Stronius was the first to feel it – an electricity in the air, an oppressive feeling that seemed to slow all movement. His mind felt dull, his body sluggish. He turned to shout a warning to Tuma and it felt like it took an hour to perform that simple action.

Tuma felt less of an effect than Stronius, being a little further away. He spotted a robed figure atop some nearby rocks, wielding a wooden staff. "You!" he shouted. "Tell her I want an audience!"

The robed figure's head tilted, as if puzzled by the request, then the mysterious being disappeared among the rocks. A few minutes later, Stronius felt his head clear. He glanced at Tuma, who nodded once. Side by side, the two rode on.

The sky darkened. From every side of the pass, more robed figures peered down at the two Skrall. Their faces were hidden, but Tuma could feel their hatred just the same.

Up ahead, a half dozen more figures blocked the way. Beyond them, a seventh sat on a crude throne carved from part of the mountain itself. "Dismount," she ordered, in a voice that was surprisingly soft. Tuma tensed. He had not realized this one had ascended to leadership. His hope of surviving this journey dwindled considerably.

He and Stronius both got off their rock steeds. The seated figure then said, "The weapons of warriors are not allowed here."

"No," Stronius replied immediately. "An elite warrior never surrenders his weapon."

The robed figure shrugged. "Then he can surrender his life instead."

Pain exploded in Stronius' head. It was worse than anything he had ever felt, worse than anything a blade or a Thornax could do. Yet no weapon had ever touched his body. The pain tore a scream from him as he dropped to his knees.

"Stop!" Tuma shouted. "We came here in peace!"

A chorus of whispers came from every side. The sound chilled Tuma as he realized what he was hearing was laughter.

"You came here out of fear," the seated figure said. "Just as you abandoned us out of fear ... just as your kind banished us millennia ago, out of fear. You stink of it, Tuma, despite your mighty legions, despite your conquests. You are a warrior made of straw."

Tuma took three steps forward, ready to ram his sword into his tormentor. That was as far as he got before the pain hit him too. But he did not leave his feet, not even as the agony increased beyond all imaginable limits. He had made a vow long ago that he intended to keep – he would never kneel before the Sisters of the Skrall.

As quickly as it had appeared, the pain vanished. Tuma saw Stronius slowly standing back up again. He noted the elite warrior's club still lay on the ground.

The figure on the throne rose and removed her hood. She wore no helmet or armor. Her face was a dark gray in color, wizened and weathered. Tuma knew appearances were deceiving. Though her body might seem feeble in comparison to a Skrall warrior, the energies at her command were more devastating than any sword or axe could ever be.

"You did not fall," she said to Tuma, matter of factly.

"I prefer to remain standing," the Skrall leader replied. "That is why I am here."

"You risked your sanity and your life coming here." She gestured at the other robed females. "They would see you dead, and worse than dead... I see no reason to deny them."

Tuma gave the slightest of shrugs, an acknowledgment that the female who faced him could do what she claimed – not an easy admission for him to make, but an honest one. “I thought you were a seeker of knowledge,” he said. “If you kill me, you’ll never learn what I came here to offer you.”

“You have nothing we want,” the female answered dismissively. “And we have nothing left to give you in return.”

She resumed her seat, her gaze never leaving Tuma. She stared straight into his eyes as she addressed her assembled people.

“Kill them,” she said. “Kill them both.”

Chapter 7

Stronius stood at the edge of a glassy lake. It was a calm, clear day, warm for the mountains, with a soft breeze. Rock Agori were working nearby, building weapons of war. Not far away, a horde of Vorox, each chained to the other, was being marched off to labor in the mines.

Life was good.

Well, almost. As he looked down at his reflection in the water, Stronius noticed a small crack in the chestplate of his armor. When had that happened? Skrall armor was some of the toughest around and he couldn't recall an opponent landing any blows lately that might have damaged it. This was puzzling.

Even more confusing –and disturbing – was that the crack was growing bigger as he watched. It was already more than two inches long, and spreading into a spider-web of tiny fractures. He staggered back a step. The crack was big enough now that he could see something through it. It looked like another layer of armor, this one silver.

The crack accelerated its pace. Before Stronius' startled eyes, his chest armor split open, followed by his arm and leg plate. With a loud crack, his helmet shattered. He stared at his reflection in horror -- something was emerging from inside the ruin of his armor -- a baterra!

And Stronius could do nothing but scream.

Not far away, Tuma heard Stronius' ragged cry. The female Skrall weren't satisfied to just execute their prisoners. No, they wanted to torture them first, using their mental powers to create illusions. He had no idea what Stronius was seeing now, but it was a good guess that his elite warrior's sanity would go before his life did.

Tuma's weapon was on the ground, just out of his reach. The women had left it there to mock him. His mind told his arm to reach for it, but his arm wouldn't move. His body was paralyzed by the mental force of his captors. Only his mouth still worked. When the time came, they wanted to hear his screams, too.

But a good warrior always had more than one strategy in mind. He'd hoped to use the threat of the baterra to talk the females into allying with him. If that wouldn't work, he knew something that would ... something that the females wouldn't be able to resist.

He tried to rise. A stabbing pain tore through his mind. It was time, then. He opened his mouth and yelled one word: "Angonce."

For a moment, the pain increased and he thought he would surely go mad or die. Then it eased, just enough for him to take a breath. The leader of the female Skrall approached.

She grabbed Tuma's jaw roughly and forced his head up to look at her.

"What do you know of Angonce?"

Tuma flicked his eyes toward Stronius. "Stop ... whatever ... you're doing to him ... and we'll talk."

The female Skrall nodded to one of the others. The next instant, Stronius stopped screaming and collapsed in a heap.

"I know where he might be," said Tuma. "At least, where he once was."

"Is that all?" the female Skrall spat. "We all know that. The great tower ... the burning place ... in the Valley of the Maze. That is where they all were."

"And they all fled," answered Tuma. "No one knows where. But Angonce always had more of a ... curiosity ... about the Agori than the others. He would stay close enough to keep an eye on them."

The leader of the Sisters of the Skrall considered his words. The females of her species had been gifted from birth with psionic powers, strong enough to enable them to withstand the hatred and violence of the males and to resist the baterra. But the legends said that one female Skrall had once encountered the Great Being named Angonce, and Angonce had taught her how to ascend to a whole new level of power. Some said entire civilizations rose and fell on her whims now. She had evolved far past her own species and had no contact with them ever again. Still, every Skrall female hoped to one day find Angonce and learn his secrets.

"Why would you share this with us?" asked the female. "You know what we could do with that kind of power."

"I could lie to you," said Tuma, "and say I think greater power would make you virtuous and good. But the truth is, I think the whole story is a pile of rock steed droppings. It's a load of nonsense you and your sisters tell each other to stay warm on cold nights in the mountains. Even if you find a Great Being, he will laugh in your face – that's what they do best."

"And if you're wrong?" the female said, a wicked smile curving the edges of her mouth upward.

Tuma returned her smile. "Then I won't live long enough to regret it, will I?"

"And what do you want in exchange?"

"Our freedom," answered Tuma. "And your pledge to destroy any baterra you encounter on your journey."

"The baterra pose no threat to us," she countered. "We carry no weapons that they

would recognize as such. Why should we start a war with them?"

"Because the alternative is two dead Skrall you have to bury, and no more idea of where Angonce is than you had before," said Tuma. "You know, the problem with revenge is it is over so quickly. And when you are done, what is there left to do? Even miserable creatures like the Sisters of the Skrall need something to aspire to, to strive for ... isn't that true?"

Of course, thought the female. *In this case, we aspire to the destruction of you and yours. So we will seek out baterra for you ... and make sure they know just where you are.*

She nodded. "We have a bargain, Tuma. You and Stronius can leave ... but once we find our Great Being, we will see you two again. Be sure of that."

That is what you think, witch, thought Tuma. *As soon as we have seized the Bara Magna desert and destroyed any baterra that are left, we will find a way to eliminate you too.*

"A bargain it is," said Tuma. "And when – if – you return from your quest, be sure we will give you a... memorable welcome home."

Chapter 8

The Sisters of the Skrall sat in council. It had only been a short time since they had done the unthinkable – allow a Skrall leader and elite warrior to walk out of their camp, alive. But a bargain had been struck: the freedom of the two arrogant males in return for information on the location of a Great Being named Angonce.

“I do not believe their tale,” one of the female Skrall whispered. “Why would Angonce have remained when the other Skrall fled? Why would he be there?”

“As a guard?” the leader of the sisterhood asked. “They say there is great power there ... power that could make someone an emperor ... or an empress.”

“And we will seek out that power?”

The leader considered. Theirs had not been an easy existence. Banished from the sight of the male Skrall, abandoned to the wilds, struggling to survive while the males pursued their plans of conquest ... and now Tuma, their hated enemy, had been forced to buy his freedom from them. His payment had been dear indeed, if it truly led to the secrets of the Great Beings. And if Angonce was still on Bara Magna, could he be far from that which was most treasured by his kind?

“We go,” she said. “Gather the sisters together. We will travel to the Valley of the Maze and pierce its heart. And when we find what is hidden there ... we will do the same to our Skrall brothers.”

Tuma and Stronius had traveled in silence since they left the camp. Stronius was furious, that much was obvious. No doubt he would have preferred to die at the hands of the sisterhood than bargain with them. But a leader could not afford to allow personal pride to threaten the welfare of his people. Dying here would not have helped the Skrall legions at all. Sending the sisterhood off on a wild sand bat chase, and possibly having some baterra killed in the process, might prove to be a great boon.

Stronius is a fine warrior, thought Tuma. But he does not understand that sometimes a leader has to make deals with those he finds ... repulsive.

Not for the first time, he thought of Metus. The ice Agori had proven somewhat useful up to now, helping to strike deals with the bone hunters and providing information on the defenses of the various villages and the skills of their Glatorian. Lately, he had promised to share the secret of how to defeat the shapeshifting baterra, but he had yet to deliver on that pledge. Privately, Tuma doubted Metus truly knew anything of use on the subject. But he preferred to keep the Agori close by for now, at least until the second phase of the war against the villages had begun. Better to let him keep thinking his best interests lay with an alliance with the Skrall than risk him betraying battle plans to the Glatorian. A traitor, after all, can never be trusted.

Once the war was over and the Agori had been subjugated, of course, things would be

different. Metus' usefulness would be at an end, along with his freedom ... and quite possibly his life. He was a viper, and Tuma had no wish to suffer his company any longer than was necessary.

The Skrall leader abruptly stopped. The pass up ahead was narrow and dotted with trees. He and Stronius had traveled through it on the way to meet with the Sisterhood earlier that day and met with no incident. But things had been different then – for one thing, there had been fewer trees. “You see it?” Tuma said, as softly as he could.

“Of course,” Stronius answered. “An ambush, no doubt ... well, we will make them regret this day before we're through.”

“Will we?” said Tuma. “There are six of those ‘trees,’ each a baterra in disguise, and two of us. I doubt we will make it through the pass alive.”

“So what do we do – call on the sisters for help?” Stronius sneered.

Tuma whirled and struck the elite warrior, sending Stronius sprawling on the ground. Before the warrior could leap up, weapon drawn, Tuma had his own weapon at the fallen fighter's neck.

“Speak to me like that again,” Tuma snarled, “and you may find you have something caught in your throat.”

Stronius eyes flicked down to the point of the blade now pressing against his neck. He knew exactly what Tuma meant. He forced his anger down and bowed his head in the traditional Skrall sign of submission to a greater authority. Placated, Tuma withdrew his blade.

As Stronius got to his feet, he noticed something odd about the baterra who lay in wait for them. At first, he wasn't sure just what did not seem right about the scene before him. Then it hit him, and his hand went to his weapon immediately.

“The roots,” he said. “Look at the roots.”

Tuma did as he asked. Baterra disguises were traditionally thorough. If one changed its shape to look like a rock, it could be mistaken for a rock that had been in place for years. If another became a plant or a tree, there was nothing to give away that it had not been growing in that spot for ages. Even the roots of the trees looked to be buried deep in the ground, an incredible illusion.

Only the roots of these new trees in the pass were not growing down into the dirt. Instead, they were resting on the surface, and some were torn and ragged. Either the baterra were getting sloppy or ...

“Those trees have been uprooted and placed there,” said Tuma. “They wanted us to see them and mistake them for our enemy. And that means -- ”

Pain exploded in the center of Tuma's back. He hit the ground, even as two baterra emerged from the rocks behind them -- or rather, the baterra had been the rocks behind them. They had run a double-bluff, focusing the attention of their prey on a fake ambush in front of them, while the true trap was behind them.

They are growing more clever, thought Stronius. Here is hoping we live long enough to share that cheerful bit of news with Roxtus ...

Silently, the baterra advanced. Stronius readied himself for battle. He and Tuma would die with honor, at least. There would be no "deals" struck with this enemy.

He raised his war club and, with a guttural yell of rage, Stronius charged.

Chapter 9

Tuma opened his eyes. With a start, he realized he must have blacked out from his wound, leaving Stronius to face two deadly baterra alone.

The worst had happened. Stronius was unconscious on the ground, not far away. His war club and Thornax launcher were nowhere to be seen. Tuma knew that he had little chance of stopping the baterra on his own, but he would have to try. He reached for his sword... but it was gone. So was his launcher.

He was defenseless.

Tuma struggled painfully to his feet. His back throbbed with pain. The baterra's attack had pierced his armor and damaged some of the organic tissue within. He could still fight, and if he had a weapon, he was sure he could take at least one baterra with him. As it was, all he could do was face his death like a true Skrall.

"Come on, then," he shouted at the baterra. "Finish this!"

The baterra made no move to advance. They seemed puzzled, if such a word could be applied to machines.

"Sorry, Tuma. You're going to be disappointed."

The Skrall leader whirled at the sound. It was Metus, unarmed, leaning against a rock as if he didn't have a care in the world. As the Skrall watched in surprise, Metus walked up the two baterra and regarded them like they were just annoyances.

"Move along. Nothing to see here," he said to the two mechanical warriors.

To Tuma's amazement, the baterra did just that. They turned and walked away! His first thought was a dark one: that Metus was truly in charge of the baterra and responsible for all the Skrall deaths they had caused, not to mention all the other warriors they had slain back in the Core War.

Metus was smart enough to guess where Tuma's thoughts would be going. He turned to the Skrall with his arms out. "Now, Tuma, if I controlled them... If I had decimated your legions and your fortresses... why would I leave you alive to maybe put a dagger in my back? Use your brain. Remember what I told you."

Tuma charged forward, ignoring his pain, and backhanded Metus, knocking the Agori to the ground. "I have grown tired of your insolence. I need no weapon to end your life."

"I just saved your life, yours and Stronius'," Metus spat. "A simple 'thank you' would have sufficed."

More than ever, Tuma wanted to shut Metus' mouth for good. But he couldn't escape the truth the Agori had spoken. The baterra were in a perfect position to kill him and his

elite warrior, but hadn't. Why?

"You said you had a secret... a way to stop the baterra," Tuma said. "Is that what I saw here today?"

Metus got to his feet. "Just about. You're not dead, are you? Yes, I know a secret, and it's not one any Skrall would ever figure out on his own."

The Agori smiled. For a change, he was actually telling the truth. Long ago, in the closing days of the Core War, Metus had hitched a ride on a supply caravan heading to an Ice army outpost. Normally, he would have preferred to make his way on his own, but his ice axe had broken and was in for repair. He hadn't time to dig up a new weapon and didn't much like the thought of traveling through a war zone unarmed.

The wagons were ambushed by a dozen baterra. The Ice warriors and other Agori put up a fight, but none of them survived the battle. Through it all, though, the baterra just ignored Metus. Even when he grabbed the reins of a wagon and made his escape, they didn't pursue. The question of why dogged him all the way to the outpost. When he arrived, he told the warriors there that he had been knocked unconscious early in the battle and must have rolled under a wagon where the attackers couldn't see him. They seemed to accept the explanation.

Metus knew better, of course. There had been something different about him, something that led the baterra to spare his life. Once he realized that, the answer was blindingly obvious.

I wasn't armed, he thought. These creatures are killing warriors on every side. Their definition of "warrior" is anyone who has a weapon.

Now, here he was, years later, apparently the only being that had made this connection. The Skrall would never figure it out on their own, and even if they did, they would never want to do it – they would cut off their arms before they would lay their weapons down. When he saw Tuma and Stronius both unconscious, he had ditched his ice axe and rushed down, kicking their weapons well away from them. That brought the baterra up short, since their programming did not include attacking unarmed beings.

"You owe me," said Metus. "I think it's time we discussed payment."

"Our deal stands," Tuma growled. "Do not go too far, Agori."

"Really? All right, then I can always bring the baterra back here. You can try negotiating with them. Or you can talk to me, like a... civilized warlord."

Stronius was waking up. Metus decided he better wrap this conversation up fast. Stronius would snap him in half whether it was in the Skrall's best interest or not.

"Listen, you're a great and powerful leader," the Agori said. "You're going to be the ruler of Bara Magna pretty soon, and with my help, you're going to wipe out the baterra. But

just in case something should go wrong... if you were killed in battle, say... someone should be ready to step into your boots, don't you think?"

"If a leader falls, an elite warrior takes over," Tuma replied, already not liking where this was going.

Metus laughed. "Stronius? Please. The guy couldn't lead a Spikit to dinner. And I won't work with him, meaning the baterra carve your last legion to bits. No, I was thinking more of... me."

Now it was Tuma's turn to howl with laughter. "You?? You are no Skrall, just a miserable traitor to his own kind. Perhaps I should hand you over to the Agori and leave you to their justice, Metus."

Metus crossed his arms over his chest. When he spoke, his voice had none of its usual bluster. It was cold and flat. "Those are my terms. If you get killed or become unfit to lead, the legion answers to me. Otherwise, just kill me now, Tuma. My death will only come a little earlier than yours and that of the rest of your warriors."

"They will never accept it," said Tuma. "They will never take orders from an Agori."

Metus chuckled. "If you go down, things will be so desperate they would even take orders from a lummox like Stronius. Anyway, you let me worry about that. Do we have a deal?"

"For now," Tuma said. "But once the baterra are defeated..."

"I'm on my own," Metus finished for him. "I got it. Well, don't be concerned – all of this will be over soon, and nothing's going to happen to you, right? You're just humoring an Agori."

"Yes," Tuma agreed. "Yes, it will all be over. Everything... and everyone... ends in time."

Metus smiled. He quickly retrieved his ice axe, and then happily "discovered" where the Skrall weapons had fallen. It had been a good day. Perhaps Tuma really would conquer the villages and the baterra in time, but the Skrall leader was in a dangerous profession. There was always the potential for accidents. Of course, it might be wise to include Stronius in the "accident" as well, if at all possible. The thought was a very entertaining one, and it kept him amused all the way back to Roxtus.

As for Tuma, his thoughts were his own. He would have to make a formal announcement to his legion, one they would have a hard time believing. But he would also give a whispered order to Stronius: if anything were to happen to him in battle, even a noble death at the hands of a Glatorian, the elite warrior was to immediately slay Metus.

Yes, everything ends, Tuma said to himself. But some endings are more painful than others, my Agori friend. Pray you never learn just how painful.

Tuma smiled and resolved to put the whole matter out of his mind for now. He had, after all, a world to win.