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RULES**

AGE OF FANTASY

TORN FROM HOME

*** SHORT STORY ***

TORN FROM HOME

by Alexander Thompson

The city of Mabalo churned with life. The city's population was composed of members from every one of the Beastmen tribes, from the hyena-like Waheni and the lion-esque horned Ndoli to the Ndwari centaurs and the avian Hapari called Mabalo home. The Ndwari cultivated farmland in wide open spaces for miles around the city, pulling ploughs behind them.

Towering one-eyed Silombi workers left large ruts in the earth as they dragged massive sandstone blocks from the quarry to the nearly completed city wall. Just outside of town a large dirt track could be seen. The landscape surrounding it was dotted with small huts and fenced-in wallows where Waheni tribes folk raised two-headed boar.

The more daring breeders raised and trained beast hounds; vicious creatures, and when properly trained, invaluable in hunting and war. Traffic was nearly constant out of the city's gates and the winged messenger Hapari flew in steady streams in the skies above.

Hakemba enjoyed delivering messages. It gave him an excuse to fly all over the savannah. It didn't pay well, but he often found things in his travels that he could sell or trade when he arrived back in the city. He had just emptied his satchel at a nearby village and they only had a few messages to send back with him on his return journey.

He was eager to fill the remainder of his bag with whatever he could find on his return flight. Hakemba flapped his wings hard until he settled into a strong wind current headed loosely in the direction he wanted to go. Stopping only a few times along the way to rest and forage, he flew the remainder of the return journey back to Mabalo. He dropped off the few items he had gotten from the village and flew home to his nest in a large baobab tree outside of town.

"I do not understand why anyone chooses to live in a cramped city when they could enjoy the fresh open air of a well-made nest," he thought to himself as he surrendered to peaceful visions behind his heavy eyelids.

In the morning, Hakemba dropped off a sack of messages he had gotten from a nearby town before making his way to the market. He had managed to find sugar sap trees, on his way back, and filled a whole pouch with honey-colored chunks of the hardened sweet sap. But as he entered the normally raucous marketplace, it was eerily silent.

Most of the crowds had dispersed and several of the vendors were absent from their stalls. They all felt it, something in the air was off, and Hakemba felt a static jump between the feathers in his plumage. Small tremors could be felt beneath his feet and cracks in the earth began forming. The sensations and trembling steadily increased in intensity. Instinctively, he took to the air as cracks beneath him gave way to a small fissure.

Rising above the streets and buildings, Hakemba could see a large cloud far away in the distance. It was too far for him to see the source of the cloud, but he could tell that it was moving fast, and whatever was causing it was rapidly approaching the unsuspecting town.

A scream tore him back to the town below. The fissures were growing in size and hanging to the edge was a young cub from the Ndoli tribe. He was desperately attempting to claw his way out of the devouring jaws of the chasm. "Help! I'm slipping!" the cub screamed.

Hakemba dove. There was quite a bit of distance between him and the cub, he would have to be fast. He pumped his wings, urging them to beat faster. The cub was screaming, unable to gain traction, it slipped fully over the edge and began to plummet. Hakemba was over the chasm now. He pulled his wings in tight, forming himself into a tight teardrop and adding a slow spin to his rapidly accelerating descent. Within moments he reached the cub.

"Gotcha!" he said as he collected the cub with his rear talons.

Hakemba was going too fast to immediately pull out of his dive. He partially opened his wings to create drag. The cub had gone silent with terror. The fissure was still expanding in width and depth. Craning his neck, he oriented himself towards one of the ends that seemed to be growing away from him.

Unfurling his wings, he exited his free fall and shot further down the opening chasm. With his speed under control, Hakemba banked hard to the left to turn around and began to climb. It was difficult to climb through the air while holding the cub. Hakemba quickly rolled out of the way of a falling cart. Objects from the surface were falling into the widening fissure. The roar of the earth around him was deafening.

He fought to stay focused on a clear path through the falling debris. Flapping his wings faster yet, He banked to the side to avoid a falling house then accelerated forward to dodge a large boulder. He pulled up and flipped onto his back, flying upside down as he sped away from a falling fruit stall. With a twist, he righted himself and was able to steer towards the middle of the chasm. While a steady flow of flotsam cascaded over the edge, the center was fairly unobstructed. Hakemba pumped his wings hard to clear the mouth of the chasm.

The roar was still deafening and the cloud that Hakemba had seen only moments before was upon them. It slammed into the town. Obscuring everything in dust. The earth shook violently and arcs of lightning dimly flashed through the haze. A gale more powerful than any storm that Hakemba had flown in, whipped around them.

Cries went out as beastmen, blinded by the storm, were buffeted by large debris carried on the violent winds. Hakemba got to the ground and dug all of his talons in as deeply as he could, pinning the cub between him and the land. His wings and legs burned from the effort. He found it difficult to cling to the earth, but he held on. Letting go meant certain and painful death.

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Small tremors and aftershocks continued for a few minutes after the cloud had passed and the dust had settled. The core of the city was gone, swallowed by the earth. The outskirts and suburbs of the town were in ruin. Small fires were sprouting up in the wreckage.

Hakemba had tried his best to land as far away from the chasm as he could while navigating the sand storm. But when he opened his eyes, he squawked his alarm that the mouth of the fissure had consumed the land and everything on it to within feet of where he had anchored himself. Once the earth had ceased rolling, the cub took a moment to find his legs before running into the arms of his father.

Hakemba stood to his feet and shook the dust from his plumage before looking around. For a while it was silent. Everyone was too stunned to move or speak as they tried to grapple with what had just happened. When they did finally begin to speak, it was only in whispers and broken sobs as the full shock of the destruction began to sink in. The scene left Hakemba entirely numb, his mind struggling to rationalize what his eyes wanted him to believe.

He steadied himself against a cracked pillar as his world began to spin with panic. His runaway thoughts jarred to stop only as his group of survivors were approached by a Ndwari runner, his four powerful legs quickly dashing through the ruined streets. The Ndwari informed them that all able-bodied beastmen were to leave the city. The chasm had swallowed most of the city and the quakes had disrupted this year's harvest. Survival depended on finding a new home.

"Search the wreckage for any provisions and essentials. Pile them on sleds and carts and prepare to leave by morning. Any Hapari should fly quickly to carry the news to the remote rookeries and villages so that they will be ready as well" the Ndwari told them, before heading off along the chasm towards the next group of survivors.

Hakemba wasted no time taking to the air. This new sense of direction distracted him from the waves of distress he felt within. Thrusting off hard, he quickly gained elevation and caught a prevalent wind that would carry him towards some of the larger rookeries and stack poles near the mountains. Below, small groups began breaking off and heading into the wreckage of the outer city.

Scattered Silombi townsfolk could be seen lifting larger debris from the old streets and clearing paths for aid. Dotted along the edge of the chasm, hubs of carts and sleds saw a steady stream of beastmen loading essential supplies salvaged from the devastation. Beastmen could be heard shouting the names of missing loved ones, hoping against hope that they may have survived this calamity.

As night began to fall, beastmen gathered around small scattered camps throughout what remained of the outer city.

Captain Waseka twisted his fingers through the mane under his cheek as he looked out at the damage caused to the city. As part of the militia, he had been assigned to help organize and lead the mobilization preparation for the following morning.

In a silent stupor, he watched the firelight dance across his vision. He barely noticed as the town shaman, Pamwana, reached bare-pawed into the fire and pulled out a large cracked bone. Pamwana had pulled the shoulder blade of a two-headed boar from the fire and was running his claws over the cracked and blackened surface, muttering frantically to himself.

Without breaking his gaze from the fire, Waseka asked "What is it, Pamwana?"

Pamwana was quiet for a moment before morosely saying "I am not sure if we will make it through the night".

"It will be hard going for some time; we have lost many and will lose many more. But the worst is behind us. We will travel to the next settlement and find safety there." Said Waseka. But even he was finding it difficult to hide his worry.

Pamwana took a seat next to Waseka. And said, "I fear that this might only be the beginning" before passing him the cracked shoulder bone.

Waseka now saw that the bone had been burned and was cracked in several places. Pamwana had probably been reading the cracks as a way to divine wisdom from the spirits.

"I can't make sense of your omens, Pamwana, you'll have to tell me what it says."

"As a stone cast into water creates many ripples. A large power has been unleashed and its many waves will buffet us. The spirits warn that the tide is rushing in, and we will face many tribulations".

Waseka turned the bone over in his paws and ran a claw down one of its more prominent cracks before returning it to Pamwana. The events of the day had shaken him to his core. But the people were vulnerable right now. He had to be strong for them.

The moon was high in the sky when the alarm went out. Creatures were emerging from the rift. They were fearsome, horned things with large leathery wings, and they were armed with chain whips and swords. Their wings thrashed at the air as they climbed into the sky in a thick torrent, forming a slowly spinning dark cloud. Waseka's mane bristled as he shouted, "We leave now! Only take what you can carry!"

He blew a long solitary note on the horn he wore at his waist and followed it with a roar that rumbled like thunder across the ruined city. Beast calls erupted in response all around him. Hulking Silombi townsfolk grabbed partially filled sleds and immediately began dragging them away from the city. Those that were ready roused the others. In moments the refugees were mobilized with Waseka and his warriors urging them on.

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The dark cloud in the sky began to descend like the head of a spear. Beastmen warriors had rallied behind Waseka. The wave of horned devils crashed against the defensive line but the beastmen were resolute, digging in with hoof and claw, as both sides tore into each other. The daemoniac furies harried the Beastmen from the sky but archers forced many of them to the ground with relentless arrow volleys.

Once on the ground, Ndoli warriors savagely cleaved flesh from bone with axe and swords. Waseka cleaved a daemon right out of the sky as it flew towards him. Carrying the momentum through, he spun round and brought his massive sword up, then straight down in a devastating overhand swing that cut a daemon from the shoulder to the hip. Waseka felled enemy after enemy, the rhythmic swings of his great sword carving up anything that got too close. They were losing ground and time. But it was taking all of his concentration to fight the unrelenting wave of enemies in front of him.

Waseka's fur bristled, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw a massive shadow descend from the sky and land hard behind him. He was abruptly sent tumbling by a massive hammer strike. He hit the ground several times before coming to a complete stop several yards away. Every breath was agony and his vision was darkening. The force of the blow had broken several of his ribs, and the flames emitted from the weapon had seared his side. The pain was intense, his vision was starting to narrow and he could hear his heartbeat in his head. He saw a winged daemon twice his size, wielding a flaming hammer large enough to split ogre skulls, start making its way towards him. As it raised its hammer to strike a killing blow. A scream of a thousand eagles caused it to hesitate.

Strangeness in the wind had Hakemba feeling uneasy. He had made a large circuit through all of the region's main nesting grounds and was now leading thousands of Hapari to meet up with the rest of the migration. The moon was bright tonight and as he began his final approach he saw the source of his unease. A torrent of dark bodies was pouring from the rift, flooding the ruins of Mabalo, charging onto the ruined streets.

The Beastmen refugees were under attack and overwhelmed.

The rest of the Hapari conclave behind him was now realizing this as well. Hakemba let out a single screech and gazed around at the Hapari around him. The conclave around him signaled in accord. They gathered in a formation around him and began to climb. With anticipation, they waited to give the 'second call', an old custom where the first screech called them to gather and the second signaled them to dive. This second call was always done in unison to strike fear and disorient their prey moments before impact. This was the dreaded "second calling" as it was known by the other Beastmen tribes.

The Hapari had climbed high above the swirling mass of daemons. Each group had moved into position. On his mark, each band of Hapari pitched forward, tucked their wings, and entered a steep dive. Rapidly gaining speed, each of them spinning slightly as they plummeted towards the earth.

The wind whipped through his feathers as he continued to accelerate. In unison moments before impact, the Hapari extended their talons forward, let loose the infamous 'Second Call of the Hapari', and collided hard with the enemy.

The daemons caught unaware were thrust out of the sky. The Hapari bore them to the ground, smashing them against the earth. Hawk's squad ignored the smaller daemons, they're focus was on the daemon champion. Their combined impact knocked it to the ground, stunning it. Before it had time to react, the Hapari swarmed in repetitive strikes deftly flying out of the way of the daemons' retaliatory hammer swings and arcing back at its exposed flank. Within moments the daemon champion had been shredded to bits.

Waseka felt a surge of energy as someone pulled him off the ground. It was Pamwana.

Pamwana was shouting, "This is our chance, we have to go!"

Disoriented, he tried to protest "but we have to save the townsfolk, we need to buy them time to escape."

With surprising strength, Pamwana pulled him away from the fray and said "The wave of destruction has broken upon us. We must move the people before we are struck again. Our friends of the Hapari tribe will keep them at bay long enough and then catch up on their own."

Understanding, Waseka conceded. With a cackle, Pamwana reached into a pouch at his waist and threw a fistful of shimmering yellow powder over himself and Snaptooth. They passed through the ruins of the city and caught up with the rear of the caravan, surprisingly without notice.

The Hapari continued their assault. Understanding that there was no way to stem this endless flow of daemons, they used their tactics to disrupt the enemies' progress toward the caravans. Hawk's squad focused on eliminating lieutenants and champions of the horde. They managed to eliminate several more effectively disrupting the chain of command. The other Hapari sowed rampant chaos through a constant hail of dives and screams. The spearhead of the enemy had been blunted. The daemon footsoldiers, without direction, had stopped pursuing targets and had resorted to aimless pillaging, making them easy targets to pick off. The daemon furies, while aggressive, couldn't match the speed and mobility of the Hapari. With each successful dive, the Hapari drove more of them into the ground.

Hakemba stole a glance towards the caravan. They had given the people of Mabalo the time they needed to clear the city and make a clean break. He gave a low nasally sounding call to signal the end of the hunt. The remaining Hapari disengaged and started making their way towards the caravan. Hakemba and a few others, however, took a detour to a corpse of baobab trees that they had once called home.

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Despite being a good distance from the city centre, they had not managed to escape the carnage of the day's events. What had once been a lush grove of baobab trees, with delicately constructed twig nests tucked cozily between each branch, was now a blasted hilltop where the trees smoldered like sputtering candles and the scorched ground was buried beneath hot ash.

His talons and feathers were slick with the corrosive black blood of daemons, which burned his skin. The city before him burned. The blaze spread and periodically he would see a building destroyed by the wanton malice of the daemon scourge. He could see figures, silhouetted against the blaze, begin pouring over the walls, spreading their destruction to the outlying homes and fields.

They could never go back, he knew this. Even if they could somehow push this scourge back into the pits they came from, there would be nothing to come back to. There was a rumbling, and Hakemba felt a slight tremor in the earth below him. A section of the city wall burst apart, disgorging a tidal wave of hate-fueled daemons.

Towering above, daemons of titanic proportions waded through the writhing masses, destroying whole buildings with singles swings of their massive war axes. A seething venom entered his heart and filled his form with subdued rage. Their home was shattered, their old lives dead; they would never return to the old bustling markets full of trade or great Silombi stone quarries. The old Waheni pens would now lay empty and the fields be left bare. Mabalo was now only a memory and they were a people torn from home.