

THE LAST OF THE EAGLE RIDERS - PART 2

By Adam Janus

A short second later, the pair felt an almost imperceptible rumble beneath them as the leviathan stalked closer. *Boom... boom... boom... boom...* occasionally followed by a short pause and the intake of air in short bursts as the dragon tried to sniff out its prey.

Leaning in close to Bron's ear, Screech whispered some last minute advice.

"When the wyrm finds us, stand perfectly still. It is hunting for food, not enemies. Do not act, only react. It will think you are paralyzed with fear." The eagle raised its beak to sniff the air before continuing, its soft breath rustling Bron's hair. "A dragon's night vision is so good it can see the shadows of shadows. Its day vision is equally proficient, but like all creatures possessed of night and day vision, the varying depth of shadow and patches of light from the fires and rising sun will make it impossible for it to focus on us both if we move from shadow to light. When you react, let your instincts guide your actions and be precise. If the battle drags on, the beast will incinerate us. I will take care of the sorcerer on its back."

The great bird once again lowered its head to nudge Bron in the chest, this time companionably. "Remember, human, you are an eagle warrior, and a dragon slayer," it said before hopping away and taking to the air, into the deep shadows of the partially collapsed, high domed ceiling of the temple.

Muscles taut, standing perfectly still, Bron waited, the seconds feeling like hours.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, the reverberations beneath his feet ceased and the dragon's massive, reptilian head appeared above the ruined eastern wall of the temple. Its eyes, easily as big as Bron's head, flicked back and forth between the eagle perched near the roof, atop a partially collapsed support pillar, and the human, standing stock still on the ground.

Pulling its gargantuan head back and down, the dragon slammed its horned skull against the already weakened granite and marble wall in an awe inspiring display of power, creating its own entrance, and showering the interior with dust and stone shrapnel. The temple groaned in protest as its crumbling foundation threatened to topple the entire building around them.

Through it all Bron held his ground. He could taste his own blood as it trickled down his face, and into his mouth, from the many nicks and cuts inflicted by the tiny stone missiles sent flying throughout the cavernous temple.

As the dust cleared, the behemoth came into view, directed by an armored sorcerer seated between its folded wings. The frost elf scanned the shadows above in search of the eagle, while silently mouthing the words to a spell.

With deliberate, almost feline ease, the dragon stalked toward the motionless human, huge head held low to the ground, flattening its serpentine neck like a cobra's. Its forked, snake-like tongue flicked out of its blood stained maw, savoring the salty taste of fear that rolled off the terrified human in waves.

But the wyrm sensed something else, something unfamiliar boiling below the surface,

permeating and mingling with the fear. Curious, the dragon flicked its tongue toward the human again, not noticing the deadly intent burning in its prey's eyes.

As the leviathan's tongue flicked mere inches from Bron's chest, close enough for him to smell rotten meat and sulfur on its breath, he reacted.

His sword arm sped by revulsion and adrenaline, he sliced through the dragon's forked appendage like it was hot butter. The severed slab of meat fell to the floor with a wet plop.

Surprised by this sudden burst of violence, the dragon pulled its head back as its mouth filled with blood.

Bron acted on pure instinct, bellowing in defiance as he stepped below the beast's rising head and swung his sword upward, from right to left. Sparks flew as the razor edge of his ancient blade cut through the scales of the dragon's neck, neatly slicing through the soft flesh beneath, severing veins and laying open the creature's wind pipe. Blood and noxious fluids flowed from the gaping wound, igniting as they rolled across the floor like liquid fire.

Unable to draw breath or breathe fire, the desperate, injured dragon slammed its head back down in an attempt to crush the puny human.

But Bron had already stepped aside. Drawing his sword over his head, the eagle warrior hacked down on the dying behemoth's exposed neck, cutting through scales and bone. His blade passed clean through, ringing on the stone floor. He cut an inch deep into the granite, numbing his arms to the shoulder.

The wyrm's tail lashed in a final death twitch, bringing down another section of the exterior wall, further compromising the temple's already crumbling structure.

As Bron's first stroke fell, the eagle leaped from its perch. First flying around the high domed ceiling, passing in and out of shadow, hoping to disorient the dragon's sorcerous rider, before folding its wings in and taking a nose dive directly at the warlock.

Finishing his incantation, the frost elf cast a black bolt of energy directly at the speeding eagle. Dipping its head, the raptor passed beneath the bolt, feeling the searing heat along its back.

Before the spell caster could ready a defense, Screech was on him. As Bron's final stroke fell, the eagle slammed into its unfortunate target. Iron shod talons punctured the mage's breast plate and skull, killing him instantly and tearing his broken body free of the harness that held him securely to the dragon's back.

As quickly as the fight had started, it was over.

Bron stared at the dragon's lifeless body through a blood red haze, as he pulled his sword free from the stone floor. Battle madness and blood lust began to fade, replaced by the pain of his forgotten injuries and a throbbing in his head from adrenaline hangover.

Wasting no time, the eagle unceremoniously dropped the limp frost elf corpse to the floor and hastened to Bron's side.

"We have to take to the air now," stressed the bird. "The wyrms are aware of their brethren's demise. They have sensed their clutch mate's mental death howl."

Grabbing the pommel of the saddle, Bron painfully swung upon the eagle's back, instinctively grabbing for the absent retainer straps, ripped from the saddle and still connected to Screech's previous, unfortunate rider.

"Keep your feet firmly in the stirrups, hold on tightly with your legs and anticipate my movements," instructed the bird. "Recall your bareback training. I will not let you fall."

Nimble hopping on the dead dragon's back for a launching point, the raptor spread its wings and did one final lap around the ruined building, picking up speed before shooting out through the

gaping hole in the roof.

“What do you plan to do?” asked Bron as they ascended into the smoky haze that obscured the dim light of dawn. “Fly right into the maws of several waiting dragons?”

“I intend to accomplish our original objective, to wreak havoc and cause chaos among the invaders’ ranks,” answered the eagle gruffly. “If we can distract them long enough to allow even one refugee to flee and seek aid, then our deaths will not be in vain.”

Once again the heat of shame colored Bron’s soot and gore covered face. He noticed the dragons had widened their circle around the city, surveying the surrounding countryside, searching for escapees.

Two behemoths spiraled down over the ruined temple of Trinia, investigating the cause of death to one of their own, while another broke away to pursue the eagle and rider now speeding their way northwest.

Bron tried, without success, not to look down at the burning city, its citizens lying dead and dying in the streets. Pockets of resistance still remained, but few and far between. Mounted invaders atop their saber-toothed white bear mounts pointed to the skies in his direction. His will almost quavered again as he tore his horrified gaze from the carnage below to focus on the dragon racing across the sky to intercept the fleeing pair.

Unable to utilize its fiery breath at high speeds, for fear of incinerating itself, the leviathan aimed to smash directly into the smaller, more fragile eagle.

At the last possible second, Screech banked its wings, rising just enough for the winged giant to pass beneath them. The eagle then went into a nose dive, descending on the lumbering dragon from behind before it could turn, and landing directly between the leviathan’s outstretched wings. Screech’s iron shod talons sunk into the wyrm’s hapless rider, pinning the frost elf sorcerer face down to its back.

Bron leaned forward and slashed down with his sword. He felt his weapon grind off the beast’s spine as his slashing blade opened a gaping wound on the dragon’s back, which quickly filled and spilled over with blood.

Roaring in pain, its movements becoming uncoordinated due to the damage to its spinal cord, the injured wyrm tried bringing its head around on its long neck, huge jaws snapping open and shut.

Bron met the snapping jaws with steel, swinging his sword with two hands, cutting roughly through the creature’s bony snout. His blade rang almost lyrically as he withdrew, scraping along teeth and bone.

Disengaging talons with an audible, wet popping sound, Screech once again turned northwest as the grievously injured dragon, its bat-like wings flapping out of sync, tumbled ponderously toward the ground.

“Hold on human,” the eagle said over the roar of the wind. Picking up speed, they quickly outdistanced the larger, slower dragons.

Bron held his face up to the cold, moist morning air, his hair flying wildly about his aching head and his eyes watering in the force of rushing air.

The warrior’s feeling of invigoration was short lived though, as he saw the smoking ruins of the farms and homesteads outside the city proper. Rage once again welled up inside him, as they raced closer to the frost elf royalty and military command, their silken black banners, bearing the red moon insignia, flapping in the wind.

Unchallenged, they gazed down on their conquest from the foothills that overlooked Raven’s

valley.

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Aganariel Timbor felt invincible, seated high atop his black wooly mammoth mount, surrounded by his personal bodyguard of axmen and war sorcerers, casually looking down on the ruined human city of Ravenholt, as his elven reavers raped and pillaged at will.

Shielding his light-sensitive eyes from the rising sun, Agnariel noted a pair of dragons break from formation and swoop down on the eastern quarter of the city.

Looking to his hooded personal sorcerer, who stood behind him on the platform built over the mammoth's back, the frost elf king impatiently nodded his head in the dragons' direction.

Unlike the sorcerous dragon riders, who were armed and armored in traditional frost blue, Timborian magic users stood out, preferring to wear flowing, blood red robes trimmed in black. The sorcerer bowed before replying to Agnariel's unspoken question.

"I have sensed the loss of another wyrm my lord," answered the spellcaster. His eyes down, he didn't notice the fleeting look of annoyance flash across his lord's pale, frost blue face.

Before Agnariel could ask his next question, the answer shot up through the smoke in the form of eagle and rider.

All watched eagerly as another dragon broke formation to engage the renegade eagle, confident that the giant reptile would rend the bird to shreds, ending any resistance.

They watched the eagle dodge the dragon's clumsy attack, then turn on the offensive. Sparks flew as the eagle warrior's blade made contact with dragon scales once, and then again. A collective gasp of disbelief escaped their lips as the raptor disengaged itself from the injured beast, and headed directly at them.

"The human must be mad or suicidal my lord, surely he does not intend ..." The sorcerer never finished the thought as Agnariel lost his composure and backhanded the stammering elf across the face, sending him flying off the platform to the ground below.

Fists clenching and unclenching in frustration, Lord Timbor screamed down at his battle sorcerers. "I have lost half my dragons this day, and you make feeble excuses!" Spittle flew from his mouth as he vented his insane fury on the assembled spellcasters. "Your warlocks have flown six dragons into oblivion!"

Tagnariel Timbor, Lord Timbor's general and younger cousin, as well as Agnariel's chief rival for the frost elf throne, shouted a warning to his king from his own wooly mammoth mount. "Agnar, you need to dismount now!" He pointed at the feathered missile and its human rider bearing down on them, leaving the slower, pursuing dragons far behind. Tagnariel then turned to his archers and battle mages. "Archers, fire at will; sorcerers, prepare defensive spells, protect your king!"

Glancing sidelong at his rival, angry at the use of his childhood nickname instead of proper title, Agnariel drew his curved sword and faced the hurtling eagle. His confidence grew as he felt protective magic begin to ripple around him.

"You would like that, wouldn't you *cousin*?" The king muttered aloud, spitting the word *cousin* as if it tasted bad. "For my people to see me leap out of danger's way in some undignified manner. Not this day, Tag. You will not steal my thunder. Today I carve my niche in history."

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“Brace yourself human!” Screech yelled back to Bron, as its acute, binocular vision picked up the waves of magic surrounding the frost elf king, rising like rippling heat tendrils from the hot coals of a forge. Screech’s trained sight also noticed that the spell was not complete, and the casters would not have time to finish the incantation before impact.

Extending its talons, the eagle felt the protective spell give way, almost as if hitting water at high speed to snag a fish from the river.

Passing through the invisible barrier, Screech’s right leg made solid contact with Agnariel Timbor’s breast plate, as the elf tried to twist away. Even blunted by protective magic, the force of impact sent the elven monarch hurtling from the back of his mammoth and broke Screech’s leg like a dry twig.

Worse than that, the raptor felt the elf king’s razor-edged blade drag along its underside and a crossbow quarrel puncture its lung.

Momentum carried the bird and its rider past the assembled frost elves to the edge of a small stand of pine trees, where it hit the ground with bone jarring force, sliding across snow and muddy earth.

Even though the jolt was cushioned by the body of his mount, Bron was stunned and unaware of the full extent of the eagle’s injuries. He used his sword, still gripped in his right hand, to stand woozily on unsteady legs. His entire body aching, he shook the fog from his brain, and stared down at the prone eagle, noticing the red mess spilling from its abdomen.

“I am the last of my kind Bron Straker,” rasped the dying bird in a barely audible voice, using Bron’s name for the first time, dark red blood flowed from its hooked beak and nostril holes. “Do not let the death of my race be in vain.”

Bron continued to stare in dazed disbelief as the light faded from the proud bird’s fierce eyes. Then, the harsh reality of his situation slowly sunk in.

“This is where I am going to die,” he said out loud.

But for some reason, he didn’t feel the way he would have thought he should feel. No fear, no regret, and no panic about his current situation or sadness welling up from deep within. Just cold, calm rage.

Hearing shouts in a language he did not understand, and the accompanying footfalls of those issuing the shouts, Bron gripped his gore-encrusted sword, and slowly turned to meet his death.

Looking up the slight rise he and Screech had just slid down seconds before, he saw at least a score of archers, crossbows and longbows leveled at his chest, and twice that number of foot soldiers, frost elf axmen, spreading out in a semi-circle as they advanced down the hill, finely crafted, double bladed axes in their gauntleted hands. The remaining six dragons now circled above, awaiting their orders.

To be continued...

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