



Shroud of Doom

Tarizon Saga

William Manchee

Sample Chapter

Rhutz Hunt

Shadow and Shimmer, two young rhutz, were frolicking in a lush green meadow after finishing off a range deer they'd killed for breakfast. They had recently mated and were enjoying a beautiful spring morning in the lush hills of the White Mountains of Tributon. A creek ran through the meadow and when Shimmer felt an urge to drink, she took off toward it. Shadow raced after her and nearly beat her to the cool water. They waded in knee-deep and began to drink deeply when the ground began to move beneath their feet. They repositioned themselves to keep from losing their footing and looked around. Tremors were not unusual as the White Mountains were the home of three active volcanos. A loud crack pierced the morning tranquility. Shadow looked toward the sound wondering if the tremor had caused a tree to fall. He looked over at Shimmer wanting to get her take on the noise. Then he felt a stab of pain—not his pain but Shimmer's as Rhutz were telepathic and could feel each other's thoughts and emotions as if they were their own. He looked over at her curiously. She stumbled, let out a mournful howl, and then collapsed into the water. Blood began gushing out of her chest turning the water red. Two more shots rang out in quick succession forcing Shadow to abandon his mate and take cover behind a large boulder.

Shadow looked in the direction of the shots and spotted three humans, one with a long rifle. They were laughing and congratulating the shooter for his good shot. Anger welled in Shadow. He was torn between pursuing the men and rushing to his mate to see if she were still alive. The men were scrambling to their feet and taking flight. His concern for his mate left him no choice but to go to her side, but not before he summoned help from the rest of his pack.

"Stop the three humans running north from Flat Meadow. They've shot my mate," Shadow demanded as he rushed over to Shimmer. When he reached her, she lay on the

bank of the creek barely breathing. He licked her face tenderly. "Oh, my love. Why are they stealing your life? What is their purpose?"

"Humans need no purpose," Shimmer replied. "They are greedy. They want God's gifts all for themselves."

"But surely that was not God's intent?"

"No. Tarizon is rich. There is plenty for all if they could only see it."

"I will make them pay, my love. I will steal their lives and the lives of their families to bring back balance in the world."

"No, it will only lead to more slaughter. Let it go."

Anger consumed Shadow as he watched Shimmer's life slowly bleed away. He didn't understand the humans. They didn't need rhutz for food. When they stole a life, they just left it to spoil in the hot sun. What was most disturbing was the apparent joy they felt after each theft. Their cheers and laughter when Shimmer fell in mortal pain echoed in his mind. To Shadow this meant only one thing. Those who stole for pleasure were evil, sent by Gorgas himself, to destroy all that God had created.

Shimmer, who knew what Shadow was thinking, pleaded to her mate, "No. Not all humans are bad. You must not judge all of them for the evil of only a few."

Shimmer's thoughts were growing weaker and weaker. Shadow looked at her with growing fear and anxiety. He knew her life was almost over. A great sadness fell over him. If only there were something he could do. The humans had casualty centers and doctors who tried to heal their sick and wounded, but Rhutz believed when God came to get them they should go without resistance. Shadow didn't share this view. He believed, as many other Rhutz did, that God had made a mistake when he gave a four-legged creature a powerful mind but no hands with which to build or create. It was true that the rhutz' telekinetic gifts were useful in building structures, moving objects, and defending themselves in battle, but they lacked the fine motor skills of the humans that gave them dominance over all other life-forms.

Shadow felt another stab of horrific pain and then a feeling of complete and utter emptiness. He looked down at Shimmer and felt a cold wave permeate his body. He shook involuntarily. "Don't leave me! You are too young to go to God. What could be the purpose of your summons?"

Shimmer did not answer. Shadow howled a long agonizing lament and then tuned his mind into the pack's collective consciousness to find out what had become of the humans. Three rhutz were in pursuit, but the humans were on jet cycles making overtaking them difficult. He looked mournfully at Shimmer one last time and then took off to join the chase.

Rupra Bruda eased the trigger of his Ruggi 7 smart shot rifle. The two rhutz were dancing around the water making it difficult to get a bead on them. Then the ground

began to move beneath his feet. He cursed under his breath and waited for the tremor to stop. Bruda's two companions looked around nervously knowing a tremor could fell a tree or open a crack in the soil and swallow them up. When they felt safe again, they turned their attention back to the rhutz. This was the first time Rupra had fired this experimental weapon. The manufacturer of this new class of rifles claimed the bullets would bend slightly toward a warm object. This they promised would increase accuracy by up to 10%. Heat-seeking bullets had long been in the design stage and this was the first actual product that had finally been manufactured. Rupra's father, the townhead of Vaceen, had acquired the rifle directly from the manufacturer and he'd given it to Rupra and told him to go try it out. Rupra loved to hunt, so he had gathered two of his teenage friends and organized this rhutz hunt.

The two rhutz finally stopped to drink from the stream. Bruda pulled the trigger as the smaller of the two rhutz came into focus. A loud, angry crack broke the silence of the morning. Bruda held his breath, waiting to see if he'd hit his target. The smaller rhutz stumbled and then collapsed. Bruda raised his hand triumphantly. His companions let out a collective cheer.

"Let me try," his friend Callus said.

Bruda smiled and handed him the rifle. Callus put it to his shoulder, aimed and fired. The shot missed, so he quickly fired a second round. The second shot also missed and by then the second rhutz had found cover behind a rock.

"You've got to wait until the target comes into focus, you dirkbird!" Rupra said angrily. "Weren't you watching me?"

Callus shrugged and handed Bruda the rifle.

"Let me try," his other friend Romas said.

"No. We've got to get out of here. The pack will be all over us in a loon. If they catch us, they'll tear us to threads."

The three men picked up their gear and began to run back to where they'd left their jet bikes. They had laid in wait on a ridge overlooking the meadow and had to run five thousand strides to their Tempest 2000 Jet Bikes. They knew once they were on the bikes they'd be safe, at least they hoped so. As they came down the hill, they spotted a rhutz between them and their bikes. Bruda stopped and aimed his rifle. The rhutz took flight when he saw the rifle pointed his way and the shot missed.

"Come on! We've got to get to the bikes," Bruda yelled.

The three hunters began running again and finally made it to the bikes. They quickly secured their gear, gunned their engines, and took off. Three rhutz suddenly appeared in front of them. Bruda pulled out his rifle again but before he could aim it flew out of his hand.

He glared angrily at the rhutz knowing he'd be in serious trouble if he came home without the rifle. "Go!" he exclaimed as his bike shot forward toward a gap between the rhutz. His two companions followed and Rupra and Romas made it

through, but the gap had been closed by the time Callus got there and one of the rhutz sunk his teeth into his leg as he went by. Callus was jerked off his bike and dragged to the ground. He screamed in pain and horror as the rhutz attacked. Bruda and Romas stopped and looked back in horror as Callus was ruthlessly attacked by the three rhutz and ripped to pieces.

"Get out of here!" Bruda ordered. "I've got to get that rifle." Romas gave him a look but took off without objection. Bruda took advantage of the fact that the three rhutz were concentrating on their kill. He shot forward and then circled back to where the rifle lay on the ground. One of the rhutz looked up when he heard the jet bike returning but Bruda was coming fast and got to the gun before the rhutz could react. He scooped up the rifle and then took off trying to evade the now charging rhutz. Just as he thought he was in the clear he felt the sharp pain of a claw slicing through his leg. A sudden dizziness almost made him lose his balance and fall off his bike, but he willed his mind to clear and regained his balance.

Romas was waiting for him at the clearing where they'd left the jetcopter. He looked at Rupra's blood-soaked pants and rushed over to him. "You'd better get a healing wrap on that or you're going to bleed to death."

"I know. Get one for me while I load the bikes," Bruda said.

Romas nodded and climbed aboard the jetcopter. A tik later he returned with a roll of healing wrap and a cleansing pack. Bruda waved him off. "We've got to get out of here. I'll put the strip on while we're airborne."

"What about Callus?"

"Callus is dead. There's nothing we can do for him."

"Oh, my God! What will his parents say?"

"It's not our fault. It's those soulless beasts, the rhutz, who killed him. My father will send out a hunting party to rid the area of them."

As they were climbing into the copter a dozen rhutz, led by Shadow, surrounded them. Romas started the engine and the lifters began to spin. The jet copter rose quickly. Shadow concentrated on the lifters, causing them to sputter. The copter dipped, wobbled, and spun around. Bruda buckled himself in, picked up his rifle, aimed and fired down at Shadow through an open door. The jerky motion of the jetcopter caused the bullet to go harmlessly over Shadow's head, but it was enough to distract the rhutz and make him release the copter from his mind's grip. The copter shot forward and soon disappeared over the treetops.

Shadow and his pack returned to Flat Meadow and went straight to Shimmer's body. Shadow dragged the lifeless body a hundred strides to a grassy area in the center of the meadow. Then members of the pack, now twenty-seven-strong, milled around trying to understand why Shimmer had been taken from them. They howled mournfully

all during the night protecting the body from the scavengers who would have otherwise fed on the carcass had it been left unattended. The rhutz honored their ancestors and believed their souls went to God upon their passing. Each pack disposed of bodies in an honorable and respectful manner depending on where they lived. Usually, they were burned or buried, but in the forests of Tributon fire was too dangerous and the ground too rocky for digging. So, Shadow's pack had come up with something different. At first light, the pack stood watching the body expectantly. Suddenly thousands of black spidery creatures called sligots swarmed out of their nest, onto Shimmer's body and began consuming her. In just a few loons she had disappeared and the sligots retreated into their nest. Shadow took one last sorrowful look at the place where Shimmer once lay, then turned and trotted away with the rest of the pack at his heels.

Rupra Bruda and Romas Lantra carefully went over their story as they flew back to Vaceen. They knew they would be interrogated separately by their parents and the authorities after they informed them of Callus' death. Unfortunately, Callus's brother Idra was there to meet them when they landed.

Not seeing Callus after Rupra and Romas had disembarked, Idra frowned. "Where's my brother?"

Rupra took a deep breath. Romas swallowed hard. "I've got bad news for you, Idra. I'm so sorry," Romas said.

"What's happened?" Idra pressed.

"We ran into a pack of rhutz while we were hunting and they attacked us. We tried to get away on our jet cycles and almost made it, but one of the rhutz caught Callus' leg and pulled him off his bike. I shot at them trying to scare them away, but one of them pulled the rifle away with his will. By the time I retrieved the rifle, Callus was dead."

"No!" Idra wailed. "You're lying. This couldn't have happened. This is some kind of cruel joke, right? My brother is hiding somewhere, isn't he?"

Rupra shook his head slowly. "No. It's the truth. We should go to your parents and tell them."

Idra began crying. "No. my brother is not dead. He cannot be dead!"

Romas grabbed Idra and pulled him into an embrace. "I'm sorry, Idra, but he's gone. You've got to be strong."

After they'd packed all their gear into Idra's ATV, Idra drove them to his home. Rupra had planned to tell his father what had happened first, but since Idra had picked them up they had no choice but to go home with him. Callus' mother came out when she heard the ATV pull up. Rupra looked at Romas and grimaced.

Icelia scanned the ATV for her son and when she didn't see him asked, "Where's Callus?"

Romas looked at Rupra and was about to explain what had happened when Idra blurted out, "He was murdered by a rhutz!"

Icelia's face paled and she fainted. Rupra rushed over and caught her before she hit the ground. They carried her inside and laid her on a recliner. Callus' father, Rubbias, stood up when he saw his wife being carried inside.

"What happened?" he asked worriedly.

Rupra told him about Callus' death and what had happened. Rubbias collapsed in a chair in dismay.

"I'm going to call my father," Rupra advised. "I'm sure he'll want to organize a hunting party to kill the rhutz responsible for Callus' death."

Rubbias looked up. "I don't understand it. Rhutz never attack humans. They only kill what they need to eat and they have no taste for human flesh. I can't understand why they attacked you."

"I don't know," Rupra said. "Maybe they were infected by a spinal tick. They acted like they were mad. Either way, they must all be killed. We can't let a pack of mad rhutz roam around the country killing people indiscriminately."

"No, you're right," Rubbias agreed. "Go ahead and call your father. I want to recover Callus' body at the very least."

"If any of it is still there," Romas said dejectedly. "When we left they were ripping it apart."

Rubbias paled at the image. Romas shrugged. "Sorry, Father, but that's the truth."

Rubbias' sorrow turned to rage. "Call your father, Rupra! We must track down the beasts before they kill others."

A faint smile came over Bruda's face. "Yes, sir. Right away."

Rupra went outside and pushed a number on his wrist array. His father, Progasis, responded quickly. "Rupra. You're back. How was your trip?"

"Not so good, Father," Rupra said wondering how to break the news to him.

"The Ruggi 7 didn't perform well?" Progasis asked. "The manufacturer assured me they'd worked the kinks out of it."

"No. It's a great rifle. That wasn't the problem. We were attacked by a pack of rhutz."

"What? Rhutz attacked you?"

"Yes," he lied. "We were just hunting for range deer when they surrounded us. If I hadn't had my jet cycle close at hand, I wouldn't have escaped them. As it is, they slashed my leg."

"Oh, no! Is it bad?"

"No. Romas bound it right away in healing wrap. I'll be fine."

"Oh, thank God you're safe," Progasis gasped.

"Unfortunately, Callus wasn't so lucky."

"What do you mean? Is he okay?"

"No. The rhutz pulled him off his bike and ripped him to pieces. They acted like they were mad."

"He's dead?" Progasis asked in shock. He hadn't considered the hunting trip to be the least bit dangerous. He'd taken his boys camping in those woods many times and the rhutz had always ignored them.

"Yes. Rubbias thinks they must be infected by the spinal tick."

"The spinal tick? But that virus was eradicated twenty cycles ago."

"He thinks it may have survived somehow and infected some of the rhutz. You know how quickly it spreads."

"But you might be infected then if you were cut by the rhutz."

Rupra immediately realized he'd gone too far. He didn't want anyone thinking he had been infected by a spinal tick. "Ah, well it was just a shallow wound. I'm sure the healing wrap killed any virus that might have been present."

"We should have you tested, just to be sure."

"Right," Rupra groaned.

"So, how did you get away?"

"I shot at them with my rifle, trying to get them off Callus, but it was too late. He couldn't have been alive, but it did drive them away so we could make our escape while we could."

"Where are you?" Progasis asked.

"I'm at Callus' house. His father asked me to report what happened to you. He wants you to organize a hunting party to go after the mad pack. He says they must pay for killing Callus."

"Indeed, they must! I can't believe they'd attack humans that way. I must bring this to the attention of the town council at once. The hills are full of rhutz and if one pack is infected others may be as well."

Medical science on Tarizon was highly advanced and most viruses had been eradicated long ago, but the eripitis virus, carried by the spinal tick, was one of the last strains to be eliminated. It had become resistant to all antibiotics and only became contained when medical researchers figured out how to attack it on a molecular level. Modern-day treatment was long, painful, and expensive. Also, since its carrier, the spinal tick, infested most forests on Tarizon, it wasn't feasible to eliminate that insect without killing thousands of other species that were vital to Tarizon's natural ecological balance.

Shadow paced back and forth in front of the pack's cave. His sadness had now turned to anger at what the humans had done. Vengeance for Shimmer's murder was on his mind, but the pack had killed one of the humans. Was that death enough, he wondered? Shimmer's thoughts came to him. "Not all humans are bad. You must not

judge all of them for the evil of only a few." Shimmer was right, he knew, but he still felt like the humans should pay for what they had done.

He'd never communicated with a human, although he knew it was possible since some humans were telepathic. The human spiritual leader, Sandee, had talked to the rhutz. One of them, Whisper, had become his friend and companion. Shadow longed to link his mind to a human and find out more about them. He wanted to know why some were evil and others full of love and joy. The wise one might have the answer. Perhaps he'll know of a human who will link with me.

The oldest member of the pack was called the wise one and was always consulted before any major decisions affecting the pack were made. Shadow entered the cave and went to him.

"Wise one. I need your counsel."

The old rhutz who'd been sleeping, as he did most of the time since his age was more than a hundred cycles, looked up and focused on his visitor. He shook his head trying to clear his mind. "Yes, how can I help you, Shadow?"

"I know it is the policy of the rhutz to stay out of human affairs, but the attack on my mate has filled me with a desire for vengeance."

"That is understandable, my brother, but you must control those urges for they can only lead you along a dark path."

"True. I can see that, but I want to understand why a human would murder a rhutz for no apparent reason. Perhaps if I could find out the answer to that question I might find some peace."

"That is one of the enigmas about the human race that we have struggled with since the beginning of the world. Perhaps that was God's purpose in calling Shimmer."

"What do you mean?" Shadow asked.

"Perhaps he wants you to seek greater understanding of the humans."

"Could that be?" Shadow asked, incredulous.

"Yes. Everything God does has a purpose."

Shadow thought about that a moment and then said, "I have heard of rhutz linking with humans. Perhaps if I could do that I'd find some answers."

"That is possible. You'd have to find a human who is pure in heart, for many are afflicted with fear and mistrust. Those will be of no help because they will lie and try to deceive you."

"Do you know an honest human who is pure in heart?" Shadow asked.

The old rhutz considered the question for a moment and then replied, "There is one I have heard stories about. His name is Tobin Sandista and he's a councilor in Urunes."

"Urunes?" Shadow thought. "That is across the White Mountains in the Ural Desert, isn't it?"

"Just north of the Ural Desert, but you must cross the desert to get there or travel an extra thousand kylods to go around it."

Shadow sighed. "Such a long journey with no guarantee he will even link to me."

"It's a good idea, though, Shadow. Understanding is always the beginning of the end of a problem."

Shadow nodded. "Then I shall travel to Urunes and link with Councilor Sandista."

"I wish I could travel with you, but I haven't the strength," the old one mused.

"It's all right. There is no need. I will open my mind to you so you can join the link."

"I look forward to it with great anticipation. May the spirit of Whisper be with you."

"Thank you, Wise one."

Shadow left the old rhutz and rejoined the main pack. He told them of his decision to go to Urunes. Several rhutz offered to travel with him, but he declined the offers as he knew he could travel much faster alone. Besides, there were packs of rhutz along the way he could link with for information and guidance. His only worry was the fifty kylods across the Ural Desert. There was no water, but he told himself he could travel at night and probably make it without too much difficulty.

The next morning before the sun had risen, Shadow began his long trek to Urunes planning to travel to the Hilor River and then follow it west to its closest point from Urunes. From there he'd cross the perilous desert. If he made it, he wondered how he'd be received by Councilor Sandista, and what it would be like to link to a human. A horrible thought crossed his mind. What if Councilor Sandista wasn't even telepathic? He'd have risked his life for nothing. Surely that could not be, for if it were, that would mean Shimmer died for no purpose, but everything God does has a purpose.

About William Manchee

William Manchee makes a living as a consumer lawyer practicing in Dallas, Texas with his son Jim. Originally from Southern California, he lives now in Plano, Texas. Writing is his passion and his novels are in the genres of mystery, science fiction, and suspense. His works to date include the Stan Turner Mystery series (11 volumes), the Rich Coleman novels (3 volumes), the Tarizon Saga (5 volumes) and stand-alone novels, Uncommon Thief and the Prime Minister's Daughter. He's also written a non-fiction work for small business owners, Go Broke, Die Rich.

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