



AGE OF FANTASY

THE FRACTURED TRIBE



SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGY

Siqasi lay perfectly still under the waters of the shallow swamp. Even his breathing was shallow as his nose crested the surface just enough to breathe.

His instincts made hunting a passive activity rather than an active one. He was accompanied by a few other Gators, also motionless, spaced randomly in the small pond.

The untrained eye would only see wet logs or mossy mounds, perfectly normal for a swamp.

They had chosen this place due to the game trail; the tall grass was pushed to either side, signifying a footpath that deer regularly took. All they had to do was wait for one to use it.

Hours slowly moved past with nothing to look at but the foliage around them. Amongst the silent sounds of the jungle, it gave plenty of opportunity for Gator minds to wander.

It had been nearly a year since Siqasi and his people had broken with the Frog-Mages, leaving behind their homes to seek out a life of their own in the swamps. They weren't the only ones that felt betrayed by the Frog-Mages' failure to wake them from their hibernation before the world fell into chaos.

The Frog-Mages had allowed the world to break; their own people now seemed scattered, and the future was uncertain.

Most still clung to the guidance of the prophecies, but Siqasi saw no reason to live his life according to the words of those who had failed his people.

Siqasi grimaced. *Damned prophecies*, he thought, thinking back to the prophecy that had given him his name.

He had always been fated to lead. Ultimately, none of his choices mattered; none of his achievements were his own. He was only what the leader that the Frog-Mages had told him that he was born to be.

When they arrived, the hunting had been rich; wild raptors, deer, and even Megasloths had wandered along the swamp. They had eaten well. Now, the hunting was sparse, and obtaining the needed food for the amount of people in his clan proved more difficult than he had anticipated.

His scouts whispered of prey migration and overhunting. Though Siqasi had always taken care never to hunt more than the packs could afford to lose.

But in a way, if he failed his people, he would prove the Frog-Mages wrong again. He wasn't born to be a leader, not a good one anyway. He would never purposefully put his followers in jeopardy, but if he did fail, a part of him would be relieved.

After all, his position as a leader now only proved the Frog-Mages right.

A twig snapped. It came from barely a few yards away, pulling him from his thoughts.

He shoved his doubts to the recesses of his mind and turned his focus to the nearby sounds.

Stepping through the trees was not just one deer, but a family of them. A male, female, and a large fawn.

His heart raced. Just one deer would have made the day's hunt a success; three might be enough to share amongst his entire village, who were growing tired of fish and scavenged food.

The fawn wandered ahead, unaware of the danger that now surrounded him. Its naivety caused the parents to press close behind. Siqasi couldn't help but smile.

The family of deer reached where the trail brushed the edge of the swamp, and the Gators pounced.

The leg of the male immediately snapped between the jaws of another Gator. Siqasi lunged for the neck of the female, feeling his teeth sink into her fur.

For good measure, another Gator swung his mace toward her ribs. The deer's body soon was limp.

The male struggled, whipping dirt into the pond with its legs. A fourth Gator swung his tail around, tripping the beast, then with the momentum, swung his weapon down onto its skull with a crack.

The fawn had burst into a sprint, squealing in surprise. Fawn tended to be a bit slower than the full-grown deer, so they had gone for the parents first, just in case. Whatever the age, however, they were too fast to pursue on foot. So, the mace-bearing Gator pulled his weapon from the female's ribs and hurled it at the fawn, snapping its neck against a nearby tree. The squeals stopped.

"Well done!" Siqasi said in a deep, grumbly voice, dropping the neck of the female. "You did well with your mace, Xhatl."

Xhatl bowed his head with a low chuckle.

"Come," Siqasi said to the others. "Let us make haste. The taste of blood has whetted my appetite."

With nods from the other Gators, they each heaved a carcass over their shoulders and walked back to their village.

Set on the far edge of the swamp, Siqasi and his people created homes of wood, placed high on stilts above the water. It was different from their homes in the temple-cities, but each of them had done their part, and he was proud.

He watched as a few Gators carried newly chopped logs into the wood hut, away from the soaked mud below. A few smaller Geckos tended to the nets along the nearby river. Then, Siqasi's eyes fell upon Tixeka, a Chameleon Scout, running from the treeline toward Siqasi.

Siqasi handed the carcass of his catch to Xhatl. "Take this and start preparing the meat. We want this to last."

Xhatl responded with a grunt and a nod, then turned away.

As Tixeka neared, Siqasi could see fear in his eyes. Tixeka spoke before he closed the distance, panting as he spoke.

"Chief! There's a horde of Beastmen who have come here through a Voidgate. They have pillaged through a temple city already and left a number of settlements in ruins..."

"What?" Siqasi stepped back in surprise. The village was small enough that many overheard. Tixeka was a great scout, but subtlety had never been his strong suit.

"I met a party of Chameleons who were fleeing the destruction. The Beastmen are making their way north!"

A sudden bustle erupted as a crowd of villagers started to form. Confused questions rang out but were drowned in the sea of murmurs. Surely they were too weak and small to take on a force of Beastmen of any size. If they could take on a settlement, a village wouldn't stand a chance.

It took a moment or two before Siqasi could quiet them down enough to hear Tixeka again.

"Did you see any of them travelling this way?" Siqasi asked.

Tixeka hesitated. "No."

"Were you followed? Have you told anyone of our location?"

"N...No."

Siqasi sighed. "Then we have nothing to fear," he said, straightening his posture. If there were Beastmen threatening the area, he needed to seem confident. Siqasi told himself that's what a good leader would do.

"Fine?" Another Gator called out. "If they have torn through a city with Dactyls and Mages, then our village will not even slow them down!"

The crowd mumbled in agreement.

"We are on the far edge of the swamp; we have no treasure and little enough stores!" Siqasi yelled to quiet the crowd again. "Why would they trouble us? There are temples and ruins rich with the Frog Mages' hoarded treasures; the Beastmen will take from those and scarcely notice us."

"When fur and fang consume the land, the fractured tribe shall find its end." One of the Geckos recited with a chill.

"He's right! The Frog-Mages' spoke of our doom in their prophecy! Our fate is sealed!" Another voice called out.

Siqasi paused. He knew of many prophecies. The people they defected from were obsessed with them. The one the voice was referring to, however, was the last thing spoken by the Frog-Mage before they left.

Siqasi held his hand out to silence the crowd once more.

"Now listen well. We do not acknowledge the power nor prophecies of the Frog-Mages. We are not fractured. I see a whole...a family. We are far from this danger. If the Frog-Mages truly knew what the future held, they should have been able to protect their own worshippers and met the Beastmen with an army before they pillaged the temples."

"Prophecies or not, the temple cities offer the safety of stone walls and numbers. Should we not return?" a Saurian asked.

Siqasi turned toward the figure with emphasis. "Safety? We would be walking along the same path as the Beastmen. If we abandon our new home to return, then we would be revealing our underbellies to these raiders!"

That seemed to do it. Silence replaced the murmurs as the crowd mulled over his words. Siqasi took the opportunity to turn their attention back to their assignments. The crowd dispersed, still worried but pacified.

Siqasi turned back to Tixeka again, making his voice quieter.

"Follow the movement of the raids, but keep your distance. If there is a need, come to me and tell me what you have seen, but do not spread panic to the entire settlement."

"Yes, Chief." Tixeka said, his colours flushed and shifted in embarrassment. He bowed his head and scampered away.

Siqasi sat still for a moment, running through the past few moments again in his mind. Did he say the right thing? Did he believe in the words that he said?

After a long pause, he nodded to himself, satisfied. For now, the threat seemed distant; it was better to focus on making sure they get enough food for the coming months.

He turned and walked back to help prepare the meat.

The next few weeks were a whole lot of the same: hunting, scouting, and rationing. Reports from Tixeka claimed that the Beastmen horde was continuing north along the path that Siqasi had predicted, far from the village.

Obtaining food was still arduous. Mostly they survived on fish; some even talked of growing vegetables, but his people needed proper meat to thrive.

They may have been hungry, but they were safe.

Siqasi and the other Gator hunters sat in the same pond they had cornered the deer a few weeks prior. Their usual hunting spots had become only more scarce; here, at least, they had found some recent success.

Siqasi let his mind wander once more. Even with the lack of food, his people trusted him. If things got any worse, however, he wouldn't blame them if they looked to return to the stability of the temple cities; even if the Frog-Mages prophecies meant nothing, they knew how to build strong walls and keep large stores of food.

He had always known that true leaders are tested. Perhaps this was his test. If he could overcome the famine, perhaps then he would be confident enough in his own leadership.

Until then, feigning confidence will do.

He heard a twig snap; his focus turned again to its source.

Twigs continued to snap. The animal was clumsy, bounding noisily through the foliage. They would have to be quick.

The creature jumped into view, and all the Gators lurched from the water, weapons raised.

"Aagh!" Tixeka yelled in surprise, falling back into the brush.

"Tixeka?" Siqasi exclaimed, lowering his weapon. "What are you doing here?"

Tixeka didn't take the time to get up. "Beastmen! Here! Headed straight toward the village!"

Siqasi didn't take the time to help him up.

He bolted towards the village. The other Gators followed him.

How was I so stupid? Siqasi thought. *Sending scouts this far out was unlikely...but obviously a possibility.*

He rushed through the forest, arriving at the village in a fraction of the time. Two buildings were on fire, and he saw multiple bodies half buried in the muck.

Standing over them were three Wahreni Scouts. Blood coated their mouths as they tucked bags of fish and meat under their arms. It was the remains of their food stores.

Siqasi yelled in rage, pulling his spiked bone hammer from his back and barreling toward them. Even if his fellow Gators were still a ways behind, he could take them. He would not allow them to take the food, which fed his people.

Unfortunately, the Beastmen were fast. They had gotten what they came for; it had been easy pickings. They wouldn't stay to face reinforcements. They turned and ran.

"No!" Siqasi screamed, trying to catch up as they dashed forward, their agile forms weaving through the trees. Siqasi tore through the brush after them.

He could see their cloaks ahead of him. He raised his hammer and threw it in at one of them. It flew too far to the right and cracked into the bark of a tree.

The Beastmen were gaining the lead. His legs burnt hot from his run from the pond. He gasped for breath, forcing himself to continue.

His leg then sunk into muddy sand, his body pivoting hard into the ground with the momentum.

Siqasi roared in vain after the Beastmen. He had failed.

He was no leader.

Siqasi slowly dug himself out, retrieved his weapon, and walked back to the village in shame.

The rest of the Gator hunters had helped put out the fires.

Luckily, a few Beastmen lay amongst the bodies. They had not gotten the meat without a fight, at least.

This was a cold comfort. There was little hope of hunting everything that they needed now; all that remained for them here was starvation.

A Gecko approached Siqasi. "Chief?" He asked tentatively. Siqasi didn't look up. "What do we do?"

He was quiet, letting a few more villagers form a crowd around him once more. After a moment, he spoke in a defeated tone.

"I...was wrong." He said, confidence gone from his voice. "They have taken our food...If we continue to hunt, it is likely they will return again."

"Where will we go?" Xhatl asked.

Siqasi gritted his teeth. "Back," he said.

The group had a quiet understanding. Their only safe promise of food and shelter would be in the very city that they had abandoned only a few seasons ago. Assuming, of course, the Frog-Mages would accept them once more.

It was the only thing Siqasi could think to do. He was an utter failure as a leader. The Frog-Mages were wrong. And yet they were his people's only chance.

The next morning they placed their belongings on their backs with the little food they had. The week-long journey was mostly silent with the exception of speculations of what would happen to them once they arrived. Siqasi reasoned that whatever fate the Frog-Mages decided to give them would be better than starving in the wilds. Luckily, most agreed.

Defeated, tired, and hungry, the clan finally neared the city. The stone of temples looked almost golden in the sun, shining out in stark contrast to the green of the jungle.

The Siqasi's people stopped, not in awe, but surprise. There was a gathering of soldiers around the city, much larger than it should have been.

"There are more standing ready to defend the city than I remember living in the city itself." Tixeka said.

"How do they have so many?" Siqasi responded.

In the distance, they watched as a band of refugees approached the gate. The soldiers let them through.

"I recognise those Geckos; they're from one of the settlements that have already fallen. Some must have escaped the destruction. Perhaps..." Tixeka said with hesitation. "Perhaps their Frog-Mage did warn them of the impending attacks."

"Or they discovered it the same way we did," Siqasi grunted.

Tixeka said nothing, but Siqasi saw doubt in his friend's eyes.

"Come." Siqasi commanded, heading toward the gate, his people following.

They approached with their heads down. If Siqasi was lucky, he wouldn't be recognised, and the guards might mistake them as having come from one of the ruined cities.

"Is that you, Ol' Siqasi? Are you done playing Chief out in the woods?" A Saurian standing by the gate called out.

Siqasi gritting his teeth, then responded. "My people are starving. Please, let them in. I will answer to the Frog-Mage's judgement alone."

"Txánéxatl has been expecting you." The soldiers responded. "We will take you to him. Do not fear; your friends will get the help they need."

Expecting me? Siqasi thought. *Of course, he thinks this is all part of his blasted prophecy... No doubt that's all the Frog-Mages can think about, even while the rest of us are staring down certain destruction!*

The Saurian guards led him away from the gate and deeper into the city. His former home now teemed with life, packed with both citizens and refugees alike going about business and trade. There was little worry at all on their faces.

Siqasi was dumbfounded.

Perhaps...Tixeka was right after all, he thought.

The soldier stopped at a taller temple near the centre of the city. "Txánéxatl will see you inside."

"You won't be joining me?" Siqasi asked in surprise. Surely a dissenter like him was a threat to a Frog-Mage.

The Saurian merely tilted his head. Siqasi turned and slowly climbed the golden steps.

The stairs continued up a few floors, eventually leading to a large room with side windows that opened out to the city below. A large golden table sat in the middle of the room lined with chairs on each side. Txánéxatl, the Frog-Mage, sat on a Palanquin on the far side.

Siqasi quickly bowed. "Thank you, Txánéxatl...for seeing me. I have returned with those who have left. We seek your protection; I shall accept whatever judgement you make for me, but I ask those who followed me be spared."

"You have proven a most excellent leader, Siqasi." Txánéxatl responded. "Not only have you gotten them to break from the safety of the city, but you survived for some time among the swamps. Now, you stand ready to face judgement alone."

Siqasi's jaw dropped as the Frog-Mage hovered towards him on his Palanquin.

He had always questioned his ability as a leader, but never out loud. "What do you mean?"

"You know well what I mean, Siqasi," Txánéxatl said softly, "You have always been destined to lead the Gators of this city."

"More of your prophecies," Siqasi felt his cold blood run hot, "What about the South Cities? Where were your predictions when the Beastmen came for them?"

"It was foretold," Txánéxatl said in his usual matter-of-fact tone, "The Prophecy was delivered with care. Panic had to be prevented. Most of their population and relics have been gathered here, where we are to make our stand."

"If you knew they were coming, why not simply seal the Voidgate?" Siqasi stepped towards an opening in the wall, where he could look out at the city.

"This is what was foretold. We observe the countless threads of fate; we do not shape them. I have imagined this meeting a thousand times before it's happening, but never once have I given you an answer that satisfied you."

Siqasi scowled slightly. Of course, this answer didn't satisfy him, but he could not deny its truth either.

Txánéxatl continued, "I know that this day you have come to aid us. Stand by us that you might stand as the leader that you were always meant to be."

Siqasi looked out the window, out to the sea of Saurians, Gators, and Geckos preparing for the fight. Where each settlement's forces may have failed on their own, their united forces would be more than a match for the approaching horde, especially if they were expecting another abandoned city.

Siqasi felt something stir within him. Excitement, he realised, at the chance to redeem himself. If the Frog-Mage is extending a hand, then he must take it for the good of his people.

"Then you shall have my strength." Siqasi said, bowing.

"Our triumph is assured. Go, our people need your guidance," Txánéxatl said, gesturing past the sea of soldiers.

"Thank you, Txánéxatl."

The Frog-Mage nodded with a smile, and Siqasi sped down the stairs to rejoin his people.

"Chief!" Xhatl called out to him. "We are ready to fight!"

He stood before the rest of the Gators who had followed him into the exile, but also many others who had chosen to remain.

"The Beastmen are not far from here. The Saurian Warriors are planning to defend the walls, but they said that Txánéxatl told them that you had a different plan; the Chameleons and Gators shall follow you." Tixeka whispered, revealing his hiding place among the trees.

Siqasi turned to address him and the surrounding Gators.

"They are expecting our city to fall as easily as the others. We will let them crash against the walls, then strike from behind. The Chameleons shall guide us deeper into the forests, and then we will strike!"

His Gator allies looked at him, obviously surprised by the use of 'our' city.

"On your command, Chief," Tixeka whispered.

Siqasi moved through the muddy jungle with the other Gators. His year of quiet hunting prepared him well for this moment.

In the distance, he could hear the sounds of battle: Saurian Warriors meeting their Ndoli counterparts.

At last, Tixeka peeled back the foliage to reveal the rear of the Beastmen horde, clamouring for the wall. At the back, Waheni skirmishers threw their javelins and kept an eye out for openings as lionine Ndoli fought in the front; none looked back at the forests behind them.

Siqasi turned and yelled. "Charge!"

Gators led the charge, but the Chameleons followed close behind, supporting their advance with a volley of blowguns. Caught by surprise, some among the Beastmen began to panic, scattering for the flanks. Above, Dactyl Riders flew to drop rocks and javelins from above.

Siqasi side-stepped a Kemba Brute, swinging down his hammer on the Beastman's skull. Behind him, Xhatl slew a Crazy Boar cracking both of its skulls with a single blow.

Through the Frog-Mages' wisdom and Siqasi's leadership, the people were safe. The Saurians and Gators met as the remaining Beastmen scattered into the jungle. Soon, celebration erupted as the gates were flung open to welcome back the victorious warriors.

Txánéxatl was there, standing patiently.

Xhatl and the others who followed Siqasi into exile gathered behind him as he stood before the Frog-Mage. Other Gators and even Saurians soon joined them, standing together as one before the Frog-Mage and his judgement. A smile cracked across the old Frog-Mage's face.

"It seems you have proven yourself again as a leader, Siqasi; your ranks swell with followers. Yet, a decision remains before you; shall you choose to return to our people or shall you remain an exile?" Txánéxatl said.

"You're giving me a choice? Do you not already know the outcome?" Siqasi asked.

Txánéxatl smiled and spoke, "Perhaps. Does it matter? The decision is still yours."

Siqasi looked around at his people, those who had trusted him both through their difficult exile and his decision to return. Whether he had wished for it or not, he was a leader. There was no escape from his responsibility; yet it was one that he could still learn to bear with pride and confidence.

He had seen the humility, unity, and shared wisdom of his people, united as one by a shared destiny. These feelings had kept them together through the lean times in the swamp, but in the temple city, there was unity too and an even greater vision than an unwillingness to accept one's lot in life.

"I shall stay." He said with confidence. "I have spent my life fighting against my destiny, but still it has led me here. I do not know what fate has in store for me, but I know we shall face it as one people."

Txánéxatl bowed, "Then so be it."

With that, his Palanquin turned towards the temple.

"Wait, Txánéxatl." Siqasi said. "There's another prophecy; it said that my tribe would meet its end when fur and fang consumed the land. Yet, we are still here."

Txánéxatl stopped. "You remain, but you are fractured no longer; our people are one once more."

Siqasi smiled. *Prophecies are strange.*