



GRIMDARK FUTURE

FACING FATE



SHORT STORY

FACING FATE BY BROOKE STEMME

Sunlight seemed to breathe life into the ancient Saurian colony. As ages passed, the forces of nature had reclaimed the ruins. The wonder might have captured a younger Saurian, but Xhalaxi hardly noticed the warmth on his scales. If anything, he actively resisted its invitation to relax.

The colony had lain abandoned for millennia before they rediscovered it. To find one in such a pristine shape was rare. Nature had long encroached upon the streets of the old colony, but its buildings had withstood the ages, as though the Frog-Mage within knew the Starhost would one day come to awaken him.

The whole place, ruins and occupants, seemed to be relaxed. The Chameleons reported no signs of intelligent life, let alone potential enemies. Once, this place had been a lively colony, and the Gecko Priests claimed that soon it would flourish once more.

Yet in Xhalaxi's mind, the quiet was a warning.

Fate rarely offered such opportunities, at least not without a cost.

That's not how others saw it, though. The silence was a measure of their triumph, the fulfilment of destiny. Like the midday sun, it made them sluggish. Xhalaxi knew too well the danger in assuming a victory already won before a shot had been fired. It had cost too much for him to forget.

"I've never known anyone to look so disheartened this early in the morning. Lingered dreams? Or something else?"

The voice startled Xhalaxi. Years of training tensed his muscles instead of flinching away. He glanced sideways at the Saurian who now stood beside him. She looked expectantly at him. It wasn't a friendly greeting by any measure, but Xhalaxi would be hard pressed to ignore it.

"Difficult to say," Xhalaxi answered, trying to keep his tone even. "It's too early to tell what the greatest trouble today brings."

The Saurian let out a sharp laugh.

"If trouble were to seek us out here, it would have found us already," she said. "This was our home. It is ours once again. After the Frog-Mage is reawakened, he'll guide us along our path with the Truth."

Xhalaxi's eyes met hers. Her confidence grated on his nerves. "The Truth often comes with a price," he said, voice tinged with bitterness. "The tricky part is never knowing when it will demand payment from you."

"A price we must be willing to pay anytime," she said, bearing just the tips of her sharp teeth. "That is what is demanded of us."

"Whatever may be demanded of us," Xhalaxi said, pondering her words. An invisible weight seemed to gather weight, slung around his neck and making each step require more effort than he'd like to exert. "Does that include this conversation? Or may I continue to look disheartened in peace?"

She stared sideways at him for longer than was polite before finally relenting. "As you wish."

The Saurian nodded, then slowed her pace, allowing Xhalaxi to walk on ahead alone.

What emotion her words carried, Xhalaxi didn't bother to guess. His purpose was not to make friends. His destiny lay in a higher calling, or at least this is what the Truth of the Frog-Mages claimed.

Nature had already begun to reclaim the buildings along the outskirts of town that Xhalaxi approached, with the stones beginning to crack in places. His warriors gathered in the shade, laughing and joking like children playing hunter-and-prey more than trained soldiers. None of them noticed his approach, not until the youngest one stumbled backward into Xhalaxi.

The playful shout died in his throat when he recognised who he had run into.

"Is this how one keeps watch?" Xhalaxi said, her voice firm and her eyes set solely on Yahiqi. "Or is all this a game to you?"

Yahiqi bowed his head, then straightened. "No," the young warrior said, his tone low in respect. "The Priests say no one has set foot on this world in millennia. You have my apologies; we were foolish to let down our guard; you taught us better."

The apology did little to settle the embers that flared inside Xhalaxi's heart.

"Flattery won't shield you, Yahiqi," he said sharply. "You are a warrior now, not a child."

Xhalaxi circled the young Saurian as he spoke.

"What you have yet to learn is that distraction is the moment in which the sniper's shot pierces your scales. Complacency among your fellow warriors, in peace or in conflict, is when you all fail to recognise a critical shift around you."

In a sharp and fluid movement, Xhalaxi struck out, his claw stopping just inches from Yahiqi's throat. The young Saurian flinched as the metal claw touched his scaly neck.

"Sometimes you can spot your enemies," Xhalaxi said, just loud enough for the young warrior to hear. "You can track their scent. But you can never underestimate them. Such mistakes will have fatal consequences."

Yahiqi swallowed hard. "I understand."

Something in those two words reminded Xhalaxi to relent. Yahiqi's heart was racing, a faint scent of fear coming from him. And yet, this was a Saurian Warrior who had never seen battle. The youth would learn his lessons the hard way if that's what it came to.

Still, Xhalaxi hoped that he would not be the one to see the young Saurian's eyes clouded or the wound that was fated to fella him. He hoped the day Yahiqi would meet his fate was still far away.

Xhalaxi stepped back, lowering his arm from the Warrior's throat.

"No," Xhalaxi said, shaking his head. "You don't understand, not yet. Fear is different when you're facing a foe determined to kill you. Fear is different when you see others..."

Xhalaxi turned away sharply, his back to the Saurian Warriors as words suddenly caught in his throat. What was embers became a fire raging within him, a heat unable to be quenched.

He could not forget what he had seen, and remembering only made the wound deeper.

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"Fear is different when you see what it takes from you," Xhalaxí said. "Once it takes hold of you, it will do everything in its power to make sure you do not get free."

"We are not afraid," another Saurian Warrior interjected. "If there were enemies in the surrounding area, we would have known by now. It is our fate..."

"Our fate is for us to face when it finds us," Xhalaxí interrupted. "Not for us to presume. We don't determine what path lies ahead of us. Our duty is simply to walk it. Enough talk; it is time for drills. Our bodies are weapons; if they are poorly maintained, then they will fail you when you need them most."

The Saurian Warriors' eyes met for a moment, the closest to grumbling they allowed themselves. Under the watchful eyes of Xhalaxí and the morning sun, they ran, crawled and practiced their aim. The glint of light off their armour danced against the buildings as they exercised, small insects flitting after the reflections as if they might find something valuable instead of empty air.

As the hours stretched on, the cryo-pyramid's shadow began to contract under the noonday sun. Xhalaxí stood watch over the north side, patrolling along a few buildings near a massive pyramid. They were out of view of the building's entrance, far from the Priests as they worked to awaken the long-dormant Frog-Mage.

As a reprieve from the midday heat, Xhalaxí sent his team on a short water break, but Yahiqí stayed behind. As the rest of them were away, there was a long silence between them. Then, the young Saurian Warrior broke it.

"You said fear is different when you see what it takes from you." Yahiqí spoke carefully, as if measuring what each word might cost him. "What did you mean?"

Xhalaxí didn't move, though the muscles in his body tensed. He pushed back the memories that tried to flood his mind.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said.

"But what did you see?" Yahiqí asked with a twinge of nervous anticipation. "What did it take from you?"

Xhalaxí's heart lurched in his chest. He closed his eyes, the names and faces of each warrior flashing through his mind unbidden.

"I do not know the whole of the Frog-Mages' Truth; I have not heard how you or I shall meet our ends," Xhalaxí said, his words measured. "But if I were allowed to hope for one thing, it would be that your fate is kinder than mine has been. Seeing your fellow Warriors die, being the only one to remain, and hearing that your survival was predestined... That's not a burden I wish upon anyone."

"Is that why..."

A loud explosion cut off Yahiqí's next question. The Pyramid had been hit by a distant artillery piece, indicated by a thin trail of smoke rising from its place in the distance. Their quiet restoration of the Frog-Mage from this pyramid was no longer peaceful.

Moments later, the other Warriors in Xhalaxí's care ran to meet him, spilling their waters and reading their weapons. The old Veteran was ready to chastise them, but he saw them moving with drilled precision, gathering their weapons and moving towards their posts on the wall, rather than the source of the battle.

Xhalaxí nodded in approval. This was discipline; abandoning this wall to charge off to battle would leave them vulnerable to an ambush.

Still, the sounds of battle had begun to flare from the southern wall.

His teeth were bared, muscles tight, but no words came. Combat meant risking their lives. The lives of soldiers, perhaps, but these lives were his responsibility. He still remembered the guilt from those lost. In each of their faces, he saw someone he had failed to save.

"To bear the weight of five more souls..."

Before Xhalaxí finished his thought, a Priest came running along the edge of the pyramid. She was panting as she ran, driven by a purpose where Xhalaxí felt only hesitation.

"Hold this perimeter," she commanded, pausing only long enough to make sure her instructions were heard. "You must guard it, no matter the cost."

The Priest spoke with certainty, as though she had witnessed some great part of the Truth. Yet, if she did, she did not dare linger to explain it; instead, she moved on to the other patrols. Yet her instructions to them were different; Xhalaxí could hear others scrambling back to join the fighting on the Priest's orders.

It was strange, Xhalaxí thought, yet he could not help but feel relief. They were far from the battle; perhaps the Priest sensed his doubts, but he did not care so long as all of his team would likely live to see another day.

"So, we're just going to stay here?" Yahiqí grumbled aloud. "We're not going to help fight?"

Xhalaxí nodded. Relief still outweighed the fear and even the curiosity about who would be attacking their ruins. Hopefully they would remain a mystery until the battle had been won.

"Those are our orders. Would you defy them?" Xhalaxí asked. He received no answer.

He turned to Yahiqí, but the young warrior wasn't looking at him.

"Would you..." Xhalaxí began to repeat, but Yahiqí interrupted, something he had never dared to do before.

"We are not alone."

Those words made Xhalaxí's blood run cold. He turned slowly, as if hoping to wake up from a dream, only to find the young warrior was right.

A Robot Legion Overseer approached them, carried by a Jetpack, her face apparently constructed in a perpetual sneer. Ten Guardians flew behind her, glimmering in the morning light.

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"What are you still doing here?" the Overseer said as she touched down, her pace barely slowing as she touched the ground. "Are you cowards hiding from the fight, or did your Priests tell you that you were fated to die here instead?"

The Saurian Warriors scrambled for cover. With little time to prepare, they readied what weapons they had. Xhalaxí held a club and claw, while the others beside him held their own clubs and pistols. Yahiqí snarled beside him, ready to charge, but Xhalaxí signalled him to hold back; this was not the time.

"I can't let you die," Xhalaxí whispered, "If you charge blindly, they'll shoot you before you even get close."

Nearby, they could hear the sound of Carbines from others in their unit who were exchanging shots with the Guardian's atom casters. Then, there was an explosion.

Xhalaxí peeked around cautiously. "They've blown a hole in the pyramid. We need to..."

Yahiqí stood beside him, barely able to contain his rage. If he didn't act soon, Xhalaxí knew that the young warrior might lose his cool.

"I can't watch you die." Xhalaxí stepped forward. "Let's go."

The Saurian Veteran looked at the two Warriors beside him as he moved out from cover; though he had been a strict commander, he had come to like them both, particularly Yahiqí. He would do what he could to protect them now, even if he had to defy the very Frog-Mage's Truth to do it.

"Charge!"

For a moment, Xhalaxí thought he might have spoken the words. But as Yahiqí ran past him, weapons readied, toward the enemy, he realised it was the young warrior who shouted the command. His fellow warriors followed close behind, leaving Xhalaxí standing alone again. It would have been an offence had Xhalaxí been present enough to have stated an instruction himself.

No sooner had they exposed them than did the Overseer of the Robots leap towards them, blade brandished.

"So eager to die." The Overseer said softly as he drew his blade. "Did your prophecies say that you would meet your fate here?"

The sound of metal on metal buzzed in Xhalaxí's eardrums. He had parried the blade with the back of his claws. He closed his eyes, unable to tell reality from the battlefield inside his head.

A cry escaped Xhalaxí's throat, his head bent forward and hands on his face. It's not enough. The high-pitched buzz was unyielding. The weight of the world seemed to press in on him, making it difficult for him to even breathe.

"Xhalaxí!"

The shouts of those injured...

"Xhalaxí!"

His eyes snapped open. That voice wasn't from inside his head.

Yahiqí fired a couple of shots from his pistol. He wasn't quick enough to hit the Overseer, but he forced the Robot back before he could strike down the distracted Saurian Veteran.

Yahiqí locked eyes with Xhalaxí. The young warrior didn't speak a word, but the old Veteran could see a quiet plea in his eyes then. The team needed Xhalaxí.

Xhalaxí gasped. Their blood was not on his hands, not yet. They were still very much alive.

He could no longer protect them from the realities of combat; all that remained was to choose how he would deal with combat. He could order them to flee, break with the orders of the Priest and perhaps the Truth itself, but ensure that he lived. Or, he could try to live up to the purpose he was born for, even if he still did not believe in it.

"They've breached the Pyramid!" Xhalaxí shouted, a new vigour running through him. "We have to cut off their path."

He raised his metal claw in challenge and closed the distance between him and their enemy.

The warriors parted just enough for Xhalaxí's claws to meet the Overseer's short blade. Her mechanical sneer didn't waver.

"I saw the fear in your eyes," she said. "I sense a high probability that you do doubt our masters' Truth. You still have a chance; flee, and we shall not have to sweep you aside."

Xhalaxí pushed back the Overseer's blade with fervour. He forced his gaze to meet her glowing eyes instead of the slick blood on her blade, more than likely Yahiqí's.

A wave of nausea threatened to overtake him, but Xhalaxí found his voice. "That was your second mistake," he said, straining with the effort of blocking her strikes.

"Mistake?" the Overseer said.

"Underestimating your enemy," Xhalaxí said. He feigned a strike. Her blade found empty air, Xhalaxí landing a clawed attack down her robotic arm. She gave no verbal indication of pain, but her mechanical sneer deepened into a snarl.

"And my first mistake?" She asked, her blade clashing against his metal armour.

Xhalaxí smiles grimly. "Damaging a cryo-pyramid in front of Saurian Warriors. I do not think you need a prophecy to guess what we are going to do with you for that."

A mechanical growl emanates from the Overseer's vocal box. It might have been more intimidating if Xhalaxí couldn't growl back.

The Overseer's blade found a break in Xhalaxí's stance, slicing into the scales along his arm. He hissed through gritted teeth, trying not to alarm his Warriors.

"Perhaps I'll ask the Frog-Mage when I bring him back onto our ship," she said, pushing the blade deeper.

Xhalaxí grimaced, though the pain hadn't fully hit him yet. The rush of the fight masked everything except the physical feeling of the push and pull of their dangerous dance.

"Of course, you'll be long dead," she said, pulling her blade free. "If only you had been a little wiser and listened to your doubts rather than their prattling prophecies..."

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The sight of his own blood coating the blade did make him nauseous. Swaying on his feet, it was all Xhalaxi could do to keep his arms held in a defensive position.

"You would have survived as a coward, rather than die as a failure!"

Xhalaxi's reflexes were too slow to predict the path of the Overseer's blade, much less block it. He could read no satisfaction in the Robot's cold face, yet his foe seemed to savour the moment as she prepared for a final blow, reeling up slowly to strike at his exposed neck.

Xhalaxi took a deep breath as he prepared himself to face the same fate as so many others had before him.

Then the sound of crashing metal; the Overseer's blade had been blocked by Yahiqi's club. The young warrior stepped forward, ready for battle.

"You don't get to tell him who he is," Yahiqi said, stepping in front of Xhalaxi. "In fact, you talk too much in general."

"What are you waiting for?" said the Overseer. Her eyes were on the Saurians before her, but she was speaking to her Guardians. "We came for the Frog-Mage; you've spent enough time stalling."

Xhalaxi looked at the cryo-pyramid. Robot Guardians had advanced towards the breach, slowly pushing back the Saurian Warriors in his team who had rushed to guard it. The Priest had ordered the rest of the Saurians nearby to the battle; it was down to only the handful of Saurians with him to hold the line.

Xhalaxi didn't care much for the Frog-Mages' Truth; it left his fellow warriors to die and allowed him to live. It gave him questions he couldn't answer and an overshadowing guilt that weighed him down and separated him from his own people.

There was no denying, though, that Xhalaxi and his warriors were all that stood between the Overseer and the cryo-pyramid. If they had rushed into battle or been given other orders, it might have already fallen. All the time and faith they'd put into restoring the Frog-Mage would have been lost. But it hadn't yet, thanks to them.

To say he could trust in prophecy again would have been a step too far for Xhalaxi. He held the memories of those he lost too dear to forgive and forget. But to believe that he was led here for a purpose, that in spite of his pain, this might be exactly where he needed to be?

He could live with that possibility.

The Overseer held his guard before them, cutting off Xhalaxi and his companions from the breach in the Pyramid as the Guardians rushed towards it.

"You know," Xhalaxi said, drawing her attention. "It's not too late for you to run yet, either. If you hurry, you will not have to see how hard the Starhost will fight to protect their own."

"You're a fool; willing to sacrifice yourself for a Frog-Mage who will never learn your name," she said.

She struck out with both blades, as if to carve both the Saurians down. Yet against two opponents, she was not able to press her attack with the same deadly grace, and in her attempt to press her attack, she left an opening.

Xhalaxi hooked his claw under the Overseer's arm, catching the back of her shoulder as they were pressed close together in his grip. He held her in place, looking up to meet her stare as Tlaxani kept her blades at bay.

There was no fear in Xhalaxi's voice as he spoke, no hesitation. For at least this moment, the past did not haunt him.

"I don't care about the Frog-Mages or any of their prophecies," he said. "But I will fight you for as long as I have breath in me. I'm fighting to protect my people. My friends. Truth be damned, I will not let them die."

The Overseer wrestled as best she could against his grip, but Xhalaxi's strength won out.

"So, you can think for yourself," the Robot said, "But it's too late; my Guardians are already inside."

"Call them off, then," Xhalaxi said, gripping the Robot so tightly with his claw that her arm began to crinkle and buckle. "I heard you talk; you don't believe in higher causes. You want to live. Order your companions to retreat, and I will let you go."

There was a pause, punctuated only by the sound of the Overseer's arms straining to withstand the pressure.

"Very well. Retreat!" The Robot turned her head to the Guardians, "Retreat and rejoin the others!"

Slowly and with great reluctance, the Guardians began to emerge from the pyramid.

Xhalaxi looked to his side as, in the corner of his eye, he watched Yahiqi pull up a pistol, preparing to level a shot at the Guardian.

"Let them go," Xhalaxi said. "There's nothing to be gained with further fighting except more death; there is still a chance they could retreat into the Pyramid..."

With that the rest of the Saurian Warriors lowered their arms, allowing the Saurians to step out of the pyramid. After a moment, Xhalaxi released the Overseer's arm.

"Fate has smiled upon you," Xhalaxi said with a snarl, "None of my people were harmed, or I might have done worse than squeeze your arm."

"I won't underestimate your kind again," the Overseer said, before turning back to rejoin her unit.

Then Xhalaxi turned to the Saurian Warriors, "We were fortunate. There are no serious injuries. I will need at least two of you guarding the breach; the rest of you should take Carbines and be ready to lay down fire; the Robot Legion might have a second wave. Yahiqi, I need a word with you."

Yahiqi bowed his head. "I apologise that I charged ahead..."

"No." Xhalaxi lifted the warrior's head so their eyes met. "You are no longer a young warrior, Yahiqi. You stepped up when I could not, but you never lost trust in me."

Yahiqi spoke softly. "Exactly as you trained us."