Prologue: Visions

Rak was elbow deep in basilisk guts when the vision swept him into a cyclone of stars. Armies clashed over blood-soaked sands. The Goddess rent the night sky with her claws. Vicious insects swarmed out of the bleeding gashes. The Army of Night fell back before her wrath and victory was lost.

Two men stood back-to-back, one with golden hair, the other with hair black as night. Hemmed in by foes, their combined swords held defeat at bay, but only just and not for long.

The setting shifted with a dizzying spin. The sun-haired man galloped a chestnut charger alone through the forest clearing. Arrows flew. He fell.

Storm-grey eyes stared into Rak’s soul. Someone begged for aid and promised something he couldn’t quite hear over a voice speaking a prophecy in the ancient tongue. Rak tried to hush the interfering voice and realized it was his own. His throat burned in the aftermath.

The high priest blinked at the loop of intestine in his hands. The memory of what he’d seen was already fading, so he spoke quickly. His ever-present assistant scribbled the words on parchment. Rak tucked the intestine back into the basilisk and called down the healing power of his God.

He continued across the battleground. Wounded men were taken back to the tents of the Therrai, the healers for humans. Rak was Thezi, a healer of beasts. His patients were not often brought to him. The priests and priestesses of his sect were combing through the debris of war for animals that could be saved.

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Drenched in sweat, Rak sat up in bed. The beardless, sun-haired man had collapsed at the dinner table, convulsing and foaming at the mouth. It was the same man from the earlier prophecy. Rak had dreamed his death over and over since that battlefield prophecy of doom. Each death was accompanied by storm-grey eyes begging for help, always promising something in return.

He wondered if the blond man was Grey Eyes. Why was this man so important that he dreamed about him daily? And why did each dream of the future show him a different death? It was a puzzle, and Rak loved puzzles.

He wrote down the details of the latest dream vision, gleaning them before it faded from his mind. There was a tapestry behind the table. Excitement filled him as he realized it showed a crest—a golden gryphon rearing, wings spread, upon an emerald field. He sketched it on the paper and added a short description. It wasn’t a crest he knew.

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“Royal family of Koilatha,” said the Astri scholar. “Here, see?” The ancient priest pointed to the page as if Rak couldn’t see it without his gnarled finger leading him. This was the third tome of noble devices they’d searched. There were many kingdoms in the Sun Lands, and they all had full complements of noble houses.

“That’s one of the isolated kingdoms,” Rak said, racking his memory for details. “Do we know anything about them?” The words had barely passed his lips when another vision spun him away.

The sun-haired man lay in state upon a bier of golden wood. Cream-and-gold-clad priests surrounded him, the golden fires of death in their hands. This time Rak could see that the grey eyes belonged to a raven-haired man. He was desperately trying to keep the priests at bay. He was the same man Rak had seen defending the sun-haired man in many of the visions. Golden flames roared through the temple, consuming living and dead alike, and the Goddess laughed, rending the fabric of creation with her claws. The Army of Night fell to the forces of the Unmaker and bloody darkness spread over the Sun Lands. Urgency beat at Rak like a second heart.

Chapter 1: Packing

*Pεndεra Atεlio, Єvphora Fεngari, εtos tohn o Polmnion 3279*

5th day, 2nd week, (waning) Evphora’s moon, Year of the War 3279

Musday, the 15th of Evphormon, in the year 1532

The scorching white sun hammered down upon the bleached, bone-dry anvil of the land. It was only spring, but already daytime temperatures reached lethal heights for the unprepared and unsheltered. The heat did not penetrate the thick stone and earth walls of the city, nor did the light penetrate the windowless room Rak stood in. The only reminders of the desert outside were the parched air and the ever-present dust.

Various lamps cast different hues upon the slate-grey walls, tinting them as well as giving Rak light to see by, though a day-sider would find the room impossibly dim. None of the lamps cast white or yellow light, but green, blue, and purple. The lights reflected off the high gloss finish of the black wood frames of the couches, tables, and matching bed.

Rak liked the effect of the different colors and how the reflections changed depending on where one stood in the room. A huge charcoal hound was curled up on the couch, asleep and half buried by a mountain of embroidered black garments. Colorful lizards called mastigi, no longer than the man’s hand, darted about him on whirring wings, alighting on him at whim before flitting off again. Rak smiled at their antics every time he noticed them, but he was long accustomed to their constant company.

From the top of a tall chest of drawers, a small grey-and-black-spotted temple cat supervised the goings-on. Whenever a mastigi flew too close to her chosen throne, a slender paw would swiftly correct the offender, batting the lizard away with sheathed claws.

“You do *not* have to pack everything you own,” declared an all-too-familiar voice.

Rak looked up from the pile of clothes he was stuffing into a pack too small for the volume awaiting it. He waved a lime-green mastigi out of his face. The lizard latched onto his sleeve instead. “I might need these things, Scorth. You never know.”

“Will you need them after I turn them to ash? They’ll fit better then.” The black-skinned, white-horned man glared at his soul-bonded mate. A scarlet mastigi landed on Scorth’s bald head and clicked rapidly.

“You would not,” protested Rak. “You *cannot*.”

Scorth pulled the lizard off his head and glared at it. It zipped out of his hand to hide in the folds of Rak’s temple robes. “Blasted Loftoni, bringing logic into this.”

“We are not walking to Koilatha,” said Rak, “and you do not have to carry them.”

Scorth hefted a dagger from a pile of similar weapons. “You need all of these? Isn’t this a mission of peace? Are you planning on slaying half of Koilatha and leaving a weapon in *each* citizen?” He threw the dagger at the wall and watched it bounce off.

“It is the journey *to* Koilatha that worries me,” said Rak as he retrieved the dagger. He inspected it for damage before putting it back in the pile.

“Treaties with sun worshippers,” Scorth mocked. “What is this world coming to? Next we’ll be teaching the Strazi to *swim*!”

“That is unlikely. Even more unlikely than a treaty with sun worshippers.” Rak pulled a blue mastigi out of the pack. Two more wormed in when his back was turned. He stuffed a few more items into the bulging pack, lashed it closed, and pulled another pack out from under the bed.

“Pack lighter for the doomed mission, then,” said Scorth. He picked up another dagger and tossed it across the room.

“I *am* packing as lightly as possible,” retorted Rak. He stalked over to the discarded dagger, wings half spread in agitation. Several mastigi landed on the leading edges of his wings and refused to be dislodged by his gentle urging.

Scorth took advantage of Rak’s distraction. He grabbed the practice armor and various weapons and shoved them under the couch. “I’ll do the packing,” Scorth said in a syrupy voice when Rak evicted the last mastigi from his wings. “You go talk to S’Ioli.”

Rak knew that tone of voice and with an exasperated sigh, carried out a brief excavation of the underside of the couch. “I am not stupid, nor am I going anywhere. If I leave you to pack I shall be fortunate to have a single change of socks.”

“That’s it. No further packing until you convince an avtappi to be a pack beast,” said Scorth, “or I’ll flame your entire pile!”

“I have already arranged for an avtappi to carry the packs,” snapped Rak. “That sweet-gaited cavalry mare, Zala, agreed.”

“You and those avtappi,” grumbled Scorth. “Have they no dignity?”

Rak shrugged a shoulder. The avtappi had followed him around like a pack of puppies since he’d been a novice. The talent that enabled him to hear Scorth in draconic form was an attractant to the telepathic equines. He filled the empty pack with the items he’d salvaged from the underside of the couch, like his practice armor.

“Not the short *and* the long bows,” protested Scorth a moment later. He tried to grab the bow, but Rak already had a hand on it.

“Longbow? That is a good idea,” said Rak. “I was only going to bring the short bow, but you are right. I might need both.”

Scorth growled. The low rumble shook the dry air and made the dust motes dance. “One avtappi. You convinced *one* avtappi to be a pack beast. And I *know* I’m going to end up carrying all of this.”

“Looks like S’Rak is packing the entire compound,” said Drien as he loitered in the doorway, watching the action. He added the *S* to Rak’s name, an honorific granted to those who’d sworn vows to the Lord of Night.

“No, only half,” said Rak with a great deal of sarcasm. Had it been anyone other than his best friend, he would’ve unleashed his temper. “S’Drien, did you need something?”

“I brought you one of the new, composite longbows. Like you asked.”

“I asked? When?” Rak scratched his head in innocent confusion.

“Never mind.” Drien smiled at his friend’s forgetfulness. “I have three dozen arrows on hand, not the twelve you ask… er, that I thought you’d need.”

“Are we hunting for the entire capitol of Koilatha now?” asked a disgruntled Scorth. “And S’Drien, *don’t* encourage him!”

Drien suppressed a grin. “Why not? I don’t have to carry it. And you can never have too many weapons. Or maps.” His forehead crinkled with worry. “Did you pack the maps?”

“Probably the entire library,” muttered Scorth.

“I have a copy of all the pertinent maps,” Rak said. He had maps for the entire known world. And a full set of star maps. And duplicate maps, in a different pack, just in case.

“Let me see,” said Scorth with great suspicion. He grabbed the map case and unrolled the hefty stack of pages. “What in night’s name do we need a map of Thassos for?”

“Thassos?” asked Drien in a too-bright manner. “Good thinking. It might come in handy.”

“Just in case we get blown off course,” said Rak, ignoring the fact that Thassos would be five thousand stadia in the wrong direction.

“That’s it!” snapped Scorth. He pointed to Drien. “You!” His finger swung to the door. “Out! Humans!” He glared at Rak when the slender man tried to rescue his maps. “Loftoni!” he added.

“Dragons!” Rak snapped back.

“Thezi!” said Drien, not to be left out.

“It is not like you have to carry it,” said Rak.

“Yes, I will. I just know it.”

“I thought I was the prophet here?” asked Rak in a tone of sweet reason.

Drien looked over the pile remaining to be packed and clucked his tongue. “Only four spare daggers? And you call yourself prepared?” Rak and Scorth both stared at him. “What? Don’t you think you should carry a full set of replacements?”

“That is in the first pack,” Rak admitted. He stuffed the offending daggers into the pack before Scorth started throwing them again.

“Night help us,” moaned Scorth. “I’ll be so laden I won’t even get airborne. I’m a dragon, not a donkey. I can’t carry twice my own weight.”