



THE FORKED TONGUE



The tongue flicked in and out, tasting the humid air. All skinks did this, but this one's tongue flicked even more rapidly when he was nervous. The skink stood alone in the centre of a large auditorium. The Astromancers looked down upon him from their elevated positions. The Second of the Order stood by an empty palanquin, giving the skink in the centre a stern look with lidless eyes. The Second would be the Order's voice in the Chief Astromancer's absence.

"Yukannadoozat, you come here without the leave of your master", spoke the Second, his saurian dialect heavily inflected with the chirping characteristic of those that reside in Tlaxtlan. "You speak ill of the Great Warding."

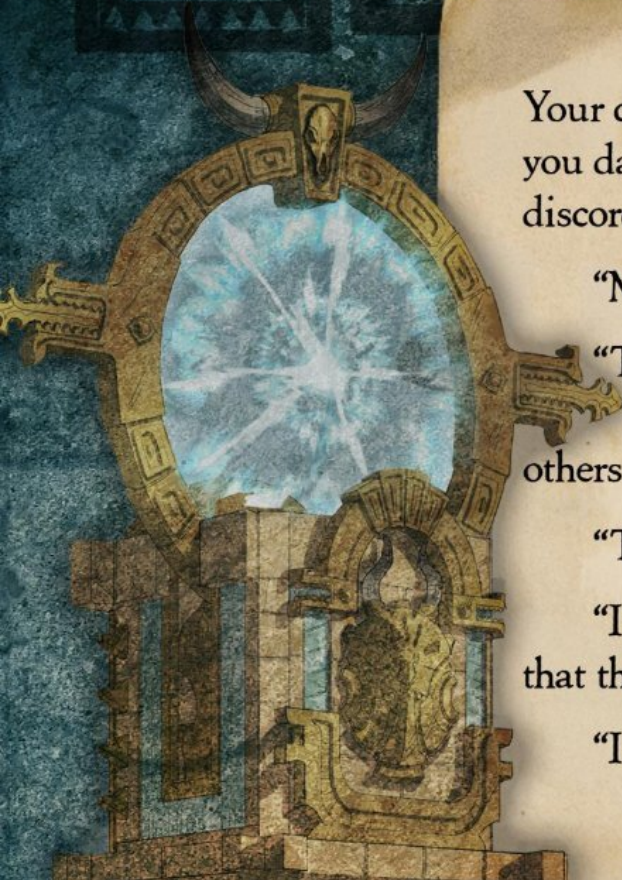
"No, my intention is not to deride the Great Warding. I mean only that it is vulnerable to forthcoming events", said Yukannadoozat. His tongue rapidly flicked out once more.

"These events are stellar in nature, yet we are unaware of any omen", said the Second, gesturing to the audience, "...and we read the skies. That is what we have been tasked by our Lord since the second generation, and yet you presume to know more than we do? Your crest denotes you are of the translator caste." Derogatory hisses from around the chamber accompanied those last words. Yukannadoozat involuntarily shrank back.

"I am. That is how I came across this portent. By transcribing an ancient plaque displaying the Forked Tongue..."

"Silence now! It is your designated role to transcribe and relay such findings to your Lord, who then deigns to share with all the other revered masters through the Geomantic Web.





Your circumvention is against the Great Plan. Then you dare invoke the Forked Tongue. This is discordance!”

“My master sleeps; he will not wake.”

“Then wait until he stirs. That has always been our way”, said the Second. The hisses of the others stated agreement.

“Time is a factor”, pleaded Yukannadoozat.

“Irrelevant! Perhaps it is part of the Great Plan that this event should occur without intervention.”

“If I could just look through the astral-scope?”

The hisses turned into chirps of protest at this request. The gathering became agitated, even hostile. The Second calmed them by opening his crest to its fullest extent.

“You are discordant! Your life is forfeit, but it is not ours to take; I shall inform our Lord Adohi-Tehga to demand your immediate sacrifice. He will commune with your master — I have no doubt that both revered Mage-Priests will agree with the sanction.”

Yukannadoozat’s tongue flicked out. “I will, of course, abide any demands from my Lord. But he sleeps. As you advise, I await his order when



he awakes. Until then I shall continue with my duties.”

The Astromancers hissed in impotent agitation, for Yukannadoozat’s logic was sound.



The skink scuttled from the Temple of the Eclipse, if the Astromancers would not aid him, he was keen to be away. He would check in on his master, try and rouse him from his trance-slumber again. If, as he expected, his master remained dormant, the skink was unsure what his next move should be. He knew he had to share his findings with someone of import.

He made his way along the Plaza of the Constellations and then down a smaller avenue towards his master’s temple within the Dome of Huanchi. The skink braves dropped from a ledge above, landing nimbly onto the stoneway. All were wearing war feathers and armed with blades of curved bronze.

“Discordance!” hissed one. “We bring clarity to the Great Plan,” it chirped in gutter-saurian. Yukannadoozat backed away. He had foreseen many things in the plaques he studied, but not this.

Behind the cohort, from the shadows of a nearby ziggurat, a kroxigor emerged. Even for a kroxigor, it was massive: a living tower of scales and muscle. It issued a crocodilian growl — a deep rumble that Yukannadoozat felt in his crest.

“No, Tar-Grax, they mean me no harm,” said Yuk.



“They are here to simply escort us back to our master’s pyramid.” The skinks flicked their tongues and looked to their brave for guidance. Tar-Grax growled once more. The brave signalled, and the cohort took a loose formation around Yuk and Tar-Grax. As one, they made their way along the avenue.



As Yukannadoozat feared, his master remained latent. It had been a decade since he had last roused, but Yuk thought this was more than mere contemplation. The Mage-Priest’s eyes wept ooze.

“Grrr”, rumbled Tar-Grax.

“No, our revered Lord remains silent.”

“Grrr...”

“What do you mean trapped? He is free to leave the temple as soon as he awakes.”

“Grrr...”

“Imprisoned in the aether? What do you mean?”

“Grrr...”

“I know, we must leave him and seek aid elsewhere.”

“Grrr...”

“There is one who may listen without an entreaty from our Lord. The Astromancers made the connection for me. They mentioned the Second Generation. I see now, the Great Plan aligns. We will travel from night to day from the City of the Moon to the City of the Sun. We shall seek audience with Lord Mazdamundi himself, the greatest Slann of the Second Generation.”





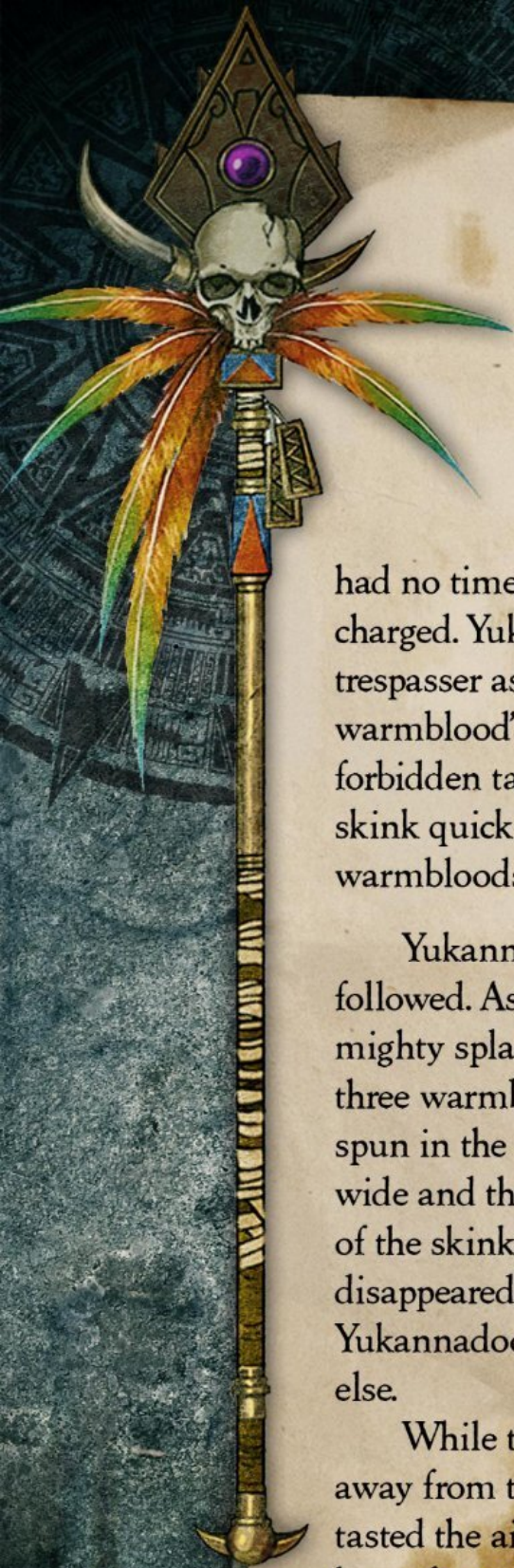
The axe flew past Yukannadoozat, missing his elongated head by inches. It implanted into the trunk of a tree, the fell runes carved on its blade glowed for a few seconds before dying out. The harsh barking of the warmbloods could be heard through the undergrowth, getting closer.

“Move!” hissed Yukannadoozat to Tar-Grax. The skink and kroxigor raced through the jungle, unimpeded by the dense undergrowth, unlike their pursuers. Soon the shouts of the warmbloods were distant. Yukannadoozat took it as an ill omen that the untamed warmbloods had ranged far from their colony on the coast and into Hexoatl’s sphere of influence. Surely, this was not part of the Great Plan? The skink tasted the air in search of his companion, but could not locate the kroxigor’s scent. He must have found some water, thought Yukannadoozat. Tar-Grax was notoriously difficult to get back on dry land once he had gotten wet.

The skink moved on, the plaque that had spurred this whole course of action tucked away in a warmblood-skin satchel, which he clung close to his body. He emerged from the undergrowth into a clearing by a fast-flowing river. The warmbloods were waiting for him.

“Chasos scalf rak Skeggi!” shouted a large specimen. They were ugly creatures, devoid of scales, coated in pinkish flesh with symbols of the Ancient Enemy carved into them. On top, they wore hides of scales



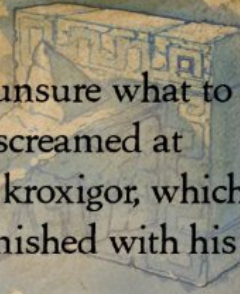


and fur, no doubt harvested from the jungle. There were twelve of them and they looked upon Yukannadoozat with hate.

One screamed a word — a name he had come across before, etched with fearful reverence in sacred plaques. A name the Old Ones had given the cosmic entities that had formed the Ancient Enemy. The skink had no time to muse further and dodged aside as the warmblood charged. Yukannadoozat produced a dagger and pounced on the trespasser as he ran past. He jabbed it repeatedly into the untamed warmblood's back, letting its blood flow, covering the scars and forbidden tattoos on the creature's back. It fell to the ground. The skink quickly dismounted and spun in time to see the other warmbloods charge.

Yukannadoozat ran towards the riverbank and the warmbloods followed. As he came within a tail's reach of the water, he heard a mighty splash from behind. Tar-Grax emerged, roaring and grabbing three warmbloods, dragging them back into the river. The kroxigor spun in the water, without letting go of his victims. His maw opened wide and the water ran red. The warmbloods stopped their pursuit of the skink, one running into the river in a fit of rage. He quickly disappeared beneath the surface — wrenched down — but Yukannadoozat was unsure whether it was Tar-Grax or something else.

While the warmbloods were distracted, the skink scampered away from the river, back into the undergrowth and up a tree. He tasted the air, and found what he was looking for. A leech-fly nest hung from a high branch.



The warmbloods stood around the riverbank, unsure what to do after witnessing the fate of their companion. They screamed at Tar-Grax from the shore and threw the odd axe at the kroxigor, which bounced off his scaly hide. Tar-Grax had just about finished with his first batch of prey.

Suddenly a wax-like ball dropped in amongst the warmbloods. It shattered on the back of one and the screams started soon after. Enraged leech-flies exploded from the smashed nest and began ravaging the warmbloods. Each fly was the size of an outstretched hand, its membranous wings carrying a creature with a hard exo-skeleton, needle-like legs and a round, tubular mouth, similar to a lamprey. Such mouths could break apart scales, but these warmbloods were made of soft, pink flesh...

As the warmbloods rolled upon the ground or flailed uselessly at the air, Tar-Grax charged the shore. He was still hungry.

Yukannadoozat was drawn to the corpse of what he suspected had been their brave. He carefully picked around the furs and shredded skin. He swatted a bloated leech-fly that was still feeding and grunted as he moved the puckered torso.

Underneath he found what had called to him. It was a plaque, an ancient one by the look of it and marked with the Forked Tongue. He compared this plaque to the one in his satchel and gave a chirp of anxiety.

“Quick!” he said to the kroxigor. “No more delays — we must get to the Solar-City!”



They stood before the Vaunted Temple of Chotec at the centre of Hexoatl. Six thousand steps scaled the great ziggurat's exterior, leading to the Star Chamber at its peak. Not that Yukannadoozat and Tar-Grax had started the ascent. A skink wearing a richly-adorned feather headdress and flanked by a kroxigor in golden armour, stamped with the sigil of Chotec, stood in the way.

“No audience!” snapped the skink in the feathers. This is circumvention! Lord Mazdamundi shall commune with your master, and your fate shall be decided!”

“My master’s will swims in the aether.”

“Then you must wait until he returns to his mortal shell.”

“But I have read plaques that foretell a disturbance to the Great Warding, one of which was taken from warmblood raiders.”

“Silence!” The skink suddenly became stock-still. His eyes took on a different aspect and his tail went rigid. He spoke again, but this time the voice was not his.

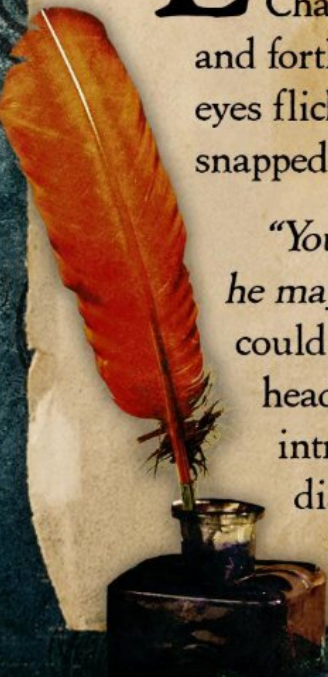
“You will ascend and attend me at once.”

The skink’s tail relaxed, his eyes returned to their normal colour and he stepped aside without a further word or glance in Yukannadoozat and Tar-Grax’s direction. The pair took their cue, and began the climb.



Lord Mazdamundi sat patiently upon his palanquin in the middle of the Star Chamber. Skink attendants scuttled back and forth, ignoring the visitors. Mazdamundi’s eyes flicked open for a moment and then snapped open again.

“Your master cannot be reached. I fear he may be lost. Or caged”, said a voice that could not be heard but was felt deep in Yuk’s head. To warm-blooded creatures, such an intrusion would almost certainly be disconcerting; for skinks, it felt as natural as swimming.



“You have done right, servant. These plaques must be studied. The scripts on them contain new incants of power. The Vortex of the island-serfs is repeated in the numeral codex on each plaque. This is of concern. The younger races — especially the Khanx — must not be allowed to access them. I will summon Kroq-Gar and send him across the World Pond, for these plaques are scattered far and wide.”

“You are wise, revered Lord. I shall return to my master and see if he can be roused.”

“No!” The Slann’s ancient eyes closed for a moment and then snapped open again. “You made mention of the Forked Tongue. We have not forecast such an appearance for another two decades — this is discordance!”

“I apologise, my Lord. I offer my head as sacrifice”, said Yuk, his crest fully folded in submission. He did not want to end his existence, but was not afraid to die, and Mazdamundi’s temper was legendary...

“Foolish servant. I have not done with you yet. While your master is indisposed, you will serve me. Begin by solving this discordance. Search the sky”

“As you wish, my Lord of the Solar-City, but the Astromancers have forbade me from using the astral-scope.”

“Then you will use mine.”



The skink looked through the astral-scope, scanning the cosmos. Then, he focused the lens, his tongue flicking out in anxious excitement. “I see you”, whispered Yukannadoozat. “The Forked Tongue of Sotek hangs low in the sky. Its hiss disturbs the Winds of Magic.”

He looked again through the lens and saw the twin-tailed comet arcing across the firmament.

THE END

by

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