



Heat Lightning

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“Do we have any chance at all, Kachka?”

“With most of our crew dead, Overmaster?” clicked the tohr-kreen. “I do not think so. With luck we might repel the next thri-kreen attack, but there are only nineteen of us left, so I doubt we can even manage that.”

For a moment, Overmaster Illix was silent. A single bead of sweat rolled down his mahogany forehead and into his one remaining eye. He blinked reflexively, but didn't notice the stinging irritation. Illix and his crew had left their home in Draj some three weeks ago on what was supposed to be a routine patrol of the regions near Raam. They were due to turn back toward home in two days. Thanks to the thri-kreen, it looked like they would never complete their mission.

With a mumbled curse, Illix took a few short steps across the bone floor beneath him and looked through the circular portal at his dying command. The great korinth stretched out ahead and around him, its dark grey shell looking like an outcropping of volcanic rock in the midst of the yellow desert. It was often difficult for Illix to think of the creature as a living thing and not some immense vehicle. After all, from his perspective, in a chamber carved out of one of the great spines that projected some twenty-five feet above the 75-ton korinth, there was no sign of life.

Kachka, whose mental link with the korinth's insignificant mind allowed him to feel the injuries that the beast had suffered, as well as direct its actions, reported that it was badly hurt. Korinths were perfect war beasts because of their great size and almost absolute resistance to pain and injury. Still, there were limits to the abuse that even these behemoths could withstand, and this one had passed that point.

Sadly, however, Illix knew that the creature would never have the chance to recover. The thri-kreen ambush had left most of his crew dead. The wizard, Coatilax, had done his best to support the troops. He had unleashed spells so powerful and deadly that vast

patches of the sand tracts around the korinth were scorched into glass. Coatilax's might was not to be trifled with, but even the most powerful wizard can find his energies depleted. In the end, the waves of thri-kreen had overwhelmed the korinth and its magical protector. Illix wished that Coatilax had survived the attack. He would have liked to thank the old man for his tremendous, if futile, efforts.

In the end, the thri-kreen had failed as well. His valiant crew, heroes all, had fought the insectoid raiders as they swarmed up the korinth's shell and into the catacombs that were carved within. For a hundred yards in every direction, the sand was dotted with the brown exoskeletons of the attackers. Here and there, badly injured thri-kreen tried to drag their wounded bodies clear of the battlefield, only to be finished off by one of a surviving handful of archers. The last count had shown that only nineteen of his crew remained alive. Still, their morale was unbroken and Illix was certain that their loyalty to the sorcerer-king was absolute.

At that thought, Illix chuckled to himself. *Even if they were to desert, where would they go? We're sixty miles from home, with nothing but burning sand to subsist on until we get there. Raam is closer, only about thirty miles away, but going there would mean capture and slavery, at best. Neither option is too pleasant.*

"I sense that the thri-kreen are making their final preparations," came the chattering, emotionless voice of the tohr-kreen. "I believe that we will be under attack again within the hour."

Illix cursed. He could not believe that a routine patrol had turned out this way. Only once before had the thri-kreen dared to attack a korinth, and that was many years ago. He frowned at the memory of Overmaster Tectalik's ill-fated expedition. Illix and three other korinth commanders had spent nearly two months looking for the lost beast but found no sign of it. The only logical assumption, they decided, was that it had been utterly destroyed by thri-kreen. Now Illix was to have the honor of following Tectalik in the dishonorable roll of those who had lost their commands to the savage insects.

He looked at Kachka and frowned. The tohr-kreen had long been his friend, and yet he could read nothing of the creature's thoughts from its chitinous face. He tried to sort out his options and found that it was not difficult. There were none.

Illix motioned to an older man who was going over a neat collection of maps at a small table in the corner. He was slender but not gaunt and had a look of shrewdness in his hawklike face. Although his dress did not clearly set him apart from the rest of the korinth's crew, he was a man to be treated with great respect, even by the Overmaster. His name was Akalla, and he was a moon-priest, one of the templars of Draji. It was his place to see that the interests of the sorcerer-king were protected at all times and that no act of treason was contemplated by the korinth's crew or commander.

Illix turned to him and tried to force a comforting smile. He reached out his hand and placed it on the older man's shoulder. He knew that Akalla had held a position of some importance prior to his assignment on the korinth. The move to Illix's command was certainly a demotion of some magnitude. In a lesser man, this might have been cause for bitterness and resentment. Akalla, however, had shown himself to be beyond such things. He had served Illix loyally as any man or woman in the crew.

"We've served together for almost three years now, Akalla, and you have always followed my orders well. There is one command, however, that I had hoped never to give you." Akalla's face dropped. He sensed what was coming. "Outfit the crew for expedition; we are leaving the korinth. We'll head due south, away from the thri-kreen."

For a moment, Akalla seemed about to object. The templar was proud and determined, Illix knew. To him, this must seem like the greatest of defeats. Still, he knew his duty. He saluted and turned to carry out his orders. Illix's dry voice stopped him in his tracks.

"One last thing, Akalla. Find four volunteers. They'll remain behind to resist the raiders. With luck, this will convince the thri-kreen that they have utterly destroyed us. Tell the volunteers that their families will receive double compensation."

Akalla could not answer. He merely nodded, his back still to the Overmaster, and began to descend the ladder into the chamber below where the crew was gathered. “Kachka,” said Illix, “destroy the beast and let’s get out of here.” The tohr-kreen obeyed, sending out a brief pulse of psychic energy that instantly killed the mighty korinth. There was no turning back now. Illix was trusting his life, and the lives of his command, to the infamous mercies of the Athasian desert and its dark sun.

“I don’t think you understand me, Overmaster,” complained Milique.

At first, Illix did not answer. He stood with his back to the healer, listening to her words but not seeming to hear them. On the far horizon, the bloated sun touched the rippling edge of the desert sand and splashed vibrant shades of violet, pink, and blue across the western sky. Slowly, he turned around to face Milique.

“I understand, Milique,” he said at last in a reluctant voice, “and I do not dispute your claims. You warn me that three of our company will be dead within a day if we do not stop to tend them. Caring for the injured is your job, and you do it well. However, we have very little water on which to travel. If we don’t keep moving south, making for the trade route, those three will be only the first to die. Without food and water, none of us will survive to see the pyramids of Draj again.”

Now, Milique was silent. This was true. She knew it. Illix was a good soldier and an even better leader. He placed the lives of his men above his own. If there were any option but to continue, he would take it. Still, she had the healer’s heart. Her family had carried the burden of empathic powers for generations, and she was but one link in a great chain of tradition. She could not stand the thought of failure in her appointed task. If the wounded men died, it would hang forever on her soul, just as the lives of all those who died fighting the thrikreen did. She knew that the same weight burdened Illix.

“By your will, Overmaster,” she answered weakly. The pain of the injured hung about her as she turned to go. She began to erect her mental barriers, blocking off the suffering of her companions,

then dropped them again. *Illix cannot simply shut them out of his mind*, she thought. *Am I so weak that I cannot carry the same burden that he does?*

“Wait a moment, Milique.”

The healer turned, at first, she thought that Illix might have changed his mind. Then she saw that it was not the Overmaster who had spoken. Akalla was trotting across the sand toward them. In his hand, he held a tattered roll of parchment.

Behind the fatherly templar, she could see the rest of the fifteen worn and exhausted survivors sprawled out in the sand. One was fanning himself, as the heat of the day began to subside, while another took a conservative pull from his waterskin. The rest just lay still, conserving their energy and enjoying the break in their trek across the desert.

Akalla stepped up to Illix and knelt down. He unrolled the parchment on the desert sand, revealing a faded and ragged chart. Judging from the bleached pigments, Illix guessed that it must be five or six years old. “I think I have found an answer to our problem!” he said jubilantly. Illix knelt down to take a closer look at the chart. “When we left the korinth, I grabbed all the charts of this area that I had and brought them with me. This one is quite old, as you can see, and it shows a small oasis about a day’s march south of here.”

“It’s not on the more recent charts?” Milique asked, “Why would that be?”

“There are many possibilities,” responded Illix. “Most probably, it ran dry.”

“What good does a dry oasis do us?” the healer asked.

Akalla smiled at her naivete and reminded himself that this was her first voyage aboard a korinth. “Sometimes, an oasis that has run dry will recover if left unused for long enough. If we’re lucky, there’ll be at least a small pool waiting for us there.”

“That’s wonderful!” Milique cried.

“At least it’s a chance,” said Akalla.

“It’s our only hope,” said the Overmaster.



The last of the sun's swollen disk vanished behind the horizon as Illix gave the order to resume the march. He had explained to the survivors that they were heading for an oasis shown on Akalla's charts. He hadn't told them that there was a good chance it would be an empty hole, as dry as the sands around them. The veterans among them would know; the new recruits didn't need to.

"Oltoluque," Illix called to the burly mul who commanded the surviving warriors, "I want you and your troops to fan out ahead of us in a wedge. As we move toward the oasis, we're likely to run into trouble. I don't want us all caught off guard if something big starts stalking us."

The mul turned to look at his commanding officer. For a moment, he seemed to be thinking carefully, clearly he was uncomfortable about something. "Perhaps I should remain with you, Overmaster. If something were to slip past our scouts, you would be left undefended".

Illix motioned toward Kachka. The insect tilted his head slightly to look at Oltoluque. "With Kachka near me I am hardly undefended," Illix replied.

"Perhaps it would be better if you were," said the mul, looking up at the tohr-kreen with obvious distaste.

"What are you implying, Oltoluque?" demanded the Overmaster sharply.

"Do you forget that it was his kind that attacked us in the desert? How can we be certain that he will not turn on you as well. Indeed the circumstances of the ambush are more than a little suspicious, Overmaster. Many of us think that we were betrayed. If that is the case, can you think of a better suspect than"

Oltoluque's words were cut short by the sharp crack of Illix's backhanded slap. The mul's head snapped to the side from the force of the blow, but he seemed to feel no pain from it.

Illix's voice hissed out, carrying with it the stern tone of authority and the deadly warning of a coiled snake. "Your words show your ignorance, mul. If it weren't very likely that we are all going to die out here, I'd have you executed for such insubordinate talk. As it is, I am willing to forget your words and blame this incident on the madness of the desert sun."

"Is it madness to fear for the survival of our company?" roared Oltoluque. The muscles in his neck tightened with rage. For a second, he and Illix stared at each other in silence. Then the mul seemed to reach an important decision. He straightened up to his full seven and a half feet of height. "If you will not concern yourself with a possible threat to the survival of this expedition, I shall. In the name of the mighty Tectuktitlay, I demand that you give up your command so that I might lead us to safety."

Illix cursed under his breath. He should not have lost his temper. To most people, there was no difference between the barbaric thri-kreen who had destroyed their vehicle and noble tohr-kreen like Kachka. Indeed, many people did not believe that the tohr-kreen were anything but a myth. Oltoluque's suspicion was understandable, especially given his lower social status and, hence, more basic education.

Now, because of his quick temper, Illix had brought about a rift in his command. Oltoluque was perfectly within his rights to issue the challenge, and Illix could not refuse it without relinquishing his command. Further, that if he didn't stand up for the tohr-kreen, it was likely the insect would be torn apart by the paranoid fools as soon as Oltoluque took command.

Illix said nothing. He nodded his head to show that the challenge was accepted. The other survivors formed a circle, roughly twenty yards wide, around the combatants. Both men removed their weapons and most of the robes they had worn to shield them from the ruby rays of the daytime sun.

To someone unfamiliar with the two combatants, the match would have looked grossly unfair. The mul stood fully a foot taller than Illix and had muscles that seemed to have been carved from a great block of bronze. The Overmaster, while by no means

a weak man, was simply not in the mul's league. But Illix had been challenged before. The very fact that he was still alive showed that he was far from helpless.

Akalla stepped into the middle of the circle. As a templar, one of the moon priests of Tectuktitlay, the sorcererking who ruled Draaj, it was his place to insure that no act of treason took place in Illix's command. Duels of this nature, though uncommon, did occur. There was a strict code of conduct to be followed, and it fell upon Akalla to see to it that the challenge was fought fairly. "Oltoluque has made challenge!" he called to the company. "In the name of Tectuktitlay, who raised our city from the sands of the desert and made its lands more fertile than any other on Athas, I say that this duel must be fought at once!"

"Akalla," called Kachka in a clicking voice, "this should be my battle, not the Overmaster's. It is I who have been insulted by the young warrior. It is my honor and place among the expedition that has been questioned. I call upon you to stop this challenge and command that the battle which is mine be fairly granted me."

Illix was shocked. He knew the tohr-kreen far better than any other man on Athas. Indeed, Kachka and he shared a common past that assured their lifelong devotion to each other. The Overmaster knew that Kachka was no warrior. In fact, Illix would not have been able to say with certainty whether the tohr-kreen or Milique had the softer heart. After all, the healer was accustomed to seeing pain and suffering which Kachka had often admitted made him sick. For him to intercede at this point was a sign of his great loyalty to Illix.

Illix stepped forward. "The fight is mine, Kachka," he said in a solemn tone. The tohr-kreen cocked his head to look down at his friend. With a rippling of his thorax that might have been the equivalent of a shrug, he stepped to the side and was silent.

Akalla raised his arms above his head and spoke in a thunderous voice that one would not have expected from the lean moon-priest. "In the name of Tectuktitlay, divine ruler of Draaj, a challenge for command of this expedition has been made and

accepted. Before the assembled company and under the all-seeing eyes of Tectuktitlay, let the combat begin!”



The mul charged at Illix like a runaway chariot. At the last second, the overmaster spun to the side and kicked behind him. In any other circumstance, he would have aimed his foot at Oltoluque’s kneecap in an effort to cripple his opponent. With things as they were, however, he couldn’t afford to do that. Instead, he landed the blow in the middle of the warrior’s shin. It would leave a colorful bruise but do no permanent harm.

As Illix had hoped, the impact threw Oltoluque off stride and caused him to lose his balance. With a spray of sand and an explosive loss of breath, the mul went down. Illix completed his lateral move and threw himself onto his opponent’s back. He knew that he could never defeat Oltoluque in a straight contest of strength and had no intention of allowing their duel to become one. As he landed, he lashed his right arm around the mul’s throat.

When he tried to anchor the hold with his left hand, however, the warrior shot an elbow back at the Overmaster. Illix would have been hard pressed to say that the blow had come from an unarmed man. Indeed, the rush of pain that raced along the entire left side of his body could not have been worse had he been struck by a stone war hammer. The blow sent him staggering back from the mul, who sprang to his feet and whirled about.

For a second, Illix lost consciousness. When he awoke, his head was pounding with pain and his vision obscured by splotches of darkness. He saw that Oltoluque was almost upon him and jacked a foot into the air. The towering warrior sprang forward, his full weight landing on the Overmaster’s leg. Something in Illix’s knee popped and another twinge of pain, minor compared to the burning in his side, rippled through his body.

Ignoring the pain, Illix pushed up with his leg. The mul's dive was not halted, but his path was deflected slightly. Amid a cheer of surprise from the bystanders, the mul crashed into the desert sand a second time.

Illix was on him at once. He slipped his arm around Oltoluque's throat and anchored the hold with his free hand. He tightened his grip, cutting off the mul's precious air. Three more savage elbow jabs crashed into Illix's body, but his hold was strong enough to resist them. The final blow was feeble compared to the first ones, but Illix felt certain that it had been enough to break at least one rib. Then his hold overcame the warrior, and Oltoluque's body went limp.

Illix released his grip and stood up slowly. There was silence among the spectators. Something was bothering them, and Illix knew what it was.

Akalla was the first among them to speak. He stepped forward and placed a firm hand on the Overmaster's shoulder. "By combat you have proven yourself, Illix. As agent of Tectuktitlay, I congratulate you and reaffirm your right to command us."

Between wheezing breaths, Illix managed to nod. "All praise to Tectuktitlay," he gasped. He knew what Akalla would say next.

"Overmaster, custom dictates that Oltoluque has forfeited his life by challenging you. Will you not complete the ordeal of combat as it is intended?"

"No, Akalla, I will not," said Illix in the most commanding voice that he could muster. A murmur of alarm rippled through the onlookers. "We are all in deadly peril here, traveling through hostile terrain with few supplies and the potential of attack at any moment. I say that we cannot afford to have any warrior slain by our own hand. There may well be a time in the future when Oltoluque's sword saves us I will not face that time with only his memory."

Akalla was clearly surprised by this, but he recognized the wisdom of the Overmaster's words. He also saw that this was a moment of great peril. If the other survivors took this as a sign of weakness in the Overmaster, he would certainly be challenged

again. In his current condition, he would be unlikely to survive. With both Illix and Oltoluque dead, it was almost certain that the expedition would succumb to the terrors of the desert. Thus, the templar knew that he must speak quickly, before word to demand that tradition besomeone could step forward to demand that tradition be kept.

“The Overmaster is right!” cried Akalla. “Tectuktitlay will commend him for his wisdom when we return to Draaj. Let us give thanks that we are led by so discerning a man.

For a second, the others seemed unconvinced, but the invocation of the sorcerer-king’s name, by one of his own moon-priests, was not to be taken lightly. If Akalla supported the Overmaster, there could be no doubt that his actions were correct. A ragged call of approval for Illix ran through the company. It built swiftly into an outright cheer that ended when Milique stepped forward to tend the injuries of the two men.“



A soft wind blew across the desert and carried the delicate odor of flowers and herbs to the worn and weary men and women of Illix’s command. The scent was invigorating, and the sight of the oasis was more welcome than anything Illix could imagine. Certainly, they were still several hours away from this enclave of life, but already they could see that it was as lush as any oasis to be found on Athas.

As they drew nearer to the water hole, it became even more wondrous. A wide, circular pond spread out at the base of a long, rounded hill. At the center of the pool, a churning waterspout reached into the air, marking the location of the generous spring that brought life to this corner of the dying world. A rolling savannah of golden grasses stretched out around the pool, swaying gently back and forth in the slow breezes that crept into the oasis from the desert around it. The hill, which was on the far side of the pond, was wooded with a thick tangle of short, squat

trees. Vines stretched back and forth like the web of some great spider, and colorful birds fluttered to and fro among the branches.

The morale among Illix's followers was utterly restored when the oasis came into view. Even Oltoluque, who had spent the majority of his time since the failed challenge sulking and glowering at Illix, allowed a smile to cross his face. Unconsciously, they all picked up the pace of their march and were fairly rushing toward the oasis when Illix called for the company to halt.

This was clearly an unpopular order, but the survivors obeyed. Milique seemed about to object, no doubt on the verge of voicing her concern for the wounded, when she saw that something was troubling the Overmaster. She stepped forward to speak with him as the others fanned out to assume their normal defensive positions. As she reached Illix, he held up a hand to silence her unasked question and called to Akalla and Kachka. The healer stood quietly by, waiting her turn to speak, as the Overmaster discussed the situation with his closest advisors.

"Akalla," he began, "your chart showed that this place would be nothing more than a brackish watering hole. At best, we hoped to find a way to replenish our stores and move on. Is there any reason that we should find so lush and splendid a place as this?"

The templar paused for a moment before answering. He looked across the last few miles of sand to the sprawling oasis and seemed about to offer a theory. Then, with a stern look falling across his face, he turned back to Illix and shook his head.

"I thought so," grimaced the Overmaster. He shifted his attention to the tohr-kreen. "Kachka, tell me what you can sense about this place. I don't want us walking into a trap."

The insect stepped forward. It sank into a trance and spread its consciousness out before it. Delicate tendrils of mental energy reached forward, coming at last to the edge of the oasis.

As Kachka's formidable mind probed into the unknown, Milique considered the situation. Certainly, she thought, there was good reason to suspect a trap. So perfect a find in the desert

was almost always cause for alarm. Still, what choice did they have?

Milique closed her eyes and looked into her healer's heart. She felt the pain and suffering of the injured, and pushed it aside. She searched deeper. At first, she sensed the faintest tremors of deception. Something was not right, though she could not say what.

Then Milique found the pain. It crashed in upon her mind with unstoppable force. The very sands beneath them seemed to be full of an anguish that she could not identify. There was an elemental agony here more powerful than any that she could have imagined. The suffering of the wounded, the subtle hints of deception, the concern of Illix for his command, were all swept away.

The healer staggered, trying to break off the mental contact with this alien presence. Everything went dark for a moment, then she was free. The agony was gone. It had found some other channel to explore, some more direct pathway to expression.

It had found Kachka.

Milique cried out a warning and threw herself at the Overmaster. The sudden impact caught him off guard, and the two of them toppled to the sands. Akalla sprang back in surprise. For both men, that was all that saved their lives.

The tohr-kreen whirled about with a howl of rage. It swept a powerful arm through the air, catching the templar on the side of the head. Akalla spun about, let out a cry of pain, and fell to his knees. Had the blow been better aimed, he was certain that his neck would have been shattered. As it was, he found himself fighting to maintain consciousness as the giant insect moved in for the kill.

Before the tohr-kreen could strike a second time, Oltoluque sprang into action. He vaulted over the sprawled bodies of Illix and Milique, and slammed into the tohrkreen's side. The weight of the mul was too much to counter, and the insect was knocked from his feet. In a smooth, rolling follow-through, Oltoluque tumbled away from tohr-kreen and landed squarely on his feet.

"You see!" he roared. "The insect has betrayed us!"

Illix could not believe his eyes. Certainly he could not have misjudged the tohr-kreen. For many years, the two had been as close as any pair of brothers could be. When he saw the normally flat and emotionless features of the insect's face, however, he knew the truth. Kachka's countenance was one of unmistakable pain and madness.

Oltoluque's warriors were quick to follow their leader into battle. Before the tohr-kreen could regain his feet, half a dozen burly warriors fell upon it. As Kachka thrashed and snapped at its opponents, Oltoluque stepped toward it. The mul reached over his shoulder and drew a bulky bone axe forward. Few men would have the strength to lift the great weapon, let alone wield it, but it looked almost weightless in the mul's hands.

For a moment, Kachka seemed to acquiesce. It stopped struggling and fixed its gaze on the great warrior. Then the tohr-kreen unleashed a stream of psychic energy at Oltoluque. The mul, however, was ready for this attack and his formidable mental defenses were already in place. Oltoluque deflected the attack, but it came with more power than any psionic challenge he had ever faced before. He grimaced with pain, and a pounding headache gripped his skull. The attack passed, and Oltoluque raised his weapon. "You have failed, traitor, now you will die!"

"No!" cried Illix, getting to his feet.

The mul stopped. He turned to look at the Overmaster, hate and disbelief burning in his eyes. "Overmaster, can you deny that the creature has turned on us?"

Before Illix could answer, Milique sprang up and stepped between the two men. "Its mind is not its own. There is some great power here, I have felt it. It has driven the tohr-kreen mad with its rage and anger."

Oltoluque cursed. He twisted his grip on the weapon and brought the flat of the blade down on the insect's skull. There was a loud cracking sound as the exoskeleton buckled under the impact. The tohr-kreen, who had begun to struggle again, fell still.

Milique rushed forward and knelt beside Kachka. Her fingers probed the wound and her empathic power reached carefully out.

She sensed its pain, felt its madness, but pulled back before the madness could lash out at her again. She turned to face Illix and force a faint smile to her face. “It lives, but I cannot say how bad the injury is.”

Akalla stepped beside Illix and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “We have no choice, Overmaster. We must make camp here. Whatever the danger, we must face it so that our wounded can be treated.”

“I know,” mumbled the Overmaster, “but if I must choose between death in the desert, or in the midst of that garden, I suppose I’ll pick the oasis.”



“But I must!” cried Milique.

“I forbid it,” responded Illix.

“I’ve done everything I can for it with traditional healing. If I don’t use my gift of healing, it may die.”

“I understand that,” said Illix, looking down at Kachka’s bandaged skull. The light inside the tent was poor, but the coolness of it was refreshing after days in the hot sun. “You know as well as I do that healing it will require a deep level of psychic contact. I can’t allow you to risk your mind until we know what happened to Kachka.”

Milique flushed with anger. She was about to continue her protests when Illix placed his dark hands on her shoulders. He forced a weak smile to his face. “Do what you can, Milique, but we’re in a dangerous situation here and I can’t risk the loss of our only healer. I know this is hard for you. I know that you can’t help but feel its pain. But I must insist.”

Milique lowered her head. She nodded, but could not speak. Illix wondered if she knew how much he shared her agony.

Illix turned and stepped out of the tent. He expected the scorching crimson rays of the sun to attack him at once, but was pleasantly surprised to notice that the day was cooler than it had been. He cocked his head back, noting, with some disbelief, the

rare sight of a tenuous cloud formation hanging above the oasis. If things had been less serious, he would have smiled at the kindly omen of fertility. Instead, his only thought was that the clouds would burn off long before they could carry any of the oasis's life giving water to the parched deserts beyond.

Illix's momentary thoughtfulness was interrupted by the lumbering arrival of Oltoluque. Since their duel, the mul had been no more, nor less courteous to his Overmaster than military tradition required. He stood at rigid attention until Illix bade him to speak.

"The sentries are in place, Overmaster," said Oltoluque in a clipped, stern voice.

Illix nodded. "Very well, come with me and we'll inspect them."

As they walked around the perimeter of the camp, Oltoluque said nothing. When the last position had been checked, Illix gave his approval.

Oltoluque had done an efficient job in establishing a secure camp. They were positioned in the sweeping savannah that blanketed the north side of the oasis. One side of the camp was bordered by the bubbling, clear water of the oasis. Care had been taken to leave a wide space between the edge of the camp and the crescent shaped forest that ran around the oasis and covered the rise south of the water. There was no danger of an ambush, for any enemy would be spotted long before reaching their enclave.

"Well done, Oltoluque. We ought to be safe enough here," said Illix. He saw that something about the security of the camp was bothering the mul. "What is the problem, Oltoluque?"

"We have a secure perimeter, Overmaster, but it won't do us any good."

"Why is that?"

"Because the real enemy is inside our camp," hissed the mul.

Illix whirled. His first thought was to strike the mul again, but his wisdom overcame his rage. In a controlled voice, the Overmaster answered Oltoluque's comment.

"You refer to Kachka?"

“You know I do,” sneered Oltoluque.

“Go on, you clearly have more to say about the matter.”

Again, the warrior hesitated before speaking. Then he allowed his thoughts to cascade forth with an almost unchecked fury. “How can you allow that creature to stay among us? It tried to kill us once; it will try again! I cannot believe that you haven’t ordered it executed for its betrayal. Clearly, it brought the thrikreen raiders down on us. Who knows? They might be on their way here!”

Again, Illix felt his temper rise. If Oltoluque was allowed to continue speaking like this, as he undoubtedly did when Illix wasn’t around, morale among the warriors would be utterly destroyed. There seemed to be only one course of action.

“Oltoluque, I’m going to tell you something that none of the others knows, not even Akalla. Perhaps it will help you to understand why Kachka can’t possibly be a traitor.”

The mul rolled his eyes. He was a physical man, not someone prone to debate or conversation. Clearly, the idea of listening to what was no doubt going to be an inspirational anecdote did nothing for him.

“Several years ago,” Illix began, “I was assigned to command a unit of erdlu riders. We were sent east out of Draaj. Reports had come in that a large number of thrikreen were massing south of Bitter Well. Our orders were to ride to the oasis, then turn south. We were to gather intelligence about their numbers and plans. It seemed a routine task, and none of us thought too much about it as we drew near to Bitter Well.

“Suddenly, the savages attacked. We were outnumbered ten to one, and it wasn’t long before most of our unit had been killed. I was taken prisoner, being the highest ranking of the survivors, and everyone else was slaughtered.

“I spent the next few days in the hands of their tribal inquisitor. It was a master at inflicting pain. During my time in its custody, I lost my left eye. I don’t remember how, but I’m sure it hurt like hell. I don’t even remember if I told them what they wanted to know.

“When the inquisitor was done with me, I was thrown into a pit at the center of the village. As they drew a heavy wooden grate across the hole, the insects mocked me, chattering that I would be killed the next morning. Given the condition that I was in, it didn’t seem likely that I would live long enough to attend my own execution. As I lay on the rocky floor of the pit, a large shadow fell across me. I opened my remaining eye and saw the towering figure of Kachka above me.”

“He was to be your executioner?” asked Oltoluque, clearly becoming interested in the tale despite himself. At that comment, Illix chuckled.

“Not at all. It was a prisoner like I was. You may have noticed that Kachka’s back is laced with fine cracks. They had broken its carapace and applied burning embers to the delicate tissues underneath. I can’t imagine how much that must have hurt, and Kachka says that no human could have endured it and remained sane.”

“I don’t understand. Was it a criminal?” asked Oltoluque.

“It seems that Kachka had been living among the thri-kreen for several months. It didn’t care for the savages, but found them an interesting study. Its people, the tohr-kreen, are far more civilized than the desert raiders you and I know. Kachka learned that the thri-kreen were going to ambush a military patrol near Bitter Well.”

Oltoluque looked surprised. “That was your unit?” he asked, already certain what the answer would be. Illix nodded and continued his story.

“Kachka demanded that they give up their plan, but the savages didn’t listen to him. In the end, when he threatened to warn the riders before the ambush could be sprung, they turned on him.”

Illix thought back to that dark night so many years ago. As he told the warrior his tale, part of his mind relived the escape. He remembered how the two had worked together, breaking a small opening in the grate that covered the pit. He could still hear the clicking gasps of pain coming from Kachka he scampered up the

tohr-kreen's fractured back and pulled his body through into the moonless night. Every movement relived the escape. He remembered how the two had brought with it a surge of pain. It was all he could do to avoid falling into unconsciousness . It took all his strength to move the grate off the hole.

Once the way was clear, the tohr-kreen had pulled itself up. Normally, such a creature could easily have launched himself into the air to a height twice that of the pit, but Kachka had been abused just as badly as Illix.

The two of them crept out of the thri-kreen village. Twice they were challenged by sentries, and twice the tohr-kreen lashed out with its mind to destroy them. They moved out into the night, leaving the certain death of the thri-kreen village for the probable death of the Athasian desert.

It took them a week to reach Draj. The last day of the journey, Illix dragged the body of the tohr-kreen through the sparse grassland that ringed the city. The burden had been too great for so wounded a man, and Illix's strength had given out. He had fallen and lost consciousness, certain that he would not wake up. When he opened his eyes, he was in the Temple of Healers in Draj. He was home and, more importantly, alive.

"When I recovered," concluded Illix, "I asked that Kachka be brought to me. We talked for a long time, and when the insect left it called me *kaluchmak*. It translates into our language as *clutch-mate*."

"Clutch-mate?" asked Oltoluque, "What's that?"

"It means that Kachka and I are sworn to be loyal to each other until the end of time. It could no more betray me and my command than Akalla could turn against the sorcerer-king he worships."

"Perhaps now you will see that Kachka has no more love of the thri-kreen than you or I. It thinks of them as savage animals. If anything, they are a shame to it, for it knows that they are its distant kin."

For a long moment, Oltoluque was silent. As a Warrior, he certainly understood the bond that could form between men who

had been through great hardships together. Still, he could not drive the image of the thri-kreen attack from his mind. Even his steel nerve had trembled at the horror of that moment.

Illix turned away from the mul and left him to his thoughts. For the moment, at least, Oltoluque seemed pacified, but Ill' knew that this wasn't going to be the end of his troubles with the young officer.



Illix sprang to his feet, throwing off the canvas blanket he had been sleeping under. The echoes of the explosion hadn't yet died out. He grabbed the steel sword that marked his rank and sprang out of his tent.

It was still dark outside, the eastern horizon was starting to brighten with the light of the coming dawn, but a band of shimmering stars was still visible to the west. Illix saw no sign of immediate danger in the darkness. Suddenly, a blinding wall of azure light slammed into him. He threw an arm up to protect his night vision just as he heard the crack of another loud explosion.

Then he saw the truth. The sky above the oasis was blanketed with thick, bulbous clouds. Dim flashes of color, accented by occasional bursts of blinding lightning, sprang from cloud to cloud in the faint light of the sunrise. The air was thick with moisture, but no rain had fallen yet.

"Have you ever been in a thunderstorm?" asked Milique, stepping up quietly behind him.

"Once," said Illix. "A long time ago. I was escorting a team of diplomats to a meeting with a tribe of halflings on the forest ridge. The storm didn't last long, but it was one of the most incredible sights I've ever seen."

"I've never seen one before, but I've heard stories. I suppose we all have, but they can't do it justice. There's something wondrous about the whole thing."

Illix found himself admiring the sensitivity of the healer. To him, everything was either an enemy or an ally. In her mind,

however, there was an artistry in all things. He looked again at the clouds, trying to see in them the elegance that Milique perceived.

Before he could say whether his experiment had succeeded, the quiet of their conversation was interrupted by Oltoluque. He came trotting forward, holding a slender bone spear in his hands, and asked to speak to the Overmaster.

“Two of the men are missing.”

“What happened?” Illix asked, his mind utterly abandoning any interest in the clouds or the storm brewing overhead.

“After the perimeter was established, I sent a team to scout the woods on the far side of the oasis. They should have been back an hour ago, but there is no sign of them. I was about to head out myself and see what I can find of them.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Illix. Oltoluque made no sign of protest.

“As will I,” said Akalla, coming out of his tent.

“I think not,” said the Overmaster. He stepped nearer to the templar and said, in a voice too low for Oltoluque to hear, “I want you here. I don’t trust any of the mul’s warriors near Kachka. You take charge and keep everything under control. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

Akalla nodded and stepped back, Illix turned away from him. “Milique, we may need your skills. Get your healing kit and come along.”

It took the young woman only a few minutes to get ready for the journey. Illix spent the time worrying about his injured friend, and watching as the whistling Oltoluque sharpened the tip of his spear.



Stepping through the thick forest, Illix cursed at the vines that seemed to coil about his feet like snakes. The change from the pleasant grasses on the other side of the oasis was quite marked. There were no cool breezes in this place, only an oppressive

heaviness in the air. Insects buzzed to and fro, horrible creatures that bit, stung, and drew blood.

By the time they started into the woods, the sun had crept above the horizon. The clouds overhead were worrying Illix, they were as dark and ominous as any the Overmaster had ever seen, but that wasn't the problem. The thing that bothered Illix was the strange shape of the cloud formation. They were hanging directly above the oasis in a large, circular formation. While the oasis and the lands around it were cloaked in somber darkness beneath the storm, the crimson rays of the sun scorched the desert beyond just as they did every day. Each flash of lightning that roared above the trio reminded Illix of the supernatural danger that hung over their heads.

"Let's make for the top of the hill," ordered Illix. "If we don't find a trace of them up there, we can begin to circle back down until we do."

Milique nodded. Oltoluque said something in response. Whatever it was, however, Illix would never know, because the deafening roar of another clap of thunder smothered his words.

As they neared the top of the hill, the forest became thicker, the trek became harder, and Oltoluque was forced to use his bone sword to chop through the foliage. When they reached the crest of the hill, Illix noticed that Milique looked winded.

"You can sit down and take a rest, Milique. Oltoluque and I will fan out and try to find the missing men."

"There's no need for that," said Oltoluque, "I believe I have found them."

Illix and Milique moved quickly to the mul's side. They saw that he had found a circular hole, roughly a yard wide, that had been cut into what appeared to be a hollow rock outcropping. Vines clung to it, but they had been hacked away with a sword.

"I don't believe it!" gasped Illix.

"Nonetheless, here it is," said Oltoluque.

"Here what is?" asked Milique.

"Don't you recognize it?" said Illix.

“It’s a window carved into the shell of a giant animal“ said Oltoluque.

“This isn’t a natural hill,“ said the Overmaster. “We’re standing on the back of a buried korinth.“



It took them only a few minutes to fashion three crude torches from the debris around them in the forest. When that was done, Oltoluque brought out his tinder box and got them burning. When the last one was lit, Illix stepped to the portal and climbed through.

As the others followed, he looked around the worn chamber beyond. The floor was covered with an inch or so of sand and dried leaves, making it easy for him to see the tracks made by his men. They had entered this chamber, which had housed a lookout when the korinth was still alive, and crossed to the access hole cut in the floor. Below was the command deck, and that was, no doubt, where the men had gone.

The trio followed the trail. As Illix stepped toward the ladder, Oltoluque grabbed him by the shoulder. Illix was surprised, cursing himself for letting his guard down. He spun about, ready for combat, but found that Oltoluque wasn’t threatening him.

“I should go first, Overmaster. We don’t know what’s down there.“

Illix’s pride told him to refuse, but he knew that Oltoluque was right. It was foolish for the head of the expedition to place himself in such danger when there was a more capable warrior present. Illix nodded and the mul stepped forward. He vanished through the hole in the floor and, after a few seconds, called for the others to follow him.

“The command crew,“ said Oltoluque, motioning to the half dozen skeletons sprawled around the chamber. Numerous weapons, mostly fashioned from bone and obsidian, lay scattered about. One wall of the command deck was obscured by a pile of sand that had poured in through the forward portal. A skeletal

hand extended from beneath, clutching a rusted steel sword in its bony grip.

Illix moved quickly to the sword and drew it from its owner's lifeless grip. He held the hilt near the sputtering light of his torch and cursed with wonder when he saw the insignia that was set there. Without a word, he turned and tossed the weapon to Oltoluque. The mul examined the sword as well, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Tectalik," he whispered. As the mul spoke the name of the Overmaster whose korinth had fallen to the thrikreen so many years ago, his voice carried a sound of fear and worry, as if the very mention of the name was enough to bring some curse down upon them all. From Milique's expression, it was clear that even she understood the importance of the name.

Illix nodded. He knelt down beside the nearest of the skeletons and looked it over carefully. There were no broken bones or signs that the man had died in combat. Indeed, none of the others bore marks of violence either. "These men didn't die at the hands of thri-kreen," said Illix.

Oltoluque looked briefly around the room, taking special care to examine the weapons and what remained of the crew's clothing. "None of these men died in battle, Overmaster, at least not with anything corporeal. None of their weapons are broken or nicked, and their clothes are not torn or punctured. Whatever killed them didn't do it by force."

Milique closed her eyes and opened her heart to vibrations in the bodies. She felt the overwhelming hate and evil of the oasis, but avoided contact with it. Instead, she focused on the dead and tried to feel the faint resonations in them. "These men drowned," she said at last.

"Drowned?" said Oltoluque.

"How is that possible?" Illix wondered aloud.

"I don't know," said the healer, "but that's how the korinth died too. I can sense it."

"This doesn't make sense," said Illix. "We're almost seventy miles from the spot where Tectalik's korinth was supposed to

have been ambushed.“ For a time, the trio was silent. Then Illix moved toward the ladder. From here, it extended up to the lookout’s station and down into the vehicle’s interior. “We’re going to Tectalik’s cabin. I want to find his orders and learn what he was doing here.“

On the way, they found Illix’s missing crewmen. There was no doubt about how they had died. Their features were bloated and puckered as only a drowned man’s can be. Their weapons were drawn and ready, but they clearly hadn’t been used. Curiously, there was no sign of water in the area. The walls were bone dry and looked as if they hadn’t seen the slightest trace of humidity in years.



“What exactly are we looking for?“ asked Milique as Oltoluque threw a massive shoulder against the door that would admit them to Tectalik’s room. The leather hinges ripped like paper, and the door splintered under the impact.

“Some manner of strongbox,“ said Illix. “The orders he was given at the start of his mission will be in it. Whatever he was commanded to do, I’ll bet it wasn’t the routine patrol we were told about when we went to search for him.“

It didn’t take long to find what they were looking for. In a secret compartment, cut into the floor beneath the folding bunk, Illix found a bone tube. He drew it out and looked at it. The end, a simple screw top, was fastened into place. Illix found no evidence of a locking device, but he suspected that the tube was magically sealed. The Overmaster attempted to pry the cap off, but it was useless.

“Let me try,“ said Oltoluque, and Illix tossed the tube to him. The mul took a moment to get a solid grip on it, then tried to snap it with all his might. There was a sharp crack, almost as loud as the thunder had been at the camp, and the cylinder broke cleanly in half. The mul pulled a slender roll of vellum from one half of it and handed it to Illix.

As the Overmaster took the scroll and unrolled it, Milique leaned near to see what was written there. As a healer, she was one of only a few non-templars in Draj who was legally permitted to know the secret of reading. Oltoluque, having neither the healer's unique gifts nor the Overmaster's rank and status, would have to trust his companions to tell him what was written on the scroll.

"It's just gibberish," said Milique.

"No," answered Illix as he read, "it's in code. Every time we get a special assignment, the orders are encrypted. This particular cipher is used only for matters of the utmost secrecy."

"Then you know what it says?"

Illix nodded but didn't answer. His face froze in alarm as he finished reading the orders. With a loud curse, he crushed the aged scroll -which promptly crumbled into dust- and allowed the debris to fall through his fingers.

"Oltoluque, do you still have Tectalik's sword?"

"Of course."

"Bring it, we're heading back to camp."



Akalla's concern was clearly written on his face as Illix and his companions stepped into the camp. "Any sign of them?" he asked.

Illix said nothing. Instead, he swept his arm forward in great arcing blow. His fist struck the templar solidly and sent him sprawling to the sand. Milique gasped, and the rest of the survivors looked on in surprise. Before the moon-priest could recover enough to say anything, Illix dropped the rusted sword beside him.

Akalla sat up. He looked at the weapon with some confusion, then a strange look came over his face. Clearly, he understood at once the origin of the blade.

"You knew about this place!" roared Illix. Murmurs of confusion spread among the survivors at this accusation.

“What are you saying?” asked Milique.

“The coded orders that we found instructed Tectalik to bring his korinth to this very place. They made mention of an experiment that he was to conduct. Tell me what it was all about, Akalla.”

Oltoluque stepped forward, he held his spear ready but seemed uncertain as to what was going on. “How would Akalla know about Tectalik’s orders?” he asked.

“He signed them,” said Illix plainly.

Akalla drew himself back to his feet, watchful of another blow from the Overmaster. Then, after several seconds of uncomfortable silence, he nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “I knew about this place. When word came to me that the oasis was about to run dry, I became concerned. We had planned to build a fort here, a place from which we could launch attacks against the sorcererqueen of Raam. She has long been a bother to the mighty Tectuktitlay, and we saw this as a chance to destroy her. Without the oasis, however, no fort could survive here.

I came up with a plan that might save the oasis. Overmaster Tectalik was sent to this place with a cargo of slaves, prisoners of the war with Raam, and a number of powerful wizards. All of the slaves were to be executed and their life energy magically transfused into the spirit that lived at the heart of the spring.

“Yes, the plan was simple enough, but we never heard from Tectalik again. The experiment had failed. No follow-up mission could be made, for fear that word of the matter would reach Abalach-Re upon her throne in Raam. My superiors decided that, to protect themselves from reprisals, they must find a scapegoat. I was the one they chose. I was disgraced in the Order of the Moon Priests and reduced in rank. A few months later, I was assigned to your command.”

Milique looked about. Her eyes were wide with awe. “Of course” she cried. “Tectalik and his crew didn’t fail. At least, not utterly. They succeeded in flooding the place with mystical power but failed to predict the effect that it would have on the spirit of

the oasis. The creature, if you can call such a thing that, couldn't cope with its new power. It was wracked with pain so great that it could no longer control itself. I can feel it all! They infused the spirit with so much life energy that it was driven insane.

Illix's arm shot forward. He locked his hand around the throat of the templar. "So you decided to come back and check things out for yourself?" Akalla gasped an affirmation. "You arranged for the thri-kreen to attack us, didn't you?" Illix relaxed his grip only enough to allow a reply.

"There was no other way for me to investigate the fate of Tectalik," Akalla said. The military command would hear nothing of a second mission five years ago, and they have had no reason to change their thinking since then. Instead, I made certain that the insects knew our route and that they were assisted in making the ambush exactly where and how they did. I knew that you would be forced to leave the korinth, and that you would have no choice but to head south. You would have done the same yourself, if you were in my position."

Illix refused to answer, half out of fear that the templar might well be correct. Instead, he thrust the templar away. Two of Oltoluque's warriors caught the tumbling body. "Oltoluque, bind him!" ordered the furious Overmaster. "When we return to Draj, he'll be tried for treason."

The mul stepped forward but stopped short as the sound of Akalla's mocking laughter filled the air. "I don't think so, Illix. I act on behalf of the sorcerer-king himself. My goals are his goals. In his name, I relieve you of your rank and your command. I am Overmaster now.

"Not while I live!" cried Illix. "You betrayed my trust and brought death to my crew. If you want to claim command of this expedition, you will have to do it by challenge. Oltoluque was brave enough to face me. Will you?"



Illix didn't expect Akalla to charge at him as Oltoluque had. The templar was more likely to hang back and use his magical abilities in the duel. For his part, Illix didn't plan to give his enemy time to weave his magic. As soon as Oltoluque gave the sign to begin, Illix threw himself at the templar. To Akalla, this looked much like the opening move Oltoluque had made against Illix in the desert. Akalla had expected this and jumped quickly back to avoid the attack.

Illix, however, had anticipated the templar. He landed four feet in front of Akalla, tumbled forward, and snapped up with his legs to deliver a brutal kick to the templar's chest. To his credit, Akalla was not caught wholly unprepared. He fell back, absorbing much of the blow, and landed in a sitting position. Before Illix could follow through, the templar made a magical sign with his left hand and spoke an ancient word of power.

Not knowing what to expect, Illix braced himself for anything. At least, he thought he had. He expected some sort of pain or physical assault. Instead, a flash of blinding light erupted from Akalla's fingers. The Overmaster threw his arm up to shield his eyes, but he was too late to block the spell.

Illix blinked rapidly, trying to drive out the splotches of color that obscured his vision. He saw the shadowy shape of Akalla moving forward, but not clearly enough to protect himself. A pair of blows, one to his abdomen and one to his jaw, sent Illix to his knees. As he struggled to draw breath into his burning lungs, the templar delivered a spinning kick to the side of his head. Illix was thrown sideways and landed on his back. The next thing that he felt, other than the pain that ripped at his body, was the solid pressure of Akalla's foot on his windpipe.

Illix's vision had begun to return. He could see the smile on Akalla's face now. There was regret in his eyes. "I truly liked you, Illix. You've been a good officer and a fine friend. I'm sorry that it's my lot to end your life."

“Not as sorry as I am,” gasped Illix. Akalla smiled at the Overmaster’s humor and began to apply slow pressure to his throat.

Suddenly, the templar staggered and toppled forward. Illix rolled clear, thankful that Akalla had lost his balance at such a fortunate moment. He came up on one knee, ready to hurl himself at his enemy, when he saw that it wouldn’t be necessary.

Akalla was dead. A crescent-shaped throwing weapon, one of Kachka’s deadly *kyorkcha*, was imbedded at the base of his skull. The needle-like spikes on the edges of the weapon had buried themselves in his neck, severing his spinal cord.

For a second, Illix was delighted that his friend had saved him from death. Then he thought of the situation, and knew that it was not right. The tohr-kreen was a creature of honor and would never interfere in a challenge duel, even if he had regained both consciousness and sanity.

As cries of alarm rippled through the onlookers, Illix turned and saw his clutch-mate. The insect lumbered out of the tent it had been resting in. A flash of lightning shattered the sky and spilled blue light down upon the camp. Although Illix had always found it impossible to see any expression in Kachka’s face, he perceived now an absolute emptiness in the creature’s eyes.

Milique saw the emptiness too. She opened her mind and touched, as lightly as she could, what remained of the tohr-kreen’s soul. Instantly, a wash of anger and agony exploded upon her. For an second, she felt as if she were one with the oasis. She could remember the coming of Tectalik and his korinth. She felt the blood of the executed slaves pour into her flesh and the rush of burning energy that had brought. Milique clutched at her temples, cried out in pain, and forced up her mental blocks as swiftly as she could. Her last thought was one of protection and xenophobia. Intruders were coming into her body again. They must be destroyed. The waters would kill them, as they had killed all the others.

Another burst of lightning ripped across the sky. In its freezing light, Illix saw Milique staggering away from the scene. Her eyes

were unfocused, her mind shattered by the agony she had exposed herself to. He saw the tohr-kreen standing like some maniacal god with its four arms stretched out to the oasis.

Suddenly, Illix was pushed roughly aside. Oltoluque bolted past him, sending the Overmaster stumbling to the side. As the mul sprang into a great leap with his spear raised above his head, Illix saw something unlike anything he had ever seen before. As if in answer to the tohr-kreen's outstretched arms, a wide column of water sprang from the oasis. It shot through the air, curling around the company like a great arm, and crashed in upon them.

Illix felt his feet being pulled from beneath him by the water. He clawed at the soil, trying to resist the impossible current that pulled him toward the oasis. He heard the choking screams of the others as they were pulled beneath the surface of the water and drowned. Water began to fill his nose and mouth, he choked and gasped for breath, but half of what he drew into his lungs was water.

Suddenly, something curled around his wrist and snapped his tumbling movement to a stop. Illix found himself being pulled swiftly against the current. His head broke clear of the water, and he labored to draw vital air into his lungs. He saw Milique standing some distance away, shaking her head in an effort to clear her battered mind.

The grip on his wrist was released, as the last of the water swept past Illix's feet. He turned his head and saw that it had been Oltoluque's hand that had pulled him from the water. The mul's spear was half buried in the ground, and he had used it to anchor himself against the draw of the current.

Without a word, the mul turned away from Illix and charged the tohr-kreen. He bent his legs as if to spring at the insect, then came in low when Kachka tilted back to receive the attack. Oltoluque lunged with the spear, cracking the insect's exoskeleton and driving the weapon deep into its body. He drew the weapon out, but before he could strike again, two of Kachka's arms locked onto his wrists and Oltoluque found himself yanked

into the air. The tohr-kreen's other pair of arms clamped down on his ankles.

Illix turned his head away before the insect applied its strength to the mul. He heard Oltoluque's cry of agony, as his arms and legs were torn from his body. If he was lucky, Illix thought, he was already dead. The idea that he might still be alive was too horrible for Illix to stand.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across his body. He turned quickly and saw that the tohr-kreen was towering above him. With a howl of rage, Kachka reached for Illix.

From somewhere nearby, the Overmaster heard someone call his name. He took a second, looked away from Kachka, and saw Milique. She was half-dazed, but had recovered enough to see what was happening. With an uncertain toss, she sent his gleaming sword tumbling through the air toward him.

Illix caught the weapon and kicked upward. His feet crashed into the tohr-kreen's chest. The blow lacked enough force to drive the insect back, but it did halt its progress. The Overmaster took advantage of the situation and pushed himself away from the tohr-kreen. He brought the sword around in a slashing attack. It caught the creature in the soft tissue of his upper right shoulder, sinking in deep between plates of his exoskeleton.

Before Illix could pull his arm back and strike again, Kachka's lower right arm shot out and locked itself around his throat. With its three working arms, Kachka raised Illix high into the air and hurled him away. He crashed through one of the tents and felt a sharp pain in his calf. Wincing, Illix looked down and saw a splinter of bone jutting out through the flesh of his leg. He tried to turn, but a horrible pain spread out from his back.

As the tohr-kreen turned toward him, Illix considered his situation. He was all but helpless. The wounds he had received caused him so much pain when he moved that he might as well have been paralyzed. Further, he was unarmed. His sword still protruded from Kachka's shoulder, its steel blade having delivered a severe but hardly mortal wound to the tohr-kreen.

Then Milique was at his side. She touched him on the forehead and warmth spread over his body. The pain eased, but she lacked the energy to do more for him.

“Milique,” he gasped, “there’s still a chance.” She looked confused but said nothing. “Kachka didn’t kill me like it did Oltoluque. It had me in the same grip and could have torn me apart, but it held back for some reason. Somewhere inside, it still knows me. Kachka knows I’m its friend. It must be trying to throw off the spirit that’s controlling it.”

“Kachka will never do it,” she said. “I’ve felt it. It’s too strong.”

“If you can help it, maybe it can. Reach out with your mind. Give it the strength of your *healer’s heart*.”

In the weeks that he had known her, Milique had proven herself to be reliable and capable. She had a talent for healing unlike any that he had ever seen. In the last few days, however, she had proven herself to be brave as well. Now, the fact that she did not protest, but simply closed her eyes and obeyed, only confirmed his estimation of her character.

Milique’s outer calm, however, could not disguise the horror that she felt. She had tasted the agony and hatred that filled Kachka’s mind. Still, she reached inside and dropped her mental defenses. Instantly, the spirit of the oasis tore into her mind. She pushed out with her essence, fighting against the madness that pressed against her.

Then she saw it, a spark of flickering light in the dark horror of the spirit’s agony. She moved her thoughts toward the light and reached out with her gift of healing. It was Kachka’s spirit. With each second, however, it grew weaker and weaker.

She tried to force her way through the madness to make contact with it. With every bit of energy she could muster, Milique poured her spirit into the effort. Then, just as she felt the edges of Kachka’s mind, the spark died and she almost screamed in frustration.

Milique’s consciousness snapped back into her body. She saw the nightmarish shape of the tohr-kreen spring at her, the image

frozen in mid-air by a blinding stroke of lightning. The healer cried out in horror, certain that her death was only seconds away, when the smoldering body of the insect fell to the ground before her. She blinked. The afterimage of the lightning flash was still visible, as was the twisted, ghostly shape of the tohr-kreen. Her eyes could still see the stroke of electricity that snaked from the clouds above to touch the metal sword projecting from its shoulder.

She fell to her knees. Illix lay beside her on the sand where he had fallen unconscious, overcome by his injuries. Milique sat and lifted the Overmaster's head onto her lap. She heard his rasping breath and closed her eyes. Timidly, she touched his temples, lowered her psychic defenses, and felt his pain. He would live.

As she expected, none of the agony and madness that had permeated the oasis remained. The tortured spirit had died with the body it had possessed.

Milique looked around her. The spring that had been the heart of the oasis was gone. Without the supercharged spirit to sustain it, the entire place would soon be swallowed up by the shifting sands of the desert, as should have happened years ago. Milique could not help but mourn the loss of such a magnificent place.

A delicate ripple of lightning rumbled through the sky. Milique tilted her head back and looked upward. A cool, pure rain began to fall. It seemed to wash away the weariness that had settled upon the healer, and even the unconscious Illix seemed to be comforted by its delicate kiss.

It won't last, she thought, good things on Athas never do .



