



BUG JUICE

One's name is Bug. One does not know what it means and cannot pronounce it. Names are not a new concept, but One abandoned One's true name when the clan burned. One knows Oneself and the clan by marking and smell. The humans do not provide the pigments needed for markings, so even that is out of reach. Without the clan, there is no need for more.

The vibrations of the crowd pulse from every direction, each human named. It is a senseless roar as always, until One gives another challenger its final mercy. Then all One hears is the chant of 'Bug' over and over and over.

Each of the challengers must have had names as well. It would be pointless to learn them, even if they are shared. The less time spent in the sand and blood the better. Sometimes One purposefully errs, allowing a steel claw to gouge chitinous hide. Scars are not a bad thing, as long as they do not disrupt mobility or strength. Besides, whenever One draws out a fight, tamps down skill like a too-

hot fire, the vibrations of the crowd become louder still, and One is brought double portions of food that night.

One wakes from thought as the arcing sword of a human opponent slashes in. One ducks under the wild blow, hooking the human's leg with One's right arm. Sharp edges of chitin tear into flesh. Thick mammalian blood wells up. The liquid tastes of iron as it splashes over barbells.

The human collapses, its screaming vibration cutting through the rumble of the crowd. They do not always approve when One kills humans, but it seems that is all they send against the Bug. This human is likely male, but they look so similar when stripped of identifying fabric. He crawls across the sand, leaving a trail of crimson in his path. The prisoner's cloth wrapped around the man's waist turns from the color of One's own blood to purple as his life pours forth. He pauses every few seconds to waggle his sword at the nightmare before him.

Today is a slow day, but if One puts on a show it might mean a double portion of slurry left in its cage. This human is especially weak though. It is unlikely he will rise again, which does not bode well for dinner. The arena wants a show from their Bug, but not abject cruelty. It is a difficult path One follows.

The man tries to rise. He succeeds, using his sword as a makeshift crutch. Impressive. One draws nearer, flaring chitin in a K'tha salute and exuding a perfume of respect, not that he will understand civilized language. One is weaponless except for what One was given in the clutch. Human facial expressions are another weak spot in One's knowledge — One is not privy to the entire spectrum of human emotion — but fear is scribed plainly enough in this man's face. It is familiar.

One reaches out to grab him, allowing the sword an age to strike. When it finally does, it is with the flat of the blade. Even the edge would not have enough strength to cut through K'tha hide. Nevertheless, One rears back as if in pain, chittering madly. A gasp erupts from the crowd and echoes through the arena. Is this the day a man kills the Bug?

No one seems more surprised than the man. His fingers loosen on his sword. His hopeful expression dances across One's vision. One releases the scent of sorrow, knowing none are left who would understand. This man will not live. One knows not why One's opponent are here, as honor or punishment. But there is no honor for a K'tha in this place.

One flashes out. A clawed hand pierces the man's throat before he has a chance to register surprise. His neck is not difficult to snap — unnecessary, but it puts an end to his suffering. Humans in the closest row wince when they hear the bones break, but few look away. The next fight will see a bigger crowd. The dead man crumples.

More blood mixes with the sand — just another irrigation for crops that will not grow.



One's village had an arena of its own, carved into clay soil and roofed with woven vines, growth coaxed over a dozen years. Its pattern formed a glorious mosaic depicting the K'tha's birth into the world. One's clanmates would gather in the grottoes and nooks that ran through the arena like blood vessels. Bouts of single combat were held and mock battles fought, but never to the death. That

would be senseless. Humans do not have the same pragmatic approach. Or perhaps they need to cull their herd and chose Bug as their instrument.

That arena is ash and mud now, just as the rest of the K'tha.

An iron collar rings One's neck, six hoops welded to it for six chains. Every time they move One to or from a place, a human takes each chain and pulls like the spokes of their wagons. Escape might be in reach, if not for the mage. The large, well-fed humans with spears are a threat, but minor. If One escapes the spears, however, a mage will surely write a glyph on One's hide. That kind of writing cannot be washed off, only burned. If One escapes even the mage, the humans might destroy another clan in retribution. There are so many of them, and they love fire so deeply.

Cries for the Bug echo a few suns after the blue-waisted man. A trio of wild-haired humans — two women and a man. Their skeletons are visible beneath skin and a crude chain shackles their feet together. The man tries to run and trips the other two before the iron links sweep his own feet away. One of the women stabs the man with a stone knife as he tries to flee. The other throws a spear at One. It flies wide, but One swats it away as if it is a true danger. The crowd's vibrations are different this day, modulated. Laughter.

Several more suns pass, and a pair of great beasts are next loosed. These have no art to their fury, just the hunger of starved animals. Twice One's size, they scuttle over the arena floor faster than horses. They have thick, gnarled skin, and a mirrored length of whippy spines jut from their flanks over a dozen muscular legs per side. Claws snicker in and out of their front paws and a proboscis lunges from each face. The K'tha have heard of such things, but One has never encountered any before.

They are beautiful in their fury. One tears a spine from the front animal. The vibrations of its howl drown out even the crowd. Its compound eyes offer less resistance than its hide, and a quick jab with the spine stills the creature. The other is wilier, but One leaps onto its back. Its two dozen legs finally still after two dozen stabs. One cannot be certain, but the scent of tonight's meat, charred and unseasoned, is reminiscent of their flesh.

There are individual human fights. Scared people with their skeletons showing through gaunt skin, covered in the same blue cloth. One makes quick work of these. There is no joy in their suffering, and they are half dead besides.

Another trio of humans come, armed with bows and wielding curved blades. They ride their obedient mammalian thralls and trail sparkling banners. They rain arrows with admirable skill at full gallop, yet the Bug is a difficult target. Projectiles glance off One's chitinous armor. A lucky shot from the leader pierces the flesh of One's neck. The crowd holds its breath as One pulls it free, wondering if today is the day the demon is vanquished. Blue blood dribbles from the puncture. It stops. They forget K'tha anatomy does not match their own.

Physical pain is unusual. One welcomes the sensation. It is respite.

There is a rock on the arena floor. One tumbles over it to avoid the sweep of the quickest rider's sword, wrenching it free. One hurls it at the leader who loosed the stinging arrow. It strikes him in the face, knocking askew his shining, plumed helmet. Red blood explodes from the man's nose. He collapses in the saddle, spilling to the right. His foot catches in the stirrup, and he is dragged behind the panicking horse, kicked again and again by his own beast.

The other bow-rider tries to help the already dead man, and while he attempts to untangle their leader, One tears out his throat with a casual swipe. Bows are not unknown to the K'tha, and it is a simple matter to loose an arrow at the sword-rider, who is banging a fist on the Challenger's Gate through which he entered. He should know only the Bug leaves this arena.

Now, a festival day. A hulking figure stands before the Bug, clad in steel plating more completely than One's own natural armor. The figure wields a massive piece of steel shaped like a hammer, cumbersome and off balance. It is a foolish weapon. Sun glints off the metal, blinding. The crowd is ecstatic. This is a great hero. They smell of sweat and last night's drink, no meaning to the odor beyond the animal. The Bug tears the human from its shell like a stubborn *uonsk*.

One sits in One's cell. One is brought to the arena. One kills. One hears the vibrations. One eats. One sits in One's cell. One kills.



The day is frozen. Fire warms the cages beneath the arena, but the flames in the braziers are mundane. This is good. Snow is on the way. One can taste it. Snow is good. It means less fighting. The humans do not enjoy the embrace of winter yet refuse to burrow into the ground as civilized beings must. Instead, they build their flimsy houses on the surface and scurry between them like vermin.

Guards come to the Bug. Six of them, accompanied by a mage. As usual, they send in a single guard to connect chains to One's iron collar. It is a man, scarred, eyes no further than an arm's length from mine. They hold the same fear every human shows near the Bug. The vibrations of his small mammalian heart are as clear as the taste of sweat and shit on the air. One chirps a formal greeting at him. He falls backward and flees the cell.

Sharp pain as a spear is jabbed into One's flank. The mage's fingers twitch, and the air tastes of gathering power. Blood drips from the wound but cuts off quickly. One remains still and now silent. They have no interest in One's words.

Another escort takes his place. No greetings this time. She growls something unintelligible, but the hatred is plain. She rattles the chains to ensure they are fastened.

One has become accustomed to uncertainty. There is never warning of what kind of creature will be set against the Bug. Will it have teeth? Claws of bone or steel? None of it matters, since none survive. Someday the food may cease, or a poisoned spear may dart through the bars of the cell, snake-quick, to lick at One's essence. Someday the humans may simply burn One like the rest of the K'tha. It would only take the twitch of a mage's fingers.

There are four robed figures visible through the barred arena gate. That means there are two above. Six mages arrayed evenly along the inner ring, more than One has ever seen together, except for the day K'tha burned.

The gate opens.

Today is different. Snow falls from the sky, blanketing the floor to the depth of One's ankle. It is so cold it is a wonder snow still falls. One steps through the opening, shedding chains like a nymph's molt. The gate seals behind, the guards on the other side leaving in search of a better view.

There are no vibrations from the crowd, yet they are plain. One blinks, trying to focus through the snow. The crowd is not only present but larger than usual. Their food, sweat, and filth is in the air, but they still make no sound. Fog puffs from their warm lungs. All are wrapped in cloth and animal hide. Did they come to watch the Bug freeze to death?

Across the arena is a dark opening, barred like this side's entrance: the Challenger's Gate.

The arena master stands on a dais and barks at the crowd in their mushy language. His voice booms over the silent watchers, augmented through some arcane means. Humans do not like to speak around the Bug, and to it even less. Their language has no beautiful hard edges to grasp. It flows like a fetid bog. Whatever he says riles the crowd though, angry murmurs rise and fall like the waves of an ocean.

There is silence again.

A gasp ripples through the crowd as the Challenger's Gate rises and another K'tha barrels out.

It looks like a K'tha, but it cannot be. All burned that day but for the Bug. The impostor is so far away One cannot discern any individualized markings, and the wind blows in the wrong direction to catch its scent.

But it has clan markings. The K'tha painted their plates in the juice of local berries. Blues and purples and greens swirl and morph into stark geometric patterns. It is unmistakable. A K'tha lives. The sight chokes the air from One's throat as if strangled. There are no K'tha left. The Bug is all.

The opponent or sibling draws nearer, arms spread and barbells tucked back, chitin flaring to make itself appear larger than it is. Half the antennae on its left side are missing, and vivid scars bear witness to recent injury. One does not know how it escaped the burning.

One allows the newcomer its tackle. We tumble, senses overcome with smells that should have been lost forever. A thousand aromas wash across barbell and antennae alike, bringing to mind home and knocking away what little breath remains.

T'ko't. It is T'ko't the hunter. We have not seen each other since the burning. We were not close but knew each other. All should be dead. No one but Bug.

We roll across the arena floor. One begins to struggle under the strain of the attack, but the hunter's claws do not tear at chitin or pierce One's flesh. It is an embrace. "Sibling," T'ko't clicks in a language One has not heard for seven seasons. Its scents of relief and fear mingle with One's own confusion.

This is a vile day. The humans would not have thrown us together for anyone's joy but their own. Indeed, the air already shimmers, metallic as the mages gather their energies. It will start small, little shocks and singses, but the magic always grows. We will have to fight, or both perish.

We come to a stop, sand and snow blanketing us like river mud. T'ko't will not let go. Some of its pigment has rubbed onto One's own body. The sight is nearly enough to sap One's will. Before that can happen One breaks T'ko't's grip and pushes it away, leaping to One's feet. One roars, filling the arena. T'ko't scrambles up and flinches at the battle cry. The humans cheer and the growing magical energies hesitate. "They will kill us both," One hisses. "Pretend we fight, but as in our own arena." The Bug begins to circle One's hunter-sibling like hundreds of past opponents.

Its confusion and hope again wash across One's antennae. "You are alive."

Concern. Urgency. “Sound angry,” One says, infusing the chirps and hisses with venom. “The humans do not understand our speech but may guess if we are not careful.” One lunges at T’ko’t in a faint, pulls back. “The humans dragged One from the rubble after the burning.” Regret.

Understanding. “One was hunting, saw the smoke, and ran through the night and next two days to warn the Hissh. When one returned, no K’tha remained. The Hissh fled, further south and east.” Sorrow wafts, mingling with growing waves of anger and resolve. “One stayed to exact retribution. One has been killing travelers, but they set a trap. Disguised bowmen in animal dung to hide their taste on the wind. They had a mage.” T’ko’t indicates its missing antennae, the barest stub of new growth starting to show.

“Of course.” One charges, the crowd cheering as they see their Bug attack. One swings a powerful but clumsy forearm in a wide arc. T’ko’t easily dodges.

The hunter swipes an equally sluggish claw near One’s face and then jumps back, circling again. Frustration. “How long must we continue?”

“They expect one of us to kill the other. They have no need for both.”

“We must refuse.”

One clicks One’s reply, pointing with subtle waves of antennae at the six mages arrayed along the wall. Resign. “We must fight. T’ko’t does not want this life.”

Defiance. The acrid scent of fear blooms like fermented milk, belying the hunter’s intended message. It says more than a thousand words could. “We will climb. Those spikes are mere handholds.”

“You will burn before you reach the top.” The energies in the air are already nearing their peak, mages suspicious of our poor showing. Grumbling comes from the crowd.

“Come! Follow, but aim for one of the other mages.” T’ko’t sprints toward One, diving under One’s kick and continuing toward the nearest wall.

Desperation. Urgency. “Wait!”

T’ko’t does not. It bounds into the air, digging its claws into the arena wall ten feet up. The circling ring of spiked iron is ten feet further.

The air changes. One’s chitin vibrates and antennae whip like grass in a storm. The mage on the near wall mutters something too soft to hear, but it would be unintelligible even then. His hands twitch arrhythmically, drawing some arcane symbol on an invisible surface.

T’ko’t climbs. Perhaps it can make it, plunge a fist into the nearest mage and run until legs fail. One hopes it does. The crowd’s vibrations are overwhelming. Some scream in terror, others in excitement. The men and women who take bets scurry every which way.

A glyph forms on the wall only an arms-breath over T’ko’t’s head. It does not notice, too intent on the climb. One cannot read human language, but this is more complicated than any of their mundane symbols. Traced in flame and bounded by a circle, a dozen interlocking strokes and shapes knit together. Hoping against it, but knowing what is to come, one steps further back.

Another lunge and T’ko’t comes in line with the glyph. Oranges and reds blaze white, blinding to the eye. It explodes. Flames erupt from the rough-hewn stone. The crowd screams, some in fear and some in joy. They have not seen this since the Bug first came to their arena floor.

The explosion flings T'ko't from its hold. It hits the ground, spraying sand and snow as it rolls, flecks of blood standing out as clearly as the glyph.

The arena holds its breath, but then the crowd bursts into revelry louder than anything before. T'ko't rises to a knee, looking shaken but not grievously injured. The wind gusts, and its odors of fear and pain are sharp. Its left arm plate is cracked. Blue blood oozes from the break. Its left barbell hangs limp halfway up its length. It will have to be cut off in order to grow back properly. Or would, if T'ko't was not already moments from death.

"Are you all right?" One shouts, running toward it. T'ko't might be about to die, but it is still K'tha. One cannot help emitting the smells of concern. At least it should cover One's determination. The air still crackles, all four of the mages now alert. If anything frightens them, no doubt they will draw the next glyphs directly on our bodies.

"I think so."

"Good," One replies, speeding up. One launches into the air, sailing just over T'ko't's head when it drops back to the ground.

"Please, sibling, a moment." T'ko't coughs, expelling sand from its mandibles. There is a rattle in that cough. Something inside might have broken, whether from the blast or fall. K'tha are strong though, and that alone will not kill it. "We are never escaping, are we?"

"One of us is leaving today. I will not subject you to this life." The Bug advances to the mob's growing chant.

Fear, as T'ko't senses either from instinct or smell this is no longer a performance. "Wait. There must be some way. We should not have to die."

"Only you will receive that mercy." One lashes out with a claw, but only as a faint. T'ko't parries but does not see One's foot as it sweeps T'ko't to the arena floor.

The crowd roars. Some of the energy in the air dissipates. The first true blow has been struck.

One kicks it, the crack in the hunter's plate widening. The blow lifts T'ko't and throws it a few feet away. It groans, spits a gob of blue, more leaking from its plate. The sand and snow slurry beneath it turn dark blue and glossy as the blood freezes almost as soon as it leaves its host's body.

"Please. Do not do this. There must be a way." Anguish, pain, and despair lay heavy on one's senses. "We are the last."

The air crackles, both of us only a moment from immolation. One does not waste breath on a response. This must be quick to ensure T'ko't suffers as little as possible.

T'ko't crawls in a feeble escape attempt. One takes another step, but there is no purchase. The hard plating of One's foot shoots outward, slipping on the frozen pool of blood. The unexpected impact is stunning.

T'ko't must see its single opportunity because it strikes, all of its remaining strength channeled into one blow. Enormous pain bursts in One's chest. One's abdomen caves in, and a great gout of blood spills forth. The taste of copper cuts through the agony, surely as one can taste the sorrow and desperation that spills from One's sibling.

"Please forgive me," T'ko't says. Regret washes over us, and One cannot be sure from which individual it originates.

"Thank you."

T'ko't reaches down, its taloned hand expanding and blocking out the humans arrayed above us. Pressure. There is more pain, sharp as a fang, as T'ko't rips out the Bug's throat. The last thing One hears before darkness comes is the cheering of the crowd.

“Bug Bug Bug Bug Bug...”

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