

ONE

Lelly's fingers tightened on the barrel of her spyglass as she zoomed in on Taram Zhod. "That dance he's doing is way over the top," she muttered.

"Way over," Tasca replied.

"It's almost obscene!"

"Almost."

"And that outfit of his!"

Frowning, Tasca adjusted the focus on her own spyglass. "What outfit? All I see is a scarlet thong."

"That's what I'm talking about. How can he dress that way?"

"Well, we are in the desert."

"It's not THAT hot."

Tasca licked her lips. "Hmm. I'd say it's getting hotter by the minute."

Lelly twisted the zoom dial up another notch. "Is that oil all over his body?" she said in alarm.

Tasca squinted. "Hmm. I can't tell for sure. Could be sweat."

"Too shiny, don't you think?"

"What does it matter?"

"Tactically speaking, it doesn't. But if he's smeared oil all over himself, that's just, you know..."

"Way over the top?"

"Exactly."

"Maybe it's suntan lotion."

"Somehow I doubt it."

The music skipped a beat. The dancer didn't.

"Zhod is nimble, I'll give him that," Lelly said. "It can't be easy dancing under these conditions, especially with that god-awful music."

She wasn't referring to the tune itself—a sprightly Brazenian number played on clarilutes, guitubas and trumpums—but the quality of the recording. Phonograph cylinders never fared well in the Nirvada desert, even the copper ones, because the metal was softened by the relentless heat, and the wind-blown grit got into the turntable gears. Yet Taram Zhod seemed unbothered by the skips and scratches—and by the clapping of his Liberationist captors, which was enthusiastic but way out of sync with the music. He wasn't even fazed by the giant crustaccas looming over him, who were clicking their wicked-looking claws like castanets.

Lelly lowered her 'glass and shoved hard on the eyepiece, the brass cylinders snicking softly as they slid into one another.

"I've seen enough, Tasca," she said. "It's time to attack."

"In the middle of his performance?"

"You call that a performance? I call it debauchery."

"Perhaps he does something uplifting at the end."

"Like what?"

"Oh I don't know, he might fall to the ground in supplication to the Goddess—or something."

"Fat chance of that. Besides, the Libs are distracted now, and they haven't had their breakfast yet. This is the perfect time to go after them."

Tasca sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

She put away her spyglass, then drew her war wand from its scabbard. It was an ancient tube of dark green gnometal, covered with arcane symbols etched deeply into the surface and blurred by time. Tasca pressed a button at the base and the wand telescoped to nearly a yard in length, the sections clicking into place.

Lelly reached into a sheath on her belt and pulled out her own weapon, a swordagger. It wasn't government issue, but had served her well over the years. The handle was made of ivory and covered with bas-relief carvings depicting Shynese demons and hell dogs, and the telescoping blade was fashioned from Glamascus steel on which a single word was etched in tiny letters, repeated once on each of the six sections. She smiled as she squeezed the handle, the well-worn carvings pressing comfortably into the palm of her hand. Exotic energies throbbed within the blades.

Her dragocorn, Kekawek, had been rooting around in the sand, searching for the succulent duneberries that often lurked just beneath the surface, but now he raised his head as he sensed impending action, his wing muscles flexing with anticipation. Tasca's mount, Fenwek, looked up a moment later, whickering softly.

Lelly looked over her shoulder at the rest of her squad, which was lurking on the far side of the dune. Their blue caps were pushed up from their sweaty foreheads, their damp hair pasted to their reddened brows, their youthful faces full of curiosity. They could hear the music but couldn't see the enemy encampment, and had no idea what was going on.

Time to clue them in.

"Form up!" Lelly shouted. "Form up!"

The troopers yanked on their dragocorns' reins and the beasts reluctantly pulled their snouts from the sand. Snorting with displeasure, they trudged to the crest of the dune, where their riders brought them to a stop.

As the troopers caught sight of the dancer below they let out a collective gasp, their jaws dropping open, their eyes lighting up.

"Crimaneewillikers, get a load of that hotty!" said Trooper Banda.

"Ooh baby!" said Trooper Waish.

"Pipe down!" Lelly snapped. "And listen up! We're going to attack. You've got to watch your lines of fire and your blowbacks so you don't hit the dancer. It's imperative we take him alive. Understood?"

Fifteen heads bobbed enthusiastically up and down.

"OK," Lelly said, "let's go kick some Libby butt!"

The troopers drew their war wands from their sheaths, the metal shafts shooting up with a chorus of clicks. Lelly made eye contact with each grrl, then turned toward the enemy and raised her sword.

"Charge!"

Kekawek and Fenwek surged forward, their thick hooves churning up the sand as they thundered down the dune, with the troopers' mounts following close behind, creating a plume of dust that billowed high into the air. As the phalanx neared the flats, Lelly shouted "Aloft!" and punched her toes into Kekawek's ribs. His shoulder blades flexed beneath her legs, his leathery wings unfurling, and he leapt forward, hooves slamming into the ground as he pushed off, bashing his way into the air.

Dragocorns were sluggish and ungainly creatures, and could only reach altitudes of fifty yards; for battle they rarely flew above twenty. But they were as tough as tanks, and the gouts of fire they spewed down on foes gave them a great tactical advantage over ground troops.

Lelly glanced behind her and saw seven dragocorns airborne. The other eight, led by Tasca, remained on the ground, rumbling across the flats in a V formation, the beast's ugly heads lowered, their thick gray horns leveled at the enemy.

This was the kind of performance Captain Lelly Nedosculu understood. The music of battle. The dance of death.

Taram Zhod had stopped his gyrations and was staring at the approaching Loyalist patrol, a gobsmacked expression on his face. The Liberationist soldiers were equally stunned, scurrying about like scarabees, frantically unslinging the sickles from their scabbards. A few tried to mount their crustaccas, but the beasts were maddened by the sight of the hated dragocorns and didn't wait for their riders, charging out to meet the enemy on their own, brandishing their two-foot-wide claws and flexing their lobster-like tails.

Crustaccas were often called the "cannon crab" because they could hurl six-inch-wide balls at their enemies. The balls, composed of sand mixed with shale and pebbles and gooey stomach juices, were stored in the base of their tails, and when the beasts were provoked they unleashed the projectiles by snapping their tails like catapults. They were definitely provoked now, and Lelly braced herself as a half-dozen "spitballs" hurled skyward.

One of them struck Kekawek in the head, bursting into fragments. Unfazed, he snorted contemptuously and belched out a stream of blue-green fire that splashed the nearest crustacca's face, popping one of its eyeballs. The crustacca snorted with equal contempt, grabbed its eye-stalk with one of its claws and defiantly snipped off the damaged appendage. Lelly knew a new stalk would grow in time—except this beastie had run out of time.

Guiding Kekawek with a nudge of her heels and a swaying of her hips, she sent him into a banking dive, his hooves nearly scraping the hard-packed ground as he rushed through the center of the encampment. She ducked below the crustacca's snapping claw, slashing at it with her swordagger, and the severed claw fell away, plopping into the sand.

Lelly barked a terse spell, unleashing a bolt of sapphire energy that flashed from her sword's forked tip and ripped across the crustacca's backside, burning through its shell. The creature roared with pain as big chunks of chitin and flesh and gouts of yellowish blood spewed into the air, and Kekawek served up a second stream of fire, raking the crab-creature's wound and boiling its innards. The beastie rolled onto its back, writhing in death agony, its six legs twitching spasmodically, and then its belly burst open and steamy gore spewed out.

Lelly turned away from the dead creature and surveyed the rest of the battlefield. The Libs were sweeping their sickles back and forth, whipping out strands of pink magical light that wriggled swiftly through the air, coalescing into blood-red ecto-serpents. Her grrls responded by spinning their wands in front of them like baton twirlers, creating translucent cyan shield-disks.

Eight serpents splatted against the shields and disintegrated, but seven more forced their way through the magical barrier. The Loys responded by swinging their wands like tennis rackets, swatting at the serpentine projectiles, which burst apart in showers of crimson sparks—all but one, which hit Trooper Banda in the throat.

Now the Loys counterattacked, sending their cyan disks rushing forward, spinning like dirigible props. To the untrained eye the blades might resemble giant flowers, pretty and ephemeral, but they were hot as fire and hard as steel. The Lib grrls raised their own spell-shields, pink ovals of rippling energy that blocked most of the "flowers." But three struck their targets, tearing through troll-leather and the flesh beneath it, sending a trio of troopers tumbling to the ground, screaming in agony, as a red mist rose over the battlefield.

Moments later the blue death disks vaporized, their magic exhausted.

Lelly looked to her left and saw another half-dozen Libs gathered in the center of the camp, combining their shield energy into one big coral-colored umbrella to deflect the rain of flames pouring down on them from the circling dragocorns above. Four other Libs had managed to clamber aboard their crustaccas and were now galloping around the perimeter of the camp, firing spitballs at the flying 'corns.

The 'corn pilots whipped up shields to deflect the balls, but two got through, smashing into the dragocorns' heads. The blows didn't bother the beasts one bit, but a piece of shale shrapnel hit Trooper Waish in the left eye and she fell from her mount, striking the umbrella shield, then rolling off and plunging to the ground, her body badly scalded, her face covered with blood.

But she hadn't died in vain, for her impact proved too much for the umbrella; with a loud "whumpf" it suddenly sagged and ruptured, and a sea of dragocorn flame poured onto the Libs beneath, igniting hair, frying faces.

Lelly quickly looked away. She couldn't allow herself to get caught up in the heat of battle; her job was to find Taram Zhod. That's all that mattered.

But where was he?

There! About twenty yards away, slung aboard the back of a galloping crustacca. A Lib captain was crouched in the saddle behind him, kicking the beast in the sides to urge him to greater speed.

The Lib heard Kekawek approaching and started to reach for her sickle, only to find the scabbard empty. So she drew another weapon, a pepperbox pistol.

Lelly smirked when she saw the ungainly thing. Liberationist magic was inferior, so many of their officers carried firearms as backup—crude man-made toys no self-respecting Loyalist grrl would ever use. Lelly quickly uttered a two-word spell, conjuring up a misty gray cloud that would dissolve any lead projectile passing through it.

"I've got you now, bitch!" she cried.

But then she got a nasty surprise, as the Lib officer aimed the gun—not at her, but Taram Zhod, placing the multi-barreled muzzle against the back of his head and glaring defiantly at Lelly, daring her to come closer.

The dancer did not respond. He was either unconscious or frozen with fear. Or gravely injured. But Lelly couldn't worry about his condition now; he'd be dead if she didn't back off.

She yanked on Kekawek's reins and the dragocorn reared up, his wings changing pitch as he went into hover mode. He snorted petulantly, puzzled by the aborted attack, and Lelly snorted back, letting him know she was equally displeased.

They hung in the sky for a minute or so, scowling as they watched the crustacca scuttle up a dune and disappear over the far side, taking its precious cargo with it.

Muttering cuss words, Lelly swung Kekawek around and headed back toward the battlefield.

As she approached the enemy camp she could see that the fight was already over. The airborne dragocorns had landed, forming a ring around the six surviving Lib soldiers, who were sitting in the sand glowering at their captors, their caps and belts removed, their arms pinioned behind their backs with magically enhanced restrain-chains.

Lelly's eyes scanned the battlefield, and the corpses strewn about. Most were clad in the Libs' red leathers, but she was dismayed to see three in Loyalist blue.

She clucked her tongue and Kekawek dove and landed, his clawed feet throwing up streaks of sand as he skidded to a stop. She slid off his back and trotted toward Tasca.

"Where's Taram Zhod, Captain?" Tasca said.

"Taken hostage by an officer," Lelly said grimly. "I didn't dare attack. She had a gun to his head. But we'll track the bitch. She can't run forever."

Lelly turned and gestured at the nearest Loy corpse, which lay face down in the sand.

"Who?"

"Trooper Banda."

Lelly winced. Banda's brassy cackle and constant yakking had often gotten on her nerves, but now...

Lelly shut her eyes a moment, listening to the sounds around her: the swoosh of the desert wind, the snapping of the pennants on the Lib tents, the soft nuzzling sounds of grazing dragocorns.

But no sound came from Banda. There would never be sounds from Banda. Ever again.

Lelly swallowed the lump in her throat and said, "Who else?"

"Benbac and Waish."

Brief memories flitted through Lelly's mind—Benbac and her comical fear of bugs; Waish's endless ribald tales about her many lovers and their odd sexual habits.

The captain shook her head. "Three good grrls gone," she muttered. "And all for one dancing boy."

"Who got away," Tasca said.

Lelly's eyes narrowed. "Oh, we'll get him back, all right. That I promise. And he damn well better be worth it!"