

Kreenwarden Tchict'Ict
An Entomological History
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In the admittedly limited experience of Kreenwarden Tchict'Ict, mammalian behavior was governed by arbitrary, unfathomable forces. Most questionable among their erratic beliefs was the seemingly inviolate maxim that the six-limbed people of Thri-Kreen were to be exterminated on sight, regardless of the cost to their own numbers. What seemed most peculiar about this arrangement to Tchict'Ict was the bizarre fact that, when victorious, the mammals would not make practical use of the high-protein bodies left behind, preferring instead to burn them, presumably as an offering to one of their invisible sky Gods. Tchict'Ict, on the contrary, was incapable of thinking beyond an innate utilitarianism and when he had successfully tracked down his quarry, be it quadrupedal or bipedal, he made absolutely sure not to let a scrap go to waste. Existence in the Empty Plains was too difficult to act otherwise.

In their small, nomadic colony, Tchict'Ict served as both sentry and hunter, guarding and providing for the queen and her clutch. He and the other adult drones lived solitary lives at the edges of the colony, returning only to communicate the coming of a threat, or to share the bounty of a successful hunt, or very rarely in response to pheromones carried on the air signaling that the queen and her eggs were in danger. Living at the very edge of the Western Hinterlands, as the mammalian kingdoms called this land, Tchict'Ict and his colony had sporadic contact with the residents of the East. Tchict'Ict had silently crouched at the edge of the forest and watched one tribe of Halflings slay and then consume another; now there were a little people to be admired. He watched the periodic arrival of trading expeditions, led by men seeking to make headway in the Thri-Kreen lands. Initially such efforts were easily destroyed. Over the years, the undeterred men began to provide protection for the caravans with guards of giantmen from the mountains beyond the forest or dirtmen, constructed so it was rumored from the soil of only the most infertile fields. Even the flesh of the dirtmen was unsavory to eat. Curiously, the caravans never had troops composed of both giantmen and dirtmen, whom, it was said, killed each other on sight as if they viewed the other as Thri-Kreen or worse.

Life for a Kreenwarden was service without mystery; Tchict'Ict's insect brain pondered no other alternative. Following his instincts, he sensed intruders at a fair distance on the plains. The chemicals in the air did not reveal the dung of oxen nor the stink of men and Tchict'Ict briefly weighed his options. They were far out on the plain but still represented potentially a meal or a threat; his brain ordered him to investigate. Half a day passed in pursuit of the party, which moved west, further into the interior. Tchict'Ict had yet to reach his quarry when he sensed the faintest trace of distress on the breeze. The queen was in trouble! Although he was so distant from the colony, he could not override the impulse to immediately return.

He raced a day without stopping but well before Tchict'Ict reached their camp, his senses had told him what he would find. The raid was long finished, the marauders already fled. He found the colony decimated. Without emotion, he examined the carnage of his family. No mammals had done this for there were no fires. Some of the eggs, prized for their nutritional content, had been devoured on the spot. All other consumable content, the stores and the slain alike, had been taken, leaving only muddy stains of ichor. This was the meticulous work of his own people, a rival clan of the Thri-Kreen. His only role in this battle should have been to fight and fall protecting the queen. Instead, due to an error in judgment, he had strayed too far to be of any use. There was no further biological function for Tchict'Ict.

Without additional instruction, Tchict'Ict's stood paralyzed, gears turning but not catching. His mind eventually found purchase of a kind in its most recent memory and Tchict'Ict mechanically returned to the previously uncompleted task. He resumed tracking the creatures, for he was sure that there was more than one of them, from whose pursuit he had been interrupted. During his hunt, he felt a strange lack of clarity in his mission, which manifested as an uncharacteristic and dangerous clumsiness. It took two days to find his quarry and in bad shape they were, worse even than Tchict'Ict himself. Crouching behind

a stone, Tchict'Ict spied on the two mammals, sitting in the partial shade of a thorn bush at the basin of a stream in which no water had flowed for many seasons.

Strangely, it appeared to Tchict'Ict that these two were a giantman and a dirtman. Tchict'Ict wondered what dire consequences could have robbed them of the hereditary enmity for each other? He examined them for a while longer. There was water within a day's march. They could make it if they left now, but clearly they did not know of its existence or location. If one killed the other, he could live on that fluid for a span of three days, longer if the smaller dirtman managed to overcome his larger companion. Tchict'Ict observed neither vicious infighting nor a fatal resignation in their actions, as they rose to their feet and tramped on with a dogged determination.

A very unusual thought entered Tchict'Ict's insect mind; a thought of empathy. He had something in common with these two travelers, although, inexperienced in these matters, he could not precisely identify what it was. Of course, what Tchict'Ict could not identify as the commonality between himself and these mammals was the fact that their pasts had been obliterated; their predestined futures erased, each wandered only in the moment. And at that moment, Tchict'Ict had the most preposterous, mammalian idea spring out of nowhere into his mind. "Perhaps," he thought to himself, "I have worth beyond the protein in my body." Buoyed by such a strange thought, former Kreenwarden Tchict'Ict led an astounded but willing (for what other alternative did they have?) Dognar Freemul and Thothonok Freegolth to the water hole that quenched their thirst and likely saved their lives.

From there the three most unlikely of companions, journeyed further into the interior of the hinterlands, to the very edge of Athas, where the reality of that ruined world shimmers and merges unpredictably with other worlds. It is said, though it may have taken place entirely by accident, that the trio left their home world and ventured into another with nary a thought of regret between them.