

Spoils of War

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

"You know, Yot, this is particularly fine wine," the Wasp officer said, swilling the dregs round in his bowl. Sfayot obediently leant forwards to pour him another serving before setting the jug back on the upturned barrel that served them as a table.

"The Thorn Bugs make it, in the North-Empire," he explained.

The Wasp gave a surprised snort. "Who'd have thought any people so ugly could make anything so pleasant." He leant back in his seat, an elaborate thing of cane and dyed wicker that had presumably been some Dragonfly noble's pride and joy before it became spoils of war. The hut they were in, the Empire's makeshift clearing house for its plunder, was piled high with all manner of goods that the Dragonflies and their subjects had once held dear, some of it already boxed up and some of it loose: silks and fine cloth, rolled artwork, statuary, books and scrolls. Only the gold was missing. The gold was being sent back to the Empire as a priority, to pay for the ongoing war.

"You came with a cart, Yot," the Wasp noted, "filled with jars. Of wine, one imagines?"

"The Imperial army is thirsty," Sfayot observed. He was used to Wasps cutting his name short for their convenience.

"One might wonder why the Imperial army should not simply appropriate your cart, wine and all, rather than pay good silver." The Wasp raised an eyebrow.

"Why then I would not be in a position to bring more excellent wine next month," Sfayot explained with great remorse.

"And...?"

"And make a gift of wine to my good friend Lieutenant Malic who was so helpful to me when I was here before."

Malic smiled at that. He was a factor for the Consortium of the Honest, the mercantile branch of the Wasp army. The role bred greed like a corpse bred flies, but Malic was a plain-dealing rogue. Unless it was a superior officer asking, he made no bones about how he preferred to do business. "You know," he said, "I've a farm in the north-east Empire. Wife, too. Years since I last saw either of'em, mind. Your lot, Roach-kindens, are all over there. A right curse, you are." He said it without acrimony, almost fondly. "Steal anything that's not nailed down, always shifting from place to place. Drive the customs lads half mad." He took another mouthful of wine and his smile widened. "Not to say you don't have your uses. This is truly fine, Yot. Don't get me wrong, we're taking enough liquor from the Wealers to drown the Fourth Army, but it's good to get a taste of home. The men will appreciate it."

Sfayot nodded, taking a moment to plan his attack. "There is a matter..."

"I thought there might be. Speak now, while I'm in a mellow mood."

"I wish to travel west, and not be put in irons. Perhaps some papers, licence to trade..."

"Towards the front?" Malic was frowning. "That's not wise."

"I am aware of that."

"There's a market, certainly, but it's ugly, that ways." The Wasp's eyes narrowed. "But it's not just for profits, is it Yot? Or you'd unload here and head back east. What's going on?" He had a hand on the barrel-table between them, resting on its wrist and tilted slightly up. If Sfayot had meant any treachery just then, the Wasp's sting would have answered it.

“You know how we Roach-kindens live,” he said carefully. “How we travel with our families, and meet, and trade.”

“And get moved on,” Malic added. “And steal, and sometimes exhaust the patience of the local garrison.”

“It is just as you say,” Sfayot confirmed mildly. “My family were travelling near here, travelling and trading. One of our number was unwise, she wandered from our camp. I have heard she was taken up.”

Malic looked at him for a long while. “I remember a white-haired girl,” he said at last. Sfayot nodded encouragingly and the Wasp continued, “That Slave Corps man had her with him, Sergeant Ban, his name was. You know this much, I take it.”

The Roach-kindens nodded. He was white-haired as well, although in his case it could pass for age. It was a mark of the Roach-kindens: white hair and tan skin and restless feet. Sfayot was old for it, though, too old for the journey that he was considering. Lean and snow-bearded, dressed in shabby, patched clothes of green and brown and grey, he knew he looked like a beggar before this well-dressed Wasp, whose black and gold tunic was worn over looted Dragonfly satins.

“My daughter,” Sfayot said softly, watching the other man’s face. “She is but thirteen years.”

Malic nodded, taking a little more wine, and his face was not without sympathy. “Then yes, Ban’s gone west to pick up another chain. Seems like every Slave Corps man is headed that way, and I hear they still have more prisoners than they know what to do with. I’d guess he saw your lass and took a shine to her. Slave Corps,” he added, with faint disgust. “You understand, in the Empire even the worst have a role to play, and the slavers are that role. I remember she was a pretty enough lass, for a Roach.”

Sfayot said nothing.

“Means she’s more likely to stay whole on the trip,” Malic noted. “Unless she catches the eye of some officer on the road, he’ll want to get her back to the good markets, back home. At this end we’re glutted with slaves, you can’t give them away. What will you do when you find Ban?” The question was thrown in without warning and Malic was regarding him keenly.

“Offer him a good price,” Sfayot said without hesitation. “I am not a Wasp. My people do not fight or demand vengeance or harbour grudges. We cannot afford such luxuries.”

Malic’s face had a strange look on it, almost a sad one. “I’ll give you papers to trade,” he said abruptly, “and to travel. I wish you luck, Yot. I hope you find her, and I hope she’s not too damaged when you do.” There was something about his manner that suggested that he might have done as much even without the wine. Greedy, corrupt men, as opposed to upright, honest soldiers, had more leeway for spontaneous kindnesses as well as private evils.

Sfayot watched him sign the scroll, sealing it with black wax and the Consortium’s imprint.

He had lied to Malic, of course, but only a little, details that would have complicated matters. The girl had not simply wandered off. Roach-kindens knew better than that. Their roving lifestyle, across the Empire and the Commonwealth both, was to avoid the persecutions of government. In the Empire it didn’t do to stay too much in one place, lest someone decided that made you property. You stuck with your family because they were all you could rely on.

Sfayot's family had been in the little village of Nalfers, Nal Fra as was, when something had gone wrong. It was an occupied town, with a garrison and everything, but the Wasps had apparently decided it needed sacking anyway, perhaps orders had been misunderstood, perhaps the local troops had gotten drunk and leery. In any event, nobody would be visiting either Nalfers or Nal Fra any more, and when Sfayot's family had finally regrouped the next morning, within sight of the rising smoke, he discovered that a cousin and a nephew were dead, and that his daughter was missing. A niece had seen her dragged off by a slaver, the man's trade made unmistakable by his full-face helm.

His family had begged him not to go looking for her, for it soon became clear where the slaver was headed. The Roach families did not go near the warfront. There was nothing for them there. The advancing plough-blade of war made a barrier they could not cross, and what was left exposed on the upturned earth behind it was rumoured to be worse than the fighting itself. The Wasps were a hard, wild people. Their army forced them to obey orders when they were on duty, and so when they were released from it they became monsters.

But Sfayot had left his younger brother to take the caravan east, and had set off in slow pursuit. He was old, and it had seemed unlikely he would ever achieve any great thing in his life. Perhaps retrieving his daughter could be that thing. Certainly if he died, and he accepted this was likely, then the loss to his family would not be great: one less mouth to feed in a harsh season.

The roads to the front were clogged with soldiers and army transports: reinforcements heading for the front, slaves and plunder being escorted home again. Sfayot passed smoke-belching automotives with cages full of thin, dispirited Dragonfly- and Grasshopper-kindens, men and women bound to feed the Empire's infinite capacity for human servitude. He did not approach the slavers, for there was room enough in those cages for an inquisitive old Roach-kindens, but he asked many questions of others about a white-haired girl, and sometimes he got answers.

He found a military camp, a few nights later, and peddled his wine to the Wasp officers, showing them his papers. Malic had been better than his word, it seemed. The conduct passes were faultless, and he was neither robbed nor beaten, more than a Roach-kindens would normally expect from Wasps anywhere. Eventually he fell in with a squad of Bee-kindens auxillians from Vesserett in the East Empire, who were surely hundreds of miles further from home than anyone else. The Bees of Vesserett had a proud and embattled history, and at one time had looked to be in a position to destroy the burgeoning Wasp Empire almost before it began. These men, though, short and dark and weather-beaten, were simply tired. When Sfayot was able to talk of their homeland, that he had seen more recently than they, they let him into their circle and drank his health. After his questions had gone around the fire someone called over a tiny Fly-kindens man because "Ferro knows everything." Ferro was not in uniform, and Sfayot understood he was a freelance hunter engaged in tracking down absconding or hiding Dragonfly nobles. The Empire had determined that certain Commonwealth bloodlines must be terminated without scion, and so experienced professionals like Ferro were making a healthy living.

Ferro was as good as his reputation. He had seen such a girl, and he named Sergeant Ban without prompting. They had gone to Shona, he said, Shon Aeres as had been, and maybe Ban was going to fill his string of slaves there. A bad place, Shona, Ferro confided, did Sfayot know it?

"Only before the war," the Roach replied guardedly.

Ferro nodded, abruptly nostalgic. "Ah, before the war this was a beautiful country. I stayed at the castles of the nobility, at their summer retreats. I tracked brigands for them." He drank more of Sfayot's wine with the expression of a connoisseur. "Now it is those nobles I hunt down like animals, so the Wasps can put them on crossed pikes. So the wheel turns." It was clear that Ferro's sense of balance enabled him to walk the wheel as it ground over those less fortunate.

Sfayot set out for Shona the next morning. Ferro's talk of the Dragonfly nobility had stirred no nostalgia in his breast. There were plenty of times his family had been moved on by the lords of the Commonweal, and when they had been taken up, too, for crimes they had or had not committed: whipped, punished, lectured, put to work. The Commonwealers did not have the cruelty and savagery of the Wasps, but they did not like a people who wandered where they would and did not fit in. Sfayot himself had been hauled before some headman or prince enough times, and seen in those aristocratic eyes a keen loathing of a man who was neither servant nor master.

The road to Shona was many days towards the front, and Sfayot could only guess as to how much faster Ban and his captive were travelling. He examined keenly every slaver that passed back towards the Empire, seeking a head of white hair. Slaves aplenty there were, and a few dozen of his kinden, but none was his daughter.

Shon Aeres as was had been torn up by the roots. Not a sign of any Dragonfly buildings remained, and the fields had been churned up by war and marching feet. Now there was a veritable city there, of tents and shacks and lean-to's. A large proportion of the Imperial Third was currently billeted there, either waiting to take the few days' march to the current fighting, or taking a rest from the front. Shona was no simple soldiers' camp but a Consortium town, it quickly became clear. Here the Empire's merchants set about the business of fleecing the Empire's soldiers of their pay and their booty. It was growing dark by the time that Sfayot arrived at the tent-town's edge, but he had been able to hear Shona for miles: the sound of an army off duty and riotous with it. The guards that stopped him had the surly, miserable expressions of men on punishment detail, and a gratis jug of wine bought more ready admittance than all the papers in the world.

He saw three fights before he had gone thirty yards, all of them between Wasps and one of them clearly fatal. The makeshift, mud-rutted street he walked down was lined with taverns, gaming houses and brothels, or so the signs outside various tents advertised. Soldiers were everywhere, most out of armour, but Wasps were never unarmed. The expressions, in those faces, were almost desperate, determined to lose themselves in any vice rather than think about what tomorrow might bring.

Further progress with the cart was going to be impossible, Sfayot saw. He sold it and most of his remaining stock to a taverner, and for a price that told him just how much the soldiers were being overcharged. He retained as many jugs as he could safely string from his belt or bed down in his pack, because his bribing work was surely not done.

He made for the centre of Shona, adopting a careful, skulking walk that put him beyond the notice of the rowdy Wasps. Malic had not been entirely wrong, in characterising the Roach-kindens people. They had a knack for hiding and for stealth born of long years of despoilment from most other races.

He could see (for Roach eyes were good in the dark) that the centre of Shona, perhaps the entire original area occupied by Shon Aeres, was an open square, and that there was some manner of entertainment there. Vague, wild strains of music drifted to

him, and he followed them around the edge of a crowd until he saw a set of mismatched Grasshopper-kindens minstrels plucking and piping as best they could, enduring the occasional kick and missile from the jostling crowd. The square boasted a series of raised wooden platforms, Sfayot saw, and on the nearest there were women dancing. They wore rags only, and he soon saw why: when any of them got too close to the crowd, hands reached for them, to tear off whatever remained. An old, bald Wasp with a pike kept watch, and jabbed at them when they clustered too close to the centre. They were Dragonfly-kindens, all, with that people's slender grace and elegance, and they wept, and shook, and went on dancing, unfettered and with the wide sky above them, and for a long time Sfayot could not understand why they did not simply fly free and risk the Wasp stings.

He saw, at last: At one edge of the platform was an unexpected rank of the audience: a dozen children sat cross-legged there, some crying, some stony-faced and blank eyed. They watched, he saw: they watched their mothers or sisters humiliated for the pleasure of their captors. They would be too young to have learned their airborne Art. Their presence held their relatives in captivity more surely than locks and chains. Sfayot felt ill, and shouldered on past the spectacle. Other platforms boasted fighters, men and women hobbled, bound together, forced to fight each other, or to fight beasts. He saw a nine-foot dragonfly, its wings mere broken stubs, slicing savagely into a pair of unarmed Grasshopper women with its razor mandibles. He saw a tethered, raging Mantis-kindens, one eye out and the rest of her face a mask of blood, kill slave after slave in a heedless, mindless frenzy, carving each up with the spines of her arms until an officer flew from the crowd and seared her with the bright fire of his sting. The expression on the officer's face as he killed her was the only compassion Sfayot was to see that night.

Eventually he could take no more. He found a Consortium counting house and took refuge in it, buying his tenure with wine. He was shaking, he found. His family had been right. He was losing all hope of seeing his errant daughter again, or whatever the war had left of her.

The clerk left minding the coffers whilst his master revelled was a young Beetle-kindens man named Noles Mender, obviously not long from home, and not at ease with the Wasps. He and Sfayot dined for pittance coins, which game Sfayot let him win, and by then Noles was happy enough to answer a few questions. Did he know Sergeant Ban? No. Did he know about slavers? Yes. Shona was not fair game for slavers, he explained. Everyone here was for the army's pleasure, not the slavers' profit. The army loathed the slavers, and would rough them up and throw them out if they tried anything. Slavers were being sent hotfoot to the front, where there was enough spare flesh to fill all the quotas of the Empire.

Noles was heading there too, quite against his will, as a confidential messenger to more enterprising Consortium factors. He would have an escort of soldiers, but he would be more than happy to have any company that was able to maintain an educated conversation. He was a stout, dark, bookish youth, and it was plain that military life did not suit him. Like a lot of Beetles he couldn't care less about Sfayot's kindens. Beetles in the Empire tended to judge a man on his moment-to-moment usefulness, not his race.

Noles travelled by mule, with Sfayot and the half-dozen soldiers on foot. The front was not far, he said. He'd heard that there was some central depot that slaves, and slavers, were being sent to, but he wasn't sure where it was. When they reached his destination he would surely be able to find out. The escort obviously disliked Noles

almost as much as they disliked Sfayot, but the bonds of rank held them: Noles was, youth notwithstanding, a sergeant, and despite provocation they took no action against him. Sfayot was willing to bet that matters would have been different if Noles had been carrying anything of value.

Noles was explaining how the fighting had been close to here for some while, some Dragonfly prince or other had amassed a big army, and there had been several inconclusive engagements, all quite bloody. Probably they were fighting even now, Noles opined, in the airy tones of one who considers himself a military expert.

He might well have been exactly right. Certainly the battlefield they found two days later looked to be about two days old.

The smell got to them before they saw it, and then they started being approached by scouts, Fly- and Wasp-kindens both, all of whom pored carefully over Noles' papers, and Sfayot's. Then they came out of a stand of trees and saw where the Dragonfly general had made his stand.

The battle had been partly within a wood, and that part was mercifully hidden, but it had spilled out across several acres of low, rolling fields, although there was little enough ground to be seen, now. Sfayot was no military man but he suspected that, if he had been, he would have been able to read the history of that battle in the dispositions of the dead. True, most of the Imperial dead had been claimed by now, taken off for identification, recording and cremation. The Commonweal dead had been left there, probably because there were neither hands nor will enough in the victorious army to do otherwise. Drifts of peasant levy lay like snow, like earthworks, in a welter of broken spears and staves. Mounds of Grasshopper-kindens, of Dragonfly-kindens, who had been sent off to war with nothing but the clothes on their back and a knife tied to a broom-shaft, lay five, ten deep, lay in their scores where the Wasps had halted them. They were sting-burned, stuck with crossbow bolts, impaled on spears, hacked by swords, broken by artillery, crushed beneath the tracks of armoured war-automotives, in their hundreds, in their many hundreds. Here and there the dead wore glittering armour, the pearlescent sheen of Dragonfly-crafted mail, hard chitin and harder steel layered together into a surface that would turn a blade or a sting-bolt with equal fortitude. Here they lay, each little knot of dead a noble's retinue, their mail broken, their long-hafted swords and bows and spears all awash with blood, where they had been plucked from the sky or made their last stand over the body of their fallen lord. Scavengers, the lowest camp-slaves and Auxillians, picked over them for anything of value, and their expressions were of such hardened sobriety that it seemed they were performing some funereal duty rather than seeking their own profit.

Noles Mender had gone quiet, was staring straight ahead with his lips pressed tightly together, but Sfayot could not drag his ravaged gaze away. He saw face after face, the men and women of the Commonweal, each locked in a final expression of fear, shock, pain or grief. He saw Mantis-kindens and Dragonfly swordsmen lying dead, the stained, clear earth about them speaking all that needed to be said about their last moments. He saw the broken, husk-like bodies of insects, saddled dragonflies with shattered wings, the curled bodies of wasps riddled with arrow-shafts, fighting mantids with spread limbs, their gorgeous, glittering eyes caved in, their killing claws broken. In the field's centre a burnt-out automotive smouldered still. A small team of engineers, faces swathed with scarves against the reek, laboured over it, trying to salvage anything of value. And everywhere there were the flies: finger-long, torpid black flies, that coated the dead like tar and arose as Noles' party passed, in glutted, blood-addled clouds.

Once they had passed the battlefield they found the army camp, where Noles' contact was. The Beetle was obviously anxious to deliver his message and be gone, and the soldiers were likewise keen to return to the delights of Shona. Sfayot bid them farewell and took his last few jugs of wine to see what they might buy.

He had expected fierce celebration, Shona in miniature, but there was none. The battle was too recent, too many men were in no fit state to cheer. He guessed that much of the army must be off routing the remaining Commonweal forces, for fully half the tents in that camp were crammed with the Imperial wounded. Battlefield surgeons, Wasp men with lined faces and steady hands, were working their way through them with fatalistic patience. Elsewhere were tents of the Mercy's Daughters, caring for those that the surgeons had not reached yet, or had given up on. The Daughters were not part of the army, were not officially even tolerated by the Empire, but any general that turned them away would lose the love of his men. These women, Wasp women and women of a dozen other kinden, were often the last sight and comfort that a wounded soldier could hope for. Their faces, as they went from pallet to pallet, were calm and fixed, their voices low. Around them the wounded cried out, or begged, wept, slept or died.

Sfayot spilled a lot of time and wine finding someone who might know what he wanted. In the end he found a half-dozen Thorn Bug-kindens auxiliaries at the back of one of the Daughters' tents. They were engineers, he understood, and from the shiny burns and scars, they had caught the rough end of their trade. He had the impression that the greater part of their company was dead. They were hateful, hideous, spiky creatures, crook-backed and hook-nosed, and the Empire regarded them with as little love as it did Sfayot's own people. He produced for them his last jug of wine, though, and they passed it around in solemn silence. For them it was a taste of distant, distant home, that briar-riddled place that the Empire ruled only loosely, but tightly enough to conscript luckless men such as they. From their wounds, at least half would likely never return there.

Two of them knew Sergeant Ban, in no uncertain terms. The sergeant was a gambling man, but not insofar as it extended to paying debts owed to lesser kinden. Sfayot guessed that the man had been gaming with the Thorn Bugs because nobody else would take his marker. They knew him, yes. Had he been through here? Yes, twice.

"Twice?" Sfayot frowned.

"Once out, once back, with a full string of Dragonfly-kindens slaves, good ones too, all decent looking women." A Thorn Bug leer has no equal.

"All Dragonfly-kindens?" Sfayot pressed, dismayed that he had managed to miss Ban entirely. "There was one, perhaps, a woman of my kinden. White hair."

They shook their malformed heads. They had got a good look at those women, yes they had. They would remember if one of them had been something as lowly as a Roach. Dragonfly princesses, the lot of them, all fit to fetch a good price back in the Empire.

"A higher price than any Roach-kindens, of course," Sfayot said softly. Of course, they agreed, almost laughing at the thought, the last dregs of the jug making their rounds. Who would buy Roach-flesh when that beautiful golden Dragonfly skin was so cheap these days.

And where was this place, that all the slaves were going? They weren't sure, but they knew which road the slavers took, and it could only go there.

Sfayot spent much of the night in thought, and by dawn he thought he understood, for all the bitter taste it left in his mouth. Ban had a quota, and no doubt

the Slave Corps set limits on how many charges any given slaver could mind. Sfayot's daughter, stolen from him on a brutal whim in Nalfers, had been held up to the light and judged unworthy. She had been cast off, in favour of the extra coin that Dragonfly women might buy.

She might be dead, therefore. She might have been used and cast off, throat slit, into a trench and not another thought on the part of whatever Wasp slaver or soldier had done it. Or she might have fallen into that great melting pot of unclaimed slaves he was hearing of, and still be there. Having come this far, what choice did he have?

He set off that morning. He had some coin in his pocket, little enough after giving away most of his stock. His wine was gone, and he sensed that Malic's papers would not hold much weight this far out. A lone Roach-kinde had no legitimate business in these places. He would most likely be executed as a spy if they caught him.

He saw more signs of war, on the road, but he felt as though his sensibilities had begun to erode under the relentless storm of trauma. Dead men and women, dead children, dead animals, his eyes slid off them. He had no more room for horror. So he thought.

For he found it. He found where the slaves, the myriad captives of war, were going, and he discovered that there was a little room left, after all, for a kind of horror that a connoisseur might savour as Ferro had savoured his wine.

The Wasps had built a cage, and the cage was like a honeycomb, and the honeycomb was vast, eight-score cells at least, all wooden-slatted walls and a hatch at the top. There had been a wood here, before, but it had been hacked back for half a mile in all directions, the felled wood contributing to this abomination,

There were plenty of Wasps here: some were arriving, and departing with strings of slaves, others were plainly the custodians of the place. All of them wore the tunics and full helms of the Slave Corps. There was not a regular soldier, not a Consortium factor or clerk or artificer to be seen, but of the slavers there were dozens, stalking about the perimeter of the thing they had built, or walking atop it, looking down on their massed charges. Sfayot waited until twilight and crept closer, trying to find a vantage to see into the wooden cells.

The sheer size of the construction awed him. They had built cells, and then built more and more, each one borrowing a wall from the last and, as more slaves had come, they had built and built, their labour becoming as mindless and instinctive as that of their insect namesakes. The cells looked to be designed for perhaps four prisoners. Sfayot guessed that none had fewer than eight, and many had more. The stench put the battlefield to shame. That was a smell of death. This was life, the most wasted, pitiful dregs of life: a sour, stomach-clutching stink of sweat and excrement, fear and despair. The slaves went in, he saw, and if they were lucky some slaver came and took them out. Otherwise, they stayed and some were fed and others starved or grew fevered from wounds, and eventually, he saw, some of them had died, and still their remains remained, because the slavers were working all the time bringing more people *in*. Every cell he could peer into had at least one collapsed form that did not move.

He saw one slaver take his helm off, just the once. The man's face was hollow-cheeked, haunted. He looked away from the slave pens as though he would rather be a slave himself elsewhere than a master here. They had built something too large to manage, even with the force of slavers that was here. They had lost control, not to their prisoners, but to entropy.

He knew, was absolutely sure, that he could not simply walk up and offer them money for a Roach girl. They would take his money and throw him in one of those cells, because men who could do this could have no possible shred of civilisation left in them. No papers or promises or appeals would move them. He would have to go about this a more direct way.

Sfayot waited until it grew properly dark, and then he crept forwards. The slavers had set a watch, but it was a desultory one. They were expecting no Dragonfly retribution. The war-front had moved on. He reached the outside edge of the pens, peering in and seeing Dragonfly-kindens bundled together, leaning on one another, without enough room to lie or even sit properly. Some slept, some just stared. None saw him. With creeping care Sfayot ascended, using his Art to scale the wooden wall until he was atop the pens. The stench assailed him anew here, rising up from below almost as a solid thing. He was Roach-kindens, though. His was a hardy people who could survive a great deal. Methodically he began to search.

Sometimes there were slavers up there with him, landing in a shimmer of wings to give the prisoners a look over, and looking for *what?*, Sfayot wondered, because it surely could not have been to check on their well-being. At these times he crouched low and called on his Art to hide him from their view. In truth, they were so careless in their examinations that he probably would not have needed it.

He searched and searched, as the hours of the night dragged away. Even with his eyes it was hard, peering between the slats and trying to see how many were in there, who lay atop who, what kindens they were. Towards the centre was a knot of around a dozen cells whose occupants were all dead, every one. Sfayot was growing desperate. He began to move faster, glancing in at each hatch for a glimpse of white hair.

A voice hailed him softly and he froze, unsure where it had come from. When it spoke again he realised that it was from below. A Dragonfly man was looking up at him from out of a tangle of his fellows.

"They tell me that Roach-kindens get everywhere," said the man, sounding, despite everything, quietly amused. "Now I see it's true."

"Please..." murmured Sfayot, horribly aware of all the Wasp slavers, of how close they all were.

"What are you scavenging after, Roach-kindens?" the Dragonfly asked. His voice was cultured, elegant, suited for polite conversation over music. The man was around Sfayot's own age, the Roach saw. The others in his cell were awake now, eyes glinting in the dark.

"Please, sir," Sfayot said hoarsely. "My daughter. They took my daughter." He realised how pathetic the plea would sound, to people already in cells.

"Mine too," the Dragonfly told him. "Although she is out of this place at least. It seems strange to say that the life of a slave in the Empire may be the best she could have hoped from, having come here." He sounded infinitely calm and Sfayot wondered if he was mad.

"Please," he said again, but then the Dragonfly said, "I know you, I think."

In the dark, Sfayot could not have placed the man for any money, but Dragonfly eyes were always good. He just crouched there above while the prisoner studied him, and at last decided, "Yes. I remember, you were a thief, I think. A vagrant and a thief, like all your kind. You were brought before me. I sentenced you to work in the fields, but your family rescued you. It was a long time ago now, but I remember."

Sfayot felt like weeping, clutching at the slats with crooked fingers. *Now?* he asked the heedless world. *This man, now?* In truth he had no idea whether it was true. It could have been some other Roach. It was not so uncommon a sequence of events.

"I had thought we were all from the battle, or from the villages hereabouts," the Dragonfly said abstractly. "Do we have a Roach-kinde girl among us?" He did not raise his voice, but Sfayot numbly heard the word being passed back and forth between those who were still awake until at last some reply must have been passed back, for the Dragonfly informed Sfayot, "five cells away, in the direction that I am pointing, is a Roach-kinde girl. May I take it that you intend to remove her from here?"

For a mad moment Sfayot thought the man, in this reeking, hideous place, was objecting to sharing captivity with a Roach. The Dragonfly's face was sublimely serious, though.

"I shall try."

"You have the means to get her out?"

The hatches were all secured with padlocks, something the slavers had apparently possessed in abundance, but the fittings themselves were wood. "I do," Sfayot said. "But it will take time." He was frowning. "What do you intend?"

"Tell me," the Dragonfly- the Dragonfly nobleman, Sfayot assumed- asked him. "Were you really a thief, when I tried you?"

Lies, normally his first line of defence, did not seem to have followed Sfayot when he mounted up here. It seemed impossible to tell anything but the truth to that calm, doomed face. "I can't recall," Sfayot whispered. "Sometimes I was. Sometimes I wasn't. I cannot remember."

"Ah, well." The answer had apparently been satisfactory, in some way. He turned to a man in the next cell. "Kindly pass this on until it reaches my master of arms, if you would. Tell him that it is fit, after all, that he dies in battle."

The low-spoken word passed from mouth to mouth in the opposite direction, until all was dark and silence, and then the noble said, "I should stand ready, if I were you."

Sfayot obediently crawled over to the given cell. Peering in he saw- yes- a flash of white. He called her name, softly, urgently, and again, and at the third time she stirred.

She was half-starved, filthy, bruised and scabbed, but her face was beautiful when she saw that he had come for her.

The padlock holding the hatch shut was solid, and Sfayot was as Inapt as most of his people, and could not have opened it even with the key. The wood, though, the wood was a different matter. His people had an Art that meant they would never starve, that they could live anywhere, on anything.

There was a cry from the far side of the cells, except that the word did not do justice to it. It was a long, howling yell, dragged straight from the pits of someone's being, a maniac's death-cry. It went on and on, and Sfayot heard the sounds of someone battering and kicking at the wood, screaming curses and oaths, and it seemed that every Wasp in the area was running that way or flying overhead.

Sfayot set to work, bringing his head low to the foul wood of the cage. He got his teeth to the slat the lock was secured to, and began to chew. His stomach roiled, but then his Art overruled it, and his jaws worked, grinding and grinding away, tearing off splinters and jagged mouthfuls of the cell.

Wasp slavers were in motion from all around, pitching into the air and casting over the labyrinth of cells towards the commotion. Sfayot glanced up, jaws working

fiercely, as one of them levered open the lid on that cell, hand extended. Instantly there was a man leaping up from it, Art-born wings flaring: a Dragonfly-kinden, rich clothes reduced to nothing but rags, but there was a brooch, some golden brooch, proudly displayed on his chest now, that surely the slavers would have taken if they had found it, and – from nowhere, from thin air – a blade in his hands, long-hafted, straight-bladed. Still keening that dreadful, agonised shriek he laid into the Wasps, cutting two of the surprised slavers down on the instant before the rest descended upon him with sword and stong.

Sfayot bend down and fixed his teeth in the wood again, wrenching and rending until the lock was abruptly holding nothing at all and the hatch swung open when he pulled.

They passed her up to him. That is what he remembered most. The other prisoners, Grasshoppers and Dragonflies, passed her up first.

He looked round. There was still a commotion at the far extent of the cells, and he saw the flash of sting-fire. The howling cry had stopped, but somehow the Dragonfly master at arms was still fighting. It could not be for long: the distraction was coming to its fatal conclusion.

While he looked, the cell beneath him had emptied, Grasshoppers clearing the hatchway in a standing jump, Dragonflies crawling out and summoning up their wings. Sfayot took his daughter in his arms and huddled back to the nobleman's cell.

"I cannot free you, sir," he said, almost in tears. "I would, but–"

"Take your child," came the reply. "You can do nothing for us except remember."

And Sfayot fled, with his daughter clinging to him, and never looked back.