

The Dreams of Avaris

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

Roven was a tough guy and Merric was a killer and Skessi was just an annoyance, and they were the bad part of the deal, but me and my partner had been in Wasp cells at the time, and finding a couple of Wasps willing to go absent without leave for a private errand had been all the luck we had been able to scrape together. It was better than slavery. I'd been born poor in Siennis, way down south, and I know everything about slavery that one Spider-kinde can teach another. I was bought and sold from when my mother had parted with me at age five to when I'd cut the throat of the latest merchant to offer me for sale, and I fled the Spiderlands after that because the merchant was an Aristoi man. Back then the Commonweal had seemed a nice peaceful place to pull a few scams and get rich. That was right before the Wasp Empire got the same idea, only on a much larger scale.

From that point, the Dragonfly Commonweal had become an overly exciting place, and I'd have made tracks south, or north, or anywhere, if not for the money. There was money in other peoples' suffering. The Wasps were chewing up great tracts of Commonweal land, scooping up whole villages' worth of slaves, winning hard-fought battles, enduring the keen Commonweal winters. They were men, those Wasp soldiers, and men had needs. A light-footed trader in certain luxuries could make a living out of drink and whores and second-hand Dragonfly souvenirs. If I watched my step: watching one's step was a difficult proposition even for a Spider-born. The Wasp officers had short tempers. Every so often a trader in dubious goods would be taken up, stock confiscated and leg-irons on with professional speed and care. There was no appeal. The Wasps accorded other kinde no rights, nor even the status of a human being. Everyone else was fair prey.

My name's Avaris, and I've never stayed still long enough to have to change it. My partner was a lean old Dragonfly called Gatre Fael who'd been robbing his kinsmen up and down the roads and canals since long before the Wasps took an interest. Our game was black guild trading and a lot of different versions of selling the Monarch's Crown to people, which makes sense when you know there's no such thing, but you'd be amazed how many people don't know. We'd been working together three years now: my mouth and his knowledge of the land, until we landed up in the north-eastern end of the Principality of Sial Men, and in irons, and in trouble.

We'd done a fair trade, and had missed just one step. We'd passed through the Wasp camps peddling our seedy wares, bringing flesh and firewater to bitter, bloodied soldiers who had been fighting, some of them, a full ten years without seeing their homes and wives. It was not that the war was going badly: to the generals and the folks back home it was stride after stride of victory for the legions of Black and Gold. To the soldiers it was fighting a numberless and fiercely determined enemy, bringing Imperial rule to village after village of bitter, surly peasants, months of trail rations and harsh discipline, the bite of each year's snow and ice, the red-washed memories of what war had made them do. Even Wasp-kinde started to feel the bloodstains, after ten years without mercy.

We never knew what it was, that had seen us taken up, stripped of our goods and slung into slave-cells. It was simply one of those things that happened to people, that you heard about, and this time the people it happened to were us. We had planned for this, though. Gatre Fael had a caper, and it was a good one, and one we had been waiting months to spring, and with slavery our only other option, why not spring it now? *Riches beyond riches*, Fael had said. Riches

beyond riches indeed, but our target was behind Wasp lines, now, and somehow it had never seemed worth the journey.

"It'll be worth the journey," I had explained to Roven and Merric. "It's a fair step, but riches, sergeant, riches. They used to bury them well-heeled back in the bad old days."

It helped that Roven, the sergeant, had heard something of this. He opined, offhand, that some officer in the engineers he knew had struck old gold excavating some Commonweal lord's broken-up castle. "Vaults of it, he said," Roven explained. "Just bodies and gold." Merric had looked interested.

"I don't know though," had said Galtre Fael, his lean face, the colour of gold itself, twisting. "Disturbing the dead."

"Disturbing the dead what?" Roven had grunted.

The Dragonfly had shrugged. "They say... bad things happen, when you open the oldest tombs. The makers protected their wealth with curses, and the dead aren't always that dead."

And the Wasps had jeered at that, and the seed was planted in their minds.

I could talk forever, and Fael knew the land, and that got both of us sprung from the cells and travelling overland north, heading for the mountains. Roven and Merric were sick of campaigning, they said, or of campaigning places where there was too much risk and not enough gold. Both of them were swearing blind they wished they'd signed on with the Slave Corps. Who cared if everyone hated you when you were that rich? Money bought back all the respect that a slaver's uniform lost you, was the way they put it. As for Skessi, he just turned up when we were two days out. Skessi was Fly-kindens, a scout attached to the Fourth and a nosy bastard by anyone's book. He'd heard, somehow, that Roven and Merric had something on, and he turned up threatening to shop them to their officers unless he was dealt in. Nobody much liked that, but Skessi could fly faster even than Gatre, and he was a wary little sod, and it didn't seem we had much choice. It was odds on whether the officers would declare Roven deserter anyway, especially after he'd had it away with four horses and a pack-beetle, but if he came back rich, well, that would smooth over a lot of rough waters. Besides, there were just so *many* Wasps forging west even as winter came on that it seemed possible that two soldiers could slip off on a frolic of their own and just claim to have gotten left behind. That was what Roven was counting on. As for Merric, he was happy enough to follow along, and if he got the chance to open my or Fael's throat, well, that would be a bonus. Merric was like that, and he liked that. He was a simple man with simple pleasures, and would have been a perfect Wasp soldier if he'd had the slightest interest in listening to orders.

The plan, when me and Fael had first made the plan, had been to hightail it over here on our twosome, but it turned out our friends from the army were worth something after all. We ran into trouble twice. The first was with the Slave Corps, but Roven straightened that out. The second was with brigands, who had been having a field day since the Commonweal soldiers gave up these lands without a fight. About a dozen lean, ragged Grasshopper-kindens swept down on us from a tree-clogged ridge, with two Mantis warriors in the vanguard. Roven's sting picked off one in a flash of golden fire, and Merric killed the other. He killed the Mantis sword to sword, too, with the Mantis sword near twice as long as his, and that gave me and Fael plenty to think about. The Grasshoppers had leapt and flown and run as soon as their leaders were down.

Still, the plan didn't call to split the loot five ways, and on the journey me and Fael had been given plenty of chance to talk about just what to do about that. "High stakes, high risk," Fael had said, but it turned out it was just one of our usual stock in trade scams after all, only played taut as a bowstring, and for real.

So that, and two tendays' sullen travel through the cold crisp air and the occasional flurry of early snow, put us here, looking at the castle. This was an old one, and like a lot of them it had been left to rot a long time ago. No Wasp army had been forced to besiege this place. The walls were crumbled, their tops gappy and uneven like broken teeth. One face had come down entirely, leaving three tottering sides of uneven stones, the internal architecture laid out in sheared floors, the traceries of fallen walls, windows and doorways gaping like dead eyes.

"Don't know why you people bothered with these things," Roven spat, jabbing Fael. "Half-dozen trebuchet and a leadshotter, and they come down a treat."

How strange a thought, I remember thinking, having one of my philosophical fits on me, that sufficient Wasp artillery can do the work of centuries. Is there a precise exchange rate, a year-value one can assign to a catapult? How many decades wear is a solid ball from a leadshotter?

"We didn't build them," Fael said, which prompted a reflective pause. It was news to me too. The Commonweal was dotted with these castles, tall stone keeps and towers, inward-leaning at the top to defend against aerial attackers. The Dragonflies had made much use of them as strong-points during the war, although Roven's assessment of their longevity was a fair one. Everyone knew that the structures were very old, and these days the Dragonflies built flimsy stuff out of wood and screens that looked like a strong wind would blow it away. It was the first suggestion I'd heard that the castles were not originally *theirs* though.

"Grew like mushrooms did they?" Skessi jeered, winging close for a moment. Fly-kinde flew, it was true, but Skessi seemed to have unlimited reserves of Art to call on. He was in the air almost every waking moment.

"We were not the first," Fael said airily, "to call these places home. Especially here near the mountains. There were ancient powers who taught us our ways and blessed the first Monarch and bade us found the Commonweal, but they were not our kinde. They were great masters, whose magic could reshape the world, command the skies. They had the castles built, for while they lived amongst us, they loved to dwell in cold stone." By now I'd figured what he was doing, and just nodded along.

"Right, whatever," said Roven, but uneasily. The great broken edifice before us had a forlorn, tragic feel to it. It was evening by that point, and Merric chose that moment to start setting up camp. Nobody suggested plumbing the place at night.

"Where's this loot of yours?" Roven would ask, though, by moonlight. "Can't see there's much left of any treasury."

"Crypts," I explained blithely. "It's the loot of the dead. The family that ruled here in yesteryear laid out its dead in state, and in gold and jewels."

"And maybe those from before are laid out here as well," Fael muttered in dark tones. "The ancient nameless ones. They can lie in the earth forever, they say, and yet wake again, if they must."

"Enough of that talk. We're not superstitious savages like your lot," Roven growled. Merric's fire shadowed his face, but the corner of Skessi's mouth was twitching, and Merric himself had his sword held close, as if for comfort. The gutted castle loomed impartial over all, black against a darkening sky.

We went in next morning, once dawn and a bottle of war-loot wine had emboldened the Wasps. Fael would go first, with Skessi hovering at his shoulder, and then the Wasps with me in arm's reach, in case of funny business. The Wasps had a couple of hissing gas lanterns, one of

which was forced on me. If it had been just the two of them, matters would have been easier, but Skessi's eyes were as good in the dark as mine.

Still, after some searching and shifting, the plan proved its worth by providing a passage into the earth that was only partially choked with fallen stones. It was a sheer drop, but Fael's wings carried him down there easily enough. Skessi didn't look keen to follow, but a dirty look from Roven convinced him, and he fluttered down after.

"Where'd you and he hear about this place?" Roven growled, one ear cocked for a report.

"We turned over a castle crypt where your lot had been. Good business: Empire doesn't know that's where the good stuff is, half the time. Only we found clues, there. The nobles had a branch lived over here, 'til they died out. Rich as rich, Fael reckoned, and who's been here to dig it up, but us?"

"Local boys didn't seem so shy," Roven pointed out. "How'd you know they've not had it all?"

"Oh, you won't find any locals willing to go into a noble family's crypts," I told him lightly. "Not with the curses."

"You don't believe that," nothing but a growl deep in Roven's throat.

"Oh we're all civilised sorts from the Spiderlands," I said. "Still, makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Come on down," came Skessi's distant call, and we did so, the Wasps lowered on spread wings, and me hand over hand down the wall. The gaslamps threw guttering shadows across walls made of irregular stones that still fit into each other so tight you'd not get a blade in.

"This is never just for the dead," Roven spat. "Too much work. Burn'em or bury'em, but not all this digging and masonry."

"Reckon they took their dead seriously, back then," I put in. Fael and Skessi were already ahead, but it was so pitchy down there that even they had to stay in the edge of the lantern light. I wasn't sure then that this wasn't just some kind of grain store. Fael was leading strong, but it wouldn't have done to show we weren't sure, so I was as much in the dark as Roven right then.

I'd have been able to pacify the Wasps, I think, had we turned up nothing but a few jars of rice that first day, but some kind of luck was with us, good or bad, your call, because Fael found some gold.

It was in some niches in the wall, and there wasn't much of it, but it was enough to make us look good. No bodies, mind, just a little trinketry: broaches, rings. I caught Fael's eye, because of the two plans we were running right then, the first one, the get rich one, had turned out sunny. That stuff we'd read, in that other old castle, looked to have been true after all, just like I told Roven. Of course, the second plan, the new one, would need a bit of work.

Roven and Merric confiscated all that glittered, although I'd bet Skessi pocketed a handful as well, and then there was nothing for it but for Fael to press on. Every so often there was a niche, and sometimes there was a piece of loot there, and sometimes there wasn't. Then Fael had yelled out, his wings taking him up so fast he bounced off the ceiling and ended up scrabbling away on his backside as something reared up over him. The Wasps' stings flashed, blinding bright down here, and then things went quiet. I helped Fael get to his feet, and he looked shaken. It had been a centipede, and living proof of how well you can live eating roaches and pillbugs and silverfish: ten feet long if it was an inch. Not a man-eater, but the poison in those fangs would have finished Fael off surely, and anyway, centipedes are bad luck in the Commonweal, because of old history.

We went on a bit slower after that. The roof was lower, for a start, and the walls had become oddly slick and nasty to touch. The floor was slippery, and sloping too, and the lanterns didn't seem to be giving out enough light even for me. I could hear the two Wasps breathing harsh and hoarse in my ear, and a lot of other little scuttlings and scrabbings as well. Nobody was much looking forward to stepping on the next centipede, or whatever other venomous residents we might disturb. You didn't get scorpions so much, in the Commonweal, but my little spider brothers certainly put in an appearance, and I didn't have the Art to warn them off. Skessi was sticking close to the light, now. He might not have the fear of the dark that the Wasps had, but he was somewhere he couldn't make much use of his wings. In the Lowlands the Fly-kinde love little tunnels. Their warrens are mazes of chambers and narrow vertical drops and the like that make it impossible for any bigger kinde to get around. I think Imperial Fly-kinde don't like being enclosed so much. Certainly Skessi wasn't at all fond of it.

Then came the bad news. The whole thing led to a wall: a dead end.

We argued then, or at least the Wasps threw accusations and we tried to defend ourselves. The loot we'd found already might as well not have been there. They wanted the big haul, worth absconding from the army for. Harsh words were exchanged, a free and frank exchange of views, until Merric got free and frank enough to shoot at Fael. His sting went wide, from poor light and Fael throwing himself flat, but it knocked a chunk out of that wall, a chunk the size of your hand.

I won't swear something moved, past that gap, but Skessi was shouting that it had, and then a great deal was moving all at once because the tunnel saw fit to collapse.

Not all of it, and not all at once, but Fael just pitched forwards into what was suddenly quite a big hole, too many stones and stuff in the air to use his wings. I felt the earth beneath me shift, and I scrabbled back and back, Art-clinging from stone to stone, and feeling each one move as I trusted it. One of the lanterns smashed and the other one went out, and it was all suddenly very black, and everyone was shouting.

We got to a stage when the only noise was us, though, and all the stone that was going anywhere had gone. Roven had somehow shielded his dead lantern with his body to save the glass, and now he coaxed a little light from it. The place had undergone severe redecoration. We counted the two Wasps and me, and Skessi had got clear of course because his kind always do.

"Fael?" I called. I had no idea what shape the plan was in, just then. The plan needed Fael, for starters.

"Here," came a weak voice, and then, "Down here, quick!" with extreme urgency.

I started forwards, and Roven came with me, lantern out. The first thing we saw was that the place was crawling with critters. There were little centipedes, finger-length, and worms and slugs and some kind of palm-wide albino cricket that just looked bad to touch. The tunnel we were in had just gone, a few feet ahead, but it had *gone* into a lower level that none of us had guessed at. Roven tried to get some light down there, and the first thing we saw were the bodies.

I hadn't thought Fael was telling the truth, perhaps he hadn't either. There hadn't been bodies in the other place, just a little loot and the writing that put us onto this one. There were bodies here though. Before the stones had fallen on them, they had been standing up in armour, and one of them was still on its feet, propped up in an alcove with its bony hands about a sword-hilt. The rest were in pieces, and the dried skulls seemed to leer and scream out at us when the lantern-light hit them. There was plenty else to catch the light, though, and it was mostly gold. Fael was lying there surrounded by a Monarch's ransom in it: the armour the corpses had been wearing was all precious metals and enamel and gems, and there were other pieces: jewellery, masks, inscribed tablets, and all of it enough for any two of us to live on til the end of our days.

No coins, of course, because even these days the Commonweal runs off barter and goodwill, but there were lots of these little ingots of gold, all the same, that I'd never seen before. There were weapons, too, fine ones, and some pieces of gilded armour that were big enough for one of the giant Mole Cricket-kindens to wear, and were surely just for show. There were spread quivers of white-shafted arrows with elegant, pearl-hafted bows and dragon-swords with inscribed blades.

"Start passing it up," Roven snapped, a barbarian at heart, and signalled for Merric to go down to help. Merric was having none of it, though. He was staying well back from the edge. Something had spooked him. I thought it was just the danger of another collapse, at the time.

"I don't think I can fly, not with any weight," Fael said. He was sitting up, and I couldn't see any obvious hurt. I got it: this was part of the plan.

"I'll go down and help," I said, but Roven pushed me back, grabbing Skessi by the collar before the fly could scoot away.

"Starting shifting it up here," he said, virtually throwing the Fly down the pit. Fael was already kneeling by then, gathering stuff up into a sack. The Fly ended up hovering above the room's centre, and in a rasping voice asking, "What's through there?"

There was an archway, you see. The pit Fael had fallen into wasn't just on its own. It must connect to some other set of tunnels. The archway was big, ten feet at the keystone. The whole chamber was big, for that matter. It dwarfed the dead guardsmen someone had set down there.

"Forget through there," Roven snapped down. "Just bring up the treasure."

Skessi got the first sack, and very nearly couldn't get it airborne. With a supreme flurry of wings he got it to where Roven could snag it, and then Roven would have tilted headforwards into the put if Merric hadn't grabbed him. By that time Fael had a second sack of loot just about ready, but he was doing a lot of looking about and twitching, and I took that as plan two, part two.

"Did you hear that?" he called out abruptly. Skessi dropped the sack he'd just been passed and vaulted into the air again.

"There was nothing!" Roven bawled. "Bring the loot up you little pin-sucking bastard!"

"I heard it!" Skessi squeaked. "Something's coming." He was fumbling for the sack.

"Nothing's coming!" Roven shouted back. I thought he was shouting so loud to block out anything that he *might* hear. Merric had retreated a good ten feet back down the tunnel, eyes wide. He'd have run, I think, if the lantern hadn't still been by Roven's feet.

Skessi got airborne again, straining furiously to lift the sack up to us. Behind him, Fael gave out a dreadful shriek.

"Avaris!" he cried. "Run! Just run! Leave the loot and run!"

That was my cue. I followed his exclamation with a blood-curdling wail and just bolted, and to my glee Merric was already outpacing me to the exit. It was pitch dark, but there was only one way to go, and we went. Skessi overtook me before I hit daylight, keening like a madman. I heard Roven behind, lumbering and cursing and bouncing off the walls. The last we heard from Fael was a high, rending scream, wordless and filled with horror. I could barely stop grinning.

It was still daylight outside, of course, and that put a little bravery back into them. We rendezvoused at the camp, where the hobbled horses were skittish and the beetle was practically dancing with anxiety, and I saw that the plan hadn't quite worked.

I had to hand it to Roven for utter single-mindedness. He had fled just as we had fled, but he'd had both the self-possession and the sheer Art-fired strength to drag both sacks of treasure

along with him. We were out and we were rich, which was all good for the Wasps, and not much fun for me. I had no illusions that they'd give me any kind of share.

We stayed and watched the opening for some time, but there was no sign of Fael of course. The other two were looking to Roven for ideas, and they were relieved as anything when he said, "We move out. We've got what we came for." Merric broke camp, and we loaded up the beetle. It was a plodding old thing, that beetle. It could keep up with the horses walking, but not at a gallop. There was no chance of using it as a quick getaway, not laden like that.

However, Fael and I, we'd talked about this. The plan could survive a few knocks. It just meant it was going to be difficult, and we'd have to do some things we might regret, but I was ready for that. I'd regretted most of my life so far, save hitching up with Gatre Fael, so why should this caper be any different? Skessi was already doing my work for me, as though he was in on it. "I saw them," he was insisting, mostly because it meant he was getting out of doing any work. "I saw them coming for us. The white shapes. White shapes with grey wings."

"You saw nothing," Roven told him disgustedly. When Skessi went to say more, Roven put an open palm his way, and the Fly shut up. The Wasp looked at me next. "You see anything, Spider-born?"

"I see the weather's turned," I told him mildly, and it had. The sky was scudding white clouds, not the white of light weather but heavy with snow. I thought of the path back to Roven's army, twenty days of hills and forests and solitude. We might pull it off yet.

We mounted up. Skessi preferred to stay airborne, letting Fael's horse trudge behind mine as mute testimony to our losses. We made poor time that day. The wind was against us, cutting coldly and keenly enough that the horses didn't want to walk straight into it and would veer off every time they could. The snow came shortly after midday, first a light feathering of big, slow flakes, then flurrying and blowing into our faces until we could see nothing of the road, barely anything of our horses' heads. The beetle was leashed to Roven's horse, and a dozen times I thought of trying to cut the traces, to lead the thing off into the snow. It was going slower than ever in the colder weather, though, and I was too worried about getting lost myself. I could freeze to death as easily as the next man, and the Wasps were better equipped to get a fire going.

We stopped before nightfall because Merric had found a wooded hollow that would keep the fire's heat in. The wind was really up, then, and when it hit the trees it made all kinds of sounds: my cue again. When we were all sitting round the best fire Merric could make I jumped up all of a sudden, meaning so did they, swords out and palms clear.

"Did you hear that?" I called over the wind.

"What?" Roven snarled at me.

"Voices!"

His look was all belligerence on the surface, but that surface was thin ice. "Whose?"

"They were calling my name!" I insisted.

"Your Dragonfly?" Roven demanded. I just shook my head dumbly. He tried out a disgusted expression, but I could tell they were all listening, now, when we sat down. The problem was, once you've said a thing like that, well, the wind makes all kinds of noises, out there in the wilds. I just hunched closer to the fire and told myself in no uncertain terms that *under no circumstances could I really hear my name in the wind now*. I've always had an active imagination and it's never done me much good.

Then it was Roven's turn to jump up, sword out, and we repeated the whole pantomime. This time, when he insisted he'd seen a shape out there, everyone was supposed to believe him.

“Bandits,” he snapped out. “Got to be. They’ve seen the fire.” Nobody objected to this, although I think you’d have had to be within burning distance to do it. “Merric, go scout. You find anyone, kill them.”

Merric didn’t look happy about that, but Roven was a sergeant, and he was just a soldier, and they hammer that into the Wasp army with big lead hammers. This, too, was the plan, but it was that part of the plan we hadn’t really talked much about.

Merric bundled himself up in a cloak, a grey-white garment that would hide him nicely in this weather. He had his shortsword drawn and by his side, but he led with his offhand, palm-out. Crouched low to the ground he went, with one backward glance at Roven.

He didn’t come back. By the time that was clear, the night was well and truly upon us and nobody was going to search for him. The three of us, Wasp, Fly and Spider, just looked at each other mutely over the fire and listen to the storm call off its roster.

Merric was still absent the next morning when we set off, trailing two horses now, and with the snow much decreased. We caught up with the man soon enough, though. He was waiting for us, in a way.

It was a long time before Roven spoke, when we saw that. I don’t know how long he’d known Merric, or what he felt about him, but he took a good, long look at what had been laid out for us. It made me wish for more snow.

He was strung between two trees, held there by some tying of the whip-like branches themselves, arms and legs spread out at unnatural angles. The pieces of his armour, the plates of the Light Airborne, were hanging off, scratched and dented. He had been quite hollowed out. You could see his spine through his belly. His eyes were gone too, and his tongue. His head was back, his mouth was open, and you could almost hear the scream in your mind. It was a real professional job. The Wasps themselves seldom put that much effort into stringing up a corpse. It’s just crossed pikes and leave them to sag, most of the time.

Skessi was swearing under his breath now, almost constantly. “On,” Roven said, at last, and kicked at his horse even though it needed no real encouragement. I followed right along, feeling absent eyes watch me go. This was the plan, but the details had turned my stomach. I knew the reasoning, but still, there’s such a thing as going too far. Of course, Merric would have been dead before all that window-dressing happened, but even so...

We made better time that day, although the ruin was still on the horizon when we stopped to camp. The wind was picking up again, and I tried to block my ears. “Avaris! Run!” it called, but the wind will say all sorts of things if you let it. After dark the snow crept back too, shrouding the world beyond the firelight in a blur of gusting white, not as fierce as yesterday, but it cut us off from the world, severed us from it totally. As the wind formed words, so the snow was apt to make shapes, and it wasn’t long before I stopped looking.

Skessi was near breaking. He’d been high-strung even before we found Merric, and around the fire that night he ran out of brave.

“I want my share!” he burst out with. Roven gave him a long, level look.

“What’s that?”

“Give me my share of the loot, now,” Skessi insisted. “I’m not crawling along here like this. Give me mine, and I’m out of here.”

“You’ll keep pace, soldier,” Sergeant Roven told him. Skessi was shaking his head very fast.

“Oh no,” he got out. “Not a hope. You’re going to die. They’re going to catch you. Not me. I’m fast. Give me my share.”

“A whole third of what we’ve got?” said Roven, grinning. “Little man, that’d weigh more than you do.”

“Give me what I can carry. Keep the rest.”

“How generous.” Roven stood, still trying for casual, but Skessi skipped back a few steps and abruptly his sword was out.

“You cross me, Roven, I’ll tell! I’ll tell your lieutenant about what you’ve been up to. I’ll tell them you killed Merric.” The Fly was in the air now, wings a-blur, and I heard the wind call, “Skessi! Skessi!”

Roven shot, but Skessi was faster, the bolt of fire streaking past him. The Fly launched for the campsite’s edge, towards the dark where Roven would not be able to track him, but he tumbled from the air even as he did so, ending up a crumpled heap at the edge of the firelight.

Roven, for whom the edge of the firelight was a good deal closer, lit his lantern with patient care. When he stood he had a hand facing me. I spread my own, showing that I had nothing. He jerked his head the way Skessi had gone.

The arrow that had transfixed the Fly was dead white, both the shaft and the fletchings, that were made from shimmering moth scales. I knew where I’d seen arrows just like that, not so long ago. So did Roven.

“I get it.” He’d grabbed me before I could step back, snagged a hand about my collar and hauled me close. His face was uglier than ever up close, and his breath stank. “I get it,” he repeated, shaking me for emphasis. “Your mate, the turncoat ‘Wealer.’”

I shook my head, but he was shaking it for me pretty hard so he probably didn’t see. “I don’t know how he killed Merric,” Roven growled, “but he surely won’t get me, *or* the treasure.” With contemptuous strength he threw me to the ground and fixed me in place with the threat of his open palm. “And as for you,” he said.

And stopped. He made a sound then I never heard from a Wasp: a little, broken sound deep in his throat.

He turned from me and ran for the animals, stumbling and almost falling into the fire. He got to the beetle even as I struggled to my feet. He was wrenching at the animal but it dug all six legs in and would not move. I could just hear Roven’s voice shrieking at it, see his mouth opening and closing. At last he just wrenched at the sacks. One of them tore open, spilling the wealth of ages over the trampled ground of the campsite. The other came away whole and he shouldered it with a supreme effort and was gone, obliterated by the snow, lurching away under his priceless burden.

I crawled back to the campsite, for the fire’s warmth more than anything else. Even before I got there I heard him scream. And scream. It went on for some short while. I just took the time to gather my wits. The plan seemed to be going ahead full tilt, but in ways I hadn’t really imagined.

When I looked up, he was there: Galtre Fael in a cloak of blown snow across the fire from me. I nodded wearily and reached to start gathering up the spilt loot.

“Stop,” he said. “Avaris, listen to me. Do not touch the treasure, not even one piece of it. Just go, Avaris, go. Please listen to me.”

A cold feeling came to me, but it was disappointment, not fear. I stood slowly, sensing the end of what little good times I had known. “Fael,” I told him, “Don’t.” I reached down for a piece of treasure, a broach worked into the shape of a beetle with spread wings.

“Avaris!” he insisted. “Not one piece! Please!”

“Don’t play it on me,” I told him. “Fael, I practically invented the ghost scam. There’s enough for both of us to live like Princes Major. Don’t try it on me. There’s no need.” But I felt sad because, whether he tried it on me or not, we couldn’t trust each other now. Our partnership had just been killed as sure as Merric.

“Avaris,” Fael said despairingly, and his friends turned up.

Pale shapes with grey wings, but I can do better than that. Ancient armour, hollow eyes, the military prime of the Commonweal’s early glories, pearly bows and white arrows, crescent-headed glaives and long-hafted swords with inscribed blades. Behind them, and mercifully half-lost in the snow, some taller thing, some greater figure, man-shaped but pale and regal and ten feet tall, armoured in mail that would put to shame a sentinel for bulk and a merchant-lord for precious stones.

“Fael.” I remember very clearly my voice, then, how it shook and twisted.

“It’s too late for me,” Fael said, “But they have let me intercede for you, for they were of my kinden once.” His gesture took in the gaunt-faced warriors about him, most definitely not the looming shadow behind.

And I fled, then. I fled without ever having touched the smallest part of the greatest hoard I have ever seen, and I never saw Galtre Fael again, nor heard any word of him.

And I wonder, now... well, at this remove, I’m sure you can guess what I wonder. I wonder whether my friend truly spent his last free moments, facing absolute annihilation, bartering for my continued life and health, and if so, I cannot measure what I owe him in all the world’s riches.

But I wonder, too, whether the second plan, the plan Fael and I had that contained the first plan we explained to Roven and the others, I wonder whether that second plan might not have been part of a third plan, known only to Fael.

And I will never know.