

An Old Man in a Harsh Season

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

Sometimes, when he woke, he forgot for a moment. Lying in his windowless room in the chill of pre-dawn he felt the desert sky's great arch over him. The hard mattress beneath (for a night on a soft one was agony to his back) became, briefly, the grittiness of sand, and he was young again.

Like scavengers to a carcass, though, the aches and pains of age came back to him one by one: his teeth, his joints, his back, his weak leg, the phantom twinge of his broken thumb-claw. Hokiak awoke. It was winter in Myna and, though the nights lacked the desert's predatory cold, the days never seemed to warm him, not even if he bowed to his years and sat all day in the sun.

Money to be made. Work to do. He rolled awkwardly from his bed, lowering his legs over the side, clutching for his cane. *Dreaming of the old country again. More fool me.* It was not even as though they had been good times. He was not such a fool as to paint all his memories with gold. Hard, violent times, the Scorpion-kindens' endless round of raiding and stealing, killing and infighting, and if he had been the Man, when it came to pillage and savagery, where had it got him now?

No, life was better here, playing the black market in the Empire's shadow, if only he had not grown so *old* before he had worked that out.

Around him he could hear Hokiak's Exchange already bustling. Gryllis, the emaciated Spider he had taken on as a business partner, was an early riser, and the man made sure that his staff kept to the same clock. Even now their band of young wastrels would be cataloguing the most recent imports, or boxing the next round of goods to be smuggled out, and if they were not then Gryllis would be reminding them that Hokiak still held their papers, and juvenile slaves were hardly a rare commodity anywhere under imperial rule.

Hokiak grunted, dragging on a pair of loose breeches and an open fronted robe. He scratched at his sagging, wrinkled belly with the curved claws of one hand. *And have these claws not torn the guts from a challenger, and let his blood soak into the sand?* Nowadays the thought was dismal to him, if only because of the *mess*.

A half-hour later found him in his back room, breaking his unenthusiastic fast on a bowl of porridge garnished with chopped dates. Some bastard somewhere was frying cricket meat with lemons, the scent leaching impossibly in from the outside, past the Exchange's front door, sneaking by Gryllis and his underage labourers to creep into Hokiak's slit-like nostrils and make his mouth water. *And last time I gave in to that I lost a tooth*, he reminded himself. He was wealthier as a merchant in Myna than he ever had been raiding up and down the Dryclaw, but the more money he had, the less there was left in the world that he could profitably spend it on. Hokiak gave his porridge a snaggle-toothed scowl.

There were few desperate enough to disturb his repast. So far, apart from the band of Fly contrabandists who were kicking their heels until Gryllis had packed their shipment, he had seen one of the local players, midway between criminal and resistance fighter, who was probably selling pilfered Wasp goods, and the unwelcome sight of another Scorpion, a squat, pug-faced tracker of fugitives that Hokiak had reluctantly done business with a few times. Neither of them seemed desperate enough to trouble him while he was eating, so he set to his bowl without enthusiasm. He had a couple of Mynans on watch and, three mouthfuls in, one of them stood up and moved closer to his table, indicating a visitor he wasn't sure of. Hokiak glanced up balefully,

noted the newcomer, and waved his employee back. He was in a foul mood this morning, and it would do him good to ruin someone else's day.

The man that sat down opposite him was Wasp-kinde, a solid-built, broad-shouldered example of Myna's new masters, dark hair cropped shorter than usual, which Hokiak knew was a practice of the Slave Corps, because the full-face helms they wore could swelter in hot weather. There was a distinct edge to the Wasp, a nervous tightness about the eyes, that suggest this master of Myna was losing his grip on things.

"Sergeant Mordrec," Hokiak noted. "Third time in a tenday. Don't tell me your luck's run even further out? You'd need a glass to see it."

The Wasp's face twitched but he manfully banished all irritation from it. Begging favours from a 'lesser race' was something that many Wasps would rather die than do but the Slave Corps men had always been monstrous pragmatists, and Hokiak knew, almost to the last coin, the burden that was on Mordrec's back.

"Hokiak. I've... got a business proposition."

The old Scorpion-kinde treated Mordrec to the full glory of his jagged and blackened smile. "Well, always willing to listen to business, son."

"The new territories, Hokiak, the principalities. You must be keen to set up trade contacts there," the Wasp said, meaning those Commonwealth lands that had been signed over to the Empire at the end of their war. "You know me. I've been all over there, last three years."

Hokiak made a noncommittal noise.

"How's about it? I'll do good business there. I'll pass it all back to you. You know me, Hokiak. I'm reliable."

"You're a liability, you mean," the old man rumbled. "And in return all I'd have to do is get you across the border, is that it? Now why would a strapping young Wasp like you need my help for that? Just hop on the next slaver caravan headed that way, I would." Seeing the little twitch of a snarl that came to the Wasps's face he chuckled. "Only I hear something about debts, sergeant. Dice not being kind to you? Only two days back there was two slaver sergeants and a Consortium captain in here, asking if I'd seen one Sergeant Mordrec, absent without leave and owing more than his year's pay to all and sundry? Now, Mordrec's not so rare a name that maybe they meant someone else...?"

Mordrec held very still, save for his eyes which flicked at the almost-empty room around them, fighting to see if Hokiak's men were about to jump him. "Hokiak..." he murmured, with a slight tremble in his voice.

"Now they were making *demands*," Hokiak went on amiably. "I don't take to them that give me demands. So I ain't telling them nothing." Seeing the Wasp relax he added, "Not unless'n they come asking nicely."

"Hokiak, listen to me," Mordrec hissed. "It's the crossed pikes for me unless I get *out* of here. I owe..."

"Three-hundred and seventeen gold Imperials to Captain Lyker," Hokiak finished. "Oh a load more than that, but I guess by now you've worked out that Lyker's not just your regular-type creditor?"

The word *Rekef* hung between them, unspoken.

Hokiak shook his head. "You want out? Use your feet and hope they can take you somewhere that Lyker can't reach you. Or you want my help over the border, you come up with some payment in *advance*, sergeant. Any man who eats promises goes hungry, and your history ain't inspiring me to extend you any credit."

Mordrec opened his mouth to argue but Hokiak was struggling to his feet all of a sudden, cane almost snapping as his weight bore on it. The Wasp kicked back out of his chair, sure for a moment that the old man was going to attack him, but the Scorpion's red-rimmed eyes were elsewhere.

Three men had pushed their way into the backroom as if they owned it. The leader held Gryllis off the ground by his collar, and now dumped the spindly Spider-kind to one side without a glance. The other two spread out, one either side: Scorpion-kind, all three of them, massively built, bald heads brushing the ceiling. Piecemeal armour of chain and chitin and leather bulked them out further, and they were all armed with double-handed swords or axes, massive weapons almost as tall as they were. They radiated fierce strength, the jut of their fanged underbites, the talons that curved like knives from each thumb and forefinger, the waxy paleness of their skins, all spoke of a world beyond these seedy backstreets. Hokiak felt ten years older still just seeing them, and his withered heart sank and stuttered in his chest.

Ah no, not now. Couldn't they wait a decade more? I'd be gone then, and they'd not need to trouble themselves. And he hadn't thought they would. Despite it all, despite all he'd done to hold his place amongst them, to keep his rivals down, he'd thought that the desert would burn out their memory of him soon enough. But no.

Their leader had fixed his yellow eyes on the old man, and the disgust and disdain on his face cut deeper than years. *So that is what I look like to them.* Those few of his own kind he had been forced to deal with, like the man who had been waiting for him that morning, had at least needed his goodwill, and covered up their revulsion, but here it was, naked and plain to wound him: on their faces was written, in a large script: *you should have died before you became as this.*

Hokiak lent on his cane for a moment, husbanding his strength, and then hobbled forwards, eyes narrowed as though against a glaring light. "What do you want?" The words had formed with all the illicit authority he wielded in Myna, as a buyer, a seller, an arranger of things, but they came out as an ancient's rattle.

"You know," spoke the lead Scorpion, not loud, but his deep voice was robust with life and health.

"Who was it then?" Hokiak pressed. "Your father, was it? An uncle? Did I cut the head off your family and not come back to finish the job? Who?"

"Father? You might have done for my *grandfather*, for all it matters," the huge Scorpion replied, "Bbt I'd not come so far north for him, nor just to trade slaves with the Wasps, for all their gold flows like sand. You *fled*, old man, when you owed us all a death. Every wrinkle in your rotting face cries out to me: '*Bring an end to me, Ecta,*' it begs me. I've come to set things right. You owe a death, and I hold your marker."

Hokiak's Mynan guards were standing uncertainly, hands to sword-hilts, but the Scorpion-kind would make short work of them, sure enough. And the mention of the Empire showed that the three were here with imperial sanction, no mere trespassers to be arrested or enslaved. As for their words...

Hokiak felt himself shrinking, shrivelling before the thought of his homeland, the harsh sands, the harsher people: men and women who lived by strength, who took what others could not deny them, who cared nothing for laws or empires, who lived in freedom and blood until their limbs faltered and their deeds caught up with them, then died at the hands of those that would take their place. There had been a day when Hokiak had driven his band of raiders across the sands and known no master, and killed with his mighty clawed hands any who would challenge his will.

That was thirty years before, and for the last five years of his rule he had relied on reputation more than action to hold his place.

He had left it all behind. When he saw he could not hold them, he had fled them. He had left their world of brutal simplicity for the shadows that the bulk of the Empire always collected beneath it. He had allowed himself to forget. Now here were the scions of his old life of strength and battle, fired with their right to his blood. He had broken a chain of generations of murder when he fled, and here came the smiths to reforge it.

"There's a market a dozen streets from here, off Seldom Street. Wasps've got a stage there, to sell slaves off. Nice place," the Scorpion told him relentlessly. "Two days time, they're done with their selling. Come meet us there then, after dusk. Come pay your debt."

"Or?" That one word was the worst admission of weakness Hokiak had heard in his long life, but the mere presence of these, his people, his successors, was draining him. The fugitive decades that they had brought with them were laid like timbers across his back.

"Or we come for you, and all of yours," the uncompromising voice assured him. "You, him," the hand picked out Gryllis before taking in the whole exchange, "this. We'll burn you out, old man. We're time and we've caught up with you. Two days." The big man turned on his heel, his companions giving the room a flaying glare before following him.

For a moment, as alone as a man can possibly be, Hokiak lent on his stick, feeling it tremble beneath him, or perhaps just feeling himself tremble against its support. All eyes were on him.

"Get out," he whispered, barely to be heard, and then, "*Get out!*" at them all, the petitioners, the smugglers, his own people, even Gryllis. "All of you! Out!"

"Hokiak, listen-!" Mordrec started, and the other Scorpion, the tracker, was on his feet as well, but Hokiak summoned all his strength, that had been whipped into cowering by the presence of his kinsmen, and bellowed at them hoarsely, shouting them down until the sheer senile fury of him had driven them, and everyone, out of the door.

Then, unwatched, Hokiak let himself sag onto a chair, his cane clattering to the floor.

There were two Wasp soldiers amongst those passing by the front of Hokiak's Exchange, but they were staring after the departing Scorpion-kind and Mordrec made good his exit, heading away from the centre of Myna towards those parts where he would be less likely to meet with other servants of the Empire. Two turns later, though, he heard footsteps behind him, and saw the Scorpion who had been his fellow petitioner before Hokiak. The man regarded him narrowly, pausing to see if Mordrec was going to be a problem. He was short for a Scorpion, broad across the chest, wearing the metal-inland leather hauberk of a Commonweal brigand. There was a crossbow slung over one shoulder.

There was a moment of mutual scrutiny, each man sizing up the other, trying to cast him as a threat, then:

"I see nobody's doing business with Hokiak today," the Scorpion said. His voice, against all odds, was ridiculously cultured, his accent definitely from somewhere far from wherever either Hokiak or his three antagonists had come from.

"Possibly ever," Mordrec said shortly and then, drawn from a well of bitterness, "when they chop him into wrinkled bloody segments."

The Scorpion shrugged. "Who knows. I take it you're not just buying and selling, slaver?"

At the word, Mordrec flinched, only then remembering that his colours marked out his allegiance and station. With a snarl he dragged his barred tunic off, exposing the stained arming jacket beneath. "What do you want?"

The Scorpion grimaced toothily. "Out. Saving that, a drink."

"Fine, lead on."

"The place I'm drinking doesn't like Wasps, Wasp."

"All the better. Se- Mordrec." With difficulty he bit off the rank that had preceded his every introduction for years.

"Barad Ygor," the Scorpion returned, his fluid accept running the words together.

"And where's Barad, when it's at home," asked Mordrec, who knew a little of Scorpion naming customs.

"Further south than you've ever been, I'll bet. Come on, let's see if you get lynched by the mob."

Mordrec had guessed at some den of the locals, filled with surly, unruly Mynan Beetle-kind, or rather the local pack of grey-blue-skinned malcontents that passed as Beetles if you had no better. Instead, Ygor led him to what had been someone's home once, a flat-roofed house with boarded-up windows. From outside, nothing suggested it was a taverna save the faint murmur of voices but, when they got inside, the dim interior had a dozen or so drinkers, and a halfbreed local sat on the floor at the back, filling clay bowls from the cask beside him.

The drinkers were, to a man, Grasshopper-kind: tall, lean men and women wearing imperial colours, auxiliaries drafted in from some conquered Commonwealth province to perform those civic tasks too menial for the proud Wasp army. Not surprisingly, none of them looked on Mordrec with much love, but his lack of uniform apparently earned him a stay of execution.

Ygor scanned the room as he walked to the barrel. "Where's Soul?" he asked its tender, but the man just spread his hands. The Scorpion scowled briefly, but secured a couple of bowls, and he and Mordrec found themselves alone at a table for the simple reason that the other drinkers would not share one with a Wasp.

"You're in trouble, then?" the Scorpion suggested.

Mordrec sipped what turned out to be the thinnest honeydew mead he had ever been exposed to. "Debts," he admitted. "You?"

"Heheh." Ygor's expression was awkward and evasive. "Worse than debts, me. Imperial debts, yours?"

The Wasp nodded glumly. "And yours, imperial worse-than-debts?"

"Hmm, well, let's just say that a friend and I did a real big *service* for your lot, after your lot had conspicuously failed to do it."

Mordrec regarded him for a moment, translating. "So everyone else hates you for what you did, and the Empire hates you because you're not a Wasp and you made them look like fools."

Barad Ygor's smile was a nightmare snarl of fangs. "In one," he agreed. "Soul and I, we need to disappear quietly from Myna before one side or the other decide that they'd rather we disappeared noisily. You're trying to ride out on the same beetle, I take it?"

Mordrec nodded, but not the sullen bob of the head of a moment before. "Can you meet Hokiak's price?" he added.

"Academic," Ygor told him dismissively, but when pressed he added, "I've no idea. I never got that far. You can't?"

"That depends on the currency." Modrec frowned. "Those Scorpions came up to sell slaves. That puts them somewhere near the market and the Corps barracks. It's more than my neck if I'm spotted there. But you..."

"Go spy on the Scorpions," Ygor said carefully. "As a prelude to...?"

"Hokiak wants payment up front, he said. I reckon we've found a new currency."

Gryllis crept into the empty backroom as though he was burgling it. Hokiak glanced balefully up at him. "Well?"

"Well you're lucky your fellows like the big public song and dance, old claw," the Spider told him softly. "If my bad memories caught up with *me* the first I'd know would be finding myself tied upside down in a cellar somewhere, surrounded by lads with razors. None of this showmanship." Under the Scorpion's yellow gaze he shrugged his bony shoulders. "But I see what they did, yes. Clever. Easy to look into a mug like theirs and think they're stupid, but I see." He stilted over and took a seat on the next nearest table to his business partner. "You're going to fight?"

"The word's out. If I ignore 'em, everyone in Myna will know it," Hokiak growled. "Then it'll start: people stop paying their debts. People start pushing me for terms. Before you know it, some bastard local or Skater or someone has decided he can run my business better than I can."

"And they're sitting with the Slave Corps, under the Empire's wings," Gryllis noted. "So you can't just do them in without losing all that goodwill we've worked so hard on." But there was a speculative expression on his face. "Old claw, I'll risk that. Old men together, let's face it: you'd not be able to best that big fellow if you had a repeating ballista."

Hokiak's gaze dropped to the table, where his broken-clawed hand lay like a dead thing. "Once..." he rasped.

"We can neither of us live on 'once'" The Spider's let out a sigh altogether too big for his narrow frame.

"When I roamed the length of the Dryclaw," Hokiak whispered, "nothing could stop me. I was like a flame, burning. Any who stood against me were ash, just ash on the wind." The words came unwillingly, as though drawn from him by wires. "So much heat and fury. But the sands never stop, do they?"

"They don't," murmured Gryllis, in heartfelt agreement.

"And I cooled, year on year, then month on month, then each day a little cooler, and I saw that I was guttering, and the next man who braved me would snuff me like a candle. But I had sold my loot all the way up the silk road to the Empire's edge, and all the little cities in between, and I hauled my embers off and thought that the others'd forget, that they'd overlook, this once, one of their own leaving the table with a handful of his winnings. I was sure that nobody cared."

"Well, touching as their sentiment is, what's it to be?" Gryllis prompted. "Broadwords at dusk? Honourable clash of two barbarian princes?"

Hokiak's hand clenched, and he stabbed his finger-claw at the table, another scratch amongst dozens. "We Scorpions," he snapped, "we don't do *honour*. Not me, not them. We fight. They came to *my* city. We fight *my* way."

When Barad Ygor rejoined Mordrec it was with a savage welt across the side of his head. He entered the auxillian drinking den with another of the long, lean Grasshopper-kindens behind him, and the murmur of the drinkers went quiet for a moment. Mordrec felt a wave of disapproval, an

utter back-turning on the part of the auxillians. Whatever disdain they felt for the Wasp in their midst, or the Scorpion mercenary, it was as nothing to what they reserved for this one of their own.

Ygor dropped into the seat across from Mordrec, his lanky companion standing behind the chair ignoring his kin.

"Well, there's good news and there's bad news," the Scorpion declared. "The good news is, I got a good look at them. In fact I offered to take up with them."

Mordrec looked sour. "Well it's good that one of us has options."

"Listen, I know we all look the same to *you*," Ygor snapped, put out, "but they're Aktaians and I'm an Aranai, and that means they wouldn't have me, and I wouldn't take up with savages like them. Still, it let me get close and sound them out. Got me this as well." He gave a bristling grimace, indicated his lacerated scalp. "Bad news time: there are nine of the sods. Our three were just the bait."

"But they were calling Hokiak out. A duel, wasn't it?"

Ygor snorted. "Listen. I know you Wasps love the idea of battle-honour, soldier's codes, noble savages. Forget all that. They want him dead because he used to be a Big Name back in the Dryclaw, and your man Ecta there wants to be the man to have killed him. Nothing to do with dead grandfathers and honour. Forget all about honour - mine, Ecta's or Hokiak's for that matter."

"And they're in tight with the Slave Corps, so... the only chance we'll get to do anything about them is when they move out for Hokiak," Mordrec mused. "So they'll set an ambush?"

"I'd guess so."

"We can't do it with two," Mordrec decided.

"Nor three," Ygor agreed. "Mordrec, formerly of the Empire, meet Soul Je, formerly of the auxillians."

The Grasshopper nodded. He was the leanest, most angular man of his kind that Mordrec had ever seen, lantern-jawed and with his hair gathered back in a tail.

"You're in whatever trouble he's in?" the Wasp asked.

"Bad career decisions," said the Grasshopper quietly. The hostility of his fellows was palpable but he shrugged it off coolly. "Three of us, nine of them. Hokiak might thank us for evening the odds, but he'd be thanking our corpses. We need more help."

"Well the locals hate us and the Empire hates him," Ygor pointed out, "and because of that we can't trust freelancers."

Mordrec put his head in his hands, not despairing but building his courage. "Right, listen," he said at last. "There's one group of clowns who'd do anything to get out of the city, and who aren't going to have any better offers."

The other two looked at him blankly

"I don't know what the Corps have in their stockade right now, but some of them are bound to be fighters," the former slaver explained.

"I thought you didn't want to show your face there," Ygor pointed out.

"I'll wear my helm. He has a uniform, and they're used to Scorpions around the place. We'd go by night. We'd be quick."

"Freeing slaves is a little more than just desertion or bad debts, Mordrec," Ygor pointed out. "You're an Empire man, still."

Mordrec stared into his mead-bowl moodily. "I've pissed off the Rekef. I owe what I can't pay. It's slavery, for me. Any idea how well a Slave Corps sergeant does, when they put the

shackles on him? It's the arena at best, if some other slave doesn't do for me. I need out, Ygor, some way that they can't trace and they can't follow."

The Scorpion exchanged a look with Soul Je. "Well we managed to overachieve to the extent that nobody likes us and we're on the same road as you. So..."

"Three of us, nine of them." Modrec threw his hands up. "A day and a half, now, to get it done. It must be tonight. Then tomorrow we bring every cursed thing we have down on Ecta and his mates."

"Just so we're clear that I'm going in as a freelance slaver," Barad Ygor hissed, as they neared the stockade. "Only, I knew a man who had the bright idea that he'd get snuck in to a place like this done up as a slave. Did twenty years down a mine, he did."

"Relax." Mordrec's voice sounded hollow and anything but relaxed. The full-faced Slave Corps helms were designed to give their wearers an intimidating facelessness, to strike fear into the hearts of slaves. Now, for the first time, Mordrec felt it as restricting and close.

The three of them approached the Slave Corps depot with all nonchalance. There were a couple of the Corps on watch at the outer wall but they paid no great notice of their visitors, just nodding to whoever they imagined was behind the helm. Inside there was a Mynan townhouse that the Corps had converted into a barracks, and a warehouse that held their stock in trade, a constant flux of human traffic, a link in the great imperial chain.

To Mordrec it felt as though every eye must be upon them, these three patent intruders trespassing on sacrosanct imperial soil. Ygor was right about one thing: people who visited the Corps unlooked-for were usually invited to stay. However the handful of Wasp-kindeen about paid them no heed, and the bulk of the slavers were clearly in the barracks. With all appearances of confidence, Mordrec led the others into the converted warehouse, where there would be a hundred likely slaves worth the freeing.

Except there were not.

He had to force himself to complete his journey inside, rather than just stopping dead in the doorway and letting the other two run into him. There were no slaves. Every cage was empty. They had come at the worst possible time. Either some grand buyer had just cleaned them out, or a Corps caravan had set off for the inner Empire earlier that very day.

He could feel the accusing stares of the others on him. The helm, which had been his companion for seven years, began to feel like a prison, like a weight.

"Him." Soul Je was striding past him, stalking towards the back of the barred space. One man: the Grasshopper's eyes had spotted one man remaining. A tug of warning jerked through Mordrec: *Why was he left?* But they had come here with a purpose and it wasn't as if they had any better options.

The man was a Commonwealer, a Dragonfly-kindeen, a little stockier than they usually were, a good few years Mordrec's senior with the faintest peppering of grey in his hair. He regarded the trio impassively.

Mordrec looked the man over: he looked capable. "Show me your hands," he directed. Sourly, the Dragonfly jammed a palm towards him, mimicking the threat of a Wasp's sting. It showed the calluses that Mordrec had been looking for, though. "Archer," he noted. "You want out of here?"

The Dragonfly said nothing, but shrugged.

"Out of this city," Ygor prompted in a low voice. "All the way home, if you want it. Willing to kill for it?"

"And what are you doing with my prisoner?"

There was a Wasp in the warehouse doorway, a tall, smooth-looking man with fair hair. He held himself with an utter certainty as he strode towards them, as though swords and stings meant nothing to him. Mordrec's heart lurched and he felt sweat break out in a chill rash. Lyker, it was Lyker, the holder of Mordrec's gambling debts: Lyker of the Rekef. That was why the Dragonfly had been left behind. He was being saved for Rekef questioning.

For the moment, Lyker was ignoring the helmed slaver, staring instead at Igor and Soul Je. "He's not for sale, Scorpion," he snapped. "Now get back to your rabble of friends before I see what price your waxy hide might fetch. You," he directed at Mordrec, "why'd you ever bring him in..." And then the dreadful moment came, Lyker's eyes narrowing. "Name, soldier."

There were dozens of Slave Corps soldiers just a shout away, and Lyker *would* shout. Mordrec's former comrades would be all too happy to turn on one of their own. The slavers bred no great loyalty amongst their number, only cruelty and greed. *Perhaps that's why I'm in this mess, because I never really fit in*, Mordrec considered. *Or perhaps I'm just a rotten gambler.*

"Mordrec...?" Lyker growled and Mordrec felt his palm flash with fire, without even consciously deciding on it. The flare of his Art lashed between them, taking the other Wasp directly in the chest. Lyker was without armour, and the distance was mere feet.

A silence followed, save for the sound of the men in the barracks laughing and drinking.

Well there's no going back now, Mordrec thought numbly. He reached for his keys and unlocked the Dragonfly's cage, his hands performing their tasks by long habit, without the need for thought. None of them spoke as they exited the warehouse. The slaver stockade was as before, and nobody was paying them any attention. The dead Rekef man was a secret that the night still kept, for all that Mordrec felt the corpse behind him like a hot iron against his back.

There was a sudden blur of sound and motion beside them, and the Dragonfly was gone, his Art-conjured wings taking him straight up into the night. Mordrec started after him, and it was a good thing that helm hid his utter chagrin from his fellows.

They left the slaver compound as quickly as possible, and trailed their way back to the nameless aucillian drinking hole. Few words were exchanged until, at the door, Ygor gave a great sigh and said, "Well, three against nine. Maybe we'll be very lucky. I have a trick or two."

Mordrec opened his mouth to reply and there was a sudden scuff of feet behind them that had all three whirling. The Dragonfly stood there, arms folded.

"Out of the city, you said," he reminded them. "Killing, you said. Fine. I'll need a bow. The name's Dal Arche."

In the still of the night, Hokiak drank and waited. The stuff in his bowl bore the same relationship to wine as a rusty saw blade did to a rapier. Hokiak, whose cellar had all manner of delicate vintages, had gone back to the drink of his youth, a vitriol his people called sak, although proper sak was traditionally drunk from a helm or a skull. There was no great mystery in that: it showed the drinker had triumphed over the world for another day. Hokiak had once heard a Beetle scholar expound on how the Scorpion-kinde lived in *harmony* with the rhythms of the desert. Hokiak's people had never lived in harmony with anything. They fought the land around them and they fought everyone else and they fought each other.

It was past midnight now, and past time, in Hokiak's estimation. The Exchange was silent around him. There were lamps lit still, in the shop front, but little light spilled into the backroom. Scorpion-kinde eyes were adaptable, from sun's glare to the dark of the moon, but these days Hokiak's own were failing. He saw best at dusk, and dusk was long gone.

At last it began. He heard a rattling, just long enough to check the door was locked, and then an explosion of shattered wood. His people were not known for subtlety. They struck hard and fast and were gone.

He sat there, sipping his sak and scratching at the tabletop with one claw as the fighting started, letting the individual details of it wash over him: the clash of steel, smash of wood, crossbows' clack and the hoarse yelling of the wounded. If things went unexpectedly badly then Ecta's people would burst into his backroom in a moment and do for him. Otherwise...

In under a minute the skirmish was played out, the only voice remaining was the strained swearing of one of Hokiak's Mynan employees. It had been hard to muster any number of guards, once Ecta had bearded him. The local resistance was in an uproar over their recent reversal, the Empire disdained to lend a hand. He had fallen back on the local gangs, freelancers, mercenaries, men unreliable and untested. Still, it seemed that his precautions had been enough.

Gryllis came in, dusting his hands off theatrically. "Well, old claw, I'll keep the lads on watch, but I reckon that's the lot."

"What damage?" Hokiak asked him.

"Three came in. One of our lads got ripped up badly. One of theirs is dead. The other two made their exit when they saw we were ready for them." The Spider-kind's face twisted. "Only thing is, the Scorpions that came in tonight weren't any of them the fellows who were with your friend Ecta yesterday."

Hokiak nodded safely. "These tonight will be his youngest, the least experienced. He'll have set them a challenge to win his respect. Or perhaps it was even their own idea, to steal the glory of taking my head. So much for whatever their plans were, then. But Ecta won't weep. All he'll care is that I've been sent a message. No quiet nights until this is over."

"Lovely," said Gryllis drily. "You're still going ahead with this tomorrow?"

The old Scorpion nodded. "Oh to be sure," he said, with a trace of iron in his voice. "After all, any more of this and I'll start taking it personally. We'll pay the men a bonus, for tonight, and tell them to spread the word."

Gryllis nodded. "And I'll get a better door put in."

The next day Mordrec, weighed at one side with a lumpy burden wrapped in oilcloth, crept his way to the drinking den. The small hours had seen him turning up, unannounced and unfriendly, at a Consortium merchant's door: The Beetle-kind's man had obviously heard that people wanted to speak to his former associate but Mordrec gave him no time to raise the alarm. Instead, keeping the palm of his hand almost in the panicking man's face at all times, he retrieved what he had put by in the man's care during better times. Thus fortified with a purse of money, a little pilfered jewellery and his heavy burden, he made a quick escape to the skies before the Consortium man could fetch help.

The Dragonfly Dal Arche had been hidden out by the Auxillians who apparently approved of his rescue, although not so far as to change their dislike of Mordrec or their absolute despite of Soul Je. It was quite an education, in fact, for Mordrec to discover just how much the conscripts got up to behind the backs of their Wasp masters. When he rejoined them, Dal and Soul both had a bow: man-high, recurved pieces of elegance that Mordrec remembered from the war.

Dal had strung his, and was running his hands down the sculpted lines, the lethality inherent in the tensioned wood. His face had a thoughtful expression to it. "To think, some

master bowyer spent months to craft this for the hand of a prince, perhaps, and now it's war loot. You can see where the gold inlay's been pried out."

"Your sort of bow, then?" Mordrec said cautiously, unsure where this man had been while the Empire pillaged his Commonweal.

"Me?" Dal Arche gave a hard smile. "Not a bit of it. Give me a brigand's shortbow any time. This'll have to do, though. Where's your Scorpion got to?"

Mordrec shrugged. "He should be here."

"He's coming now," Soul Je stated with a nod. "Brought a friend."

Glancing past the shutters, Mordrec saw that someone resembling the Scorpion was indeed approaching, but swathed in an enormous cloak, considerably bulkier and inexplicably affecting a pronounced hunchback.

"Is he in disguise?" he murmured.

Soul Je had a slightly amused look. "He's bringing everything he's got to the table, gambler," he replied softly.

Barad Ygor stumbled through the doorway and descended heavily onto a bench, which barely survived the experience. "Right," he announced. "I'm ready."

"Armour?" Mordrec asked him, baffled.

The Scorpion-kindens glanced left and right conspiratorially, before slinging his cloak back.

"Light's fire!" Dal Arche spat, and Mordrec leapt back from him, almost tripping backwards. Ygor had come with a friend: it was coiled about him, eight legs clasping his chest and stomach, burnished pincers resting on his collarbones like hideously oversized jewellery, and about his waist the segmented tail, with its needle-tipped stinger nestling companionably over his navel. Mordrec had seen big scorpions before, of course. They were popular in the arenas, a good match for a handful of badly-armed slaves or one skilled fighter, but to have such a dangerous animal loose within a city was unthinkable. To have one just across the table made him sweat and, as for having one actually draped, all claws and tail over someone's body...

"You're mad," he told Ygor flatly. "Even that brute Ecta would say you're mad."

"Let him," Ygor replied. "Scutts and I understand each other." He put a hand on one of the beast's fierce pincers, which shifted slightly under his touch. "Back home, the speaking Art isn't so rare as around here. You can't even get to be a proper Stalker unless you can take a wife."

"A *wife*? You're ill. What if it..."

"She," Ygor corrected. "And consider her one of us, our fifth. Now what have you brought?" He shrugged the cloak on again and nodded to Mordrec's parcel.

"Ah well." Slightly shamefaced after his outburst, Mordrec drew back the cloth to reveal an ugly, lumpy weapon as long as his arm, something like an armless crossbow but with a boxy mechanism over the trigger lever.

"Right," Ygor said levelly. "And *I'm* mad, am I?"

"What is it?" Dal Arche asked blankly.

"It's part of my winnings from an eighteen-hour game of toppers with an Engineering Corps captain, who must have had a lot of explaining to do the next day. We call them nailbows. They're quite new."

"And quite *loud*," Ygor pointed out. "Do you even know how to use it?"

"As I understand it's mostly a matter of pointing it in the right direction and waiting for the noise to stop," Mordrec said blithely.

"Well it'll give Ecta a shock, as well as most of the city," Ygor decided philosophically.

The marketplace Ecta had picked out was mostly abandoned some time before dusk. Those traders who had intended to remain were soon discouraged by a band of big, heavily-armed Scorpion-kindens, at first by means of a few words, and then with broken stalls and goods. The Empire, which might have been expected to take an interest in this lawlessness, was conspicuous in its absence. It was clear to Mordrec that the Scorpions had made a donation to Slave Corps coffers, and they in turn had leant on the auxillian militia, Soul Je's kindred, to keep away. Soon enough, even before the sun was falling behind Myna's city wall, the place was deserted save for Ecta's people. At a signal from their leader the Scorpions broke up, each finding cover amongst the stalls, spreading out through the deserted lanes of the market. Mordrec saw, then, that Ygor had been right about his own people. This was no matter of honour. Ecta might be standing out in his full glory, leaning on his man-high sword like a noble barbarian prince, but the others had fanned out into a pincer ambush, fingering their axes and blades. They hid well, too, for big men. Soon only Ecta was left, but the jaws of the trap were trembling, waiting for one old man.

Soul Je had used his Auxillian status to install them in the upper room of a wayhouse at the edge of the market. From its small window they had done their best to keep track of where Ecta's followers had *gone*, but in the end at least half of the Scorpions had vanished entirely.

"Time to move," Mordrec decided. "Hokiak'll be here any moment." He looked at his allies doubtfully. "We'll have to hunt them."

"We'll strike when the old man turns up," Dal Arche stated. "You want him to be impressed, yes?"

"Yes," Mordrec agreed, heartfelt. He glanced from face to face: the grizzled Dragonfly-kindens; Soul Je with his long, unreadable face; squat and broad Barad Ygor with his lethal pet, Scutts, coiled about his feet. The former slaver hefted the weight of his nailbow. "Let's move."

The Slave Corps were not known for subtlety, but Mordrec had fought in the Twelve-year War and had his own memories of playing stalking games with Dragonfly Mercers and assassins. He had served the Corps as scout and spotter, in the air and on the ground, and he entered the hushed market noiselessly, the bulk of the nailbow cocked back over his shoulder to keep it from rattling against anything, his free hand palm out, ready to unleash his sting in case someone else was stalking *him*.

Of his allies, Dal Arche and Soul Je had vanished utterly, not a sound or scent of them. The maze of vacant stalls did not admit to their presence in any way. Barad Ygor was hanging back, not the stealthiest of men, crouched by a derelict potter's with his crossbow cradled, string taut, in his arms. His venomous friend was gone, though, and Mordrec imagined the creature creeping, belly to the ground, beneath the awnings and the wooden stands, hunting out the enemy on Ygor's behalf.

It was dusk now, and Wasp eyes were not at their best. Mordrec took his progress step by step, working his way towards the centre. He was in sight of the cleared space, edging round to get an angle on Ecta himself, when he realised that, only a few yards away, one of the other Scorpions was crouched, clawed hands on the haft of a crescent-headed axe. Mordrec froze, but the man's attention was wholly inward. With painstaking care the ex-slaver canted the heavy nailbow from his shoulder and brought the machined barrel round.

The Scorpion twitched, and very nearly died for it, as Mordrec's nerves were stretched to snapping. A newcomer was shuffling a slow progress out into the open space at the market's heart.

Hokiak lent on his cane with each step, breathing heavily as though the mere walk from his Exchange had worn him down. He glanced around him, plainly suspecting that Ecta's confederates were nearby, and then stopped, still a dozen yards from the bigger Scorpion, both hands on the head of his stick. Ecta's stance had changed when the old man made his entrance: the greatsword's length and weight now hanging easily in one fist. For a moment it seemed that he was expecting something special: for Hokiak to leap into the air and reveal himself as some great combat master whose edge could never be dulled by mere time. The ancient renegade just hunched there, though, a sack of bones and yellowed skin and rheumy, watering eyes.

You had better be bloody grateful for this, Mordrec thought to himself. *You had better not have come here wanting to die, you wrinkled bastard.*

Ecta had apparently understood that there was nothing more than this: an old man at the end of his times. With a disappointed grunt, clearly audible against the sound of so many people being silent, he hefted his blade.

Now. And Mordrec's finger twitched on the lever, and the nailbow roared in his hands, all but jumping out of his grip. He had intended to put a neat hole in the back of the man before him, but he emptied a half-dozen bolts in a wild arc amidst the sound of firepowder and thunder. Two bolts struck home, more by luck than anything else, slamming the man forwards hard enough to overturn his hiding place. Then a second Scorpion had arisen from a few feet to Mordrec's left, lifting a halberd with a roar of fury, and everything started to happen at once.

Ecta was single-minded, and he went for Hokiak still, trusting to his men to deal with the noise. He changed his mind when an arrow clipped his shoulder, signing a narrow line of blood against his dead white skin. Turning, he saw a Dragonfly drop to the ground across the market square, already reaching for another shaft. Ecta was at him, though, covering the intervening ground with startling swiftness, the greatsword's blade blurring between them. Dal Arche's wings flickered in and out of sight, landing him ten feet back, but the string of his borrowed bow snapped as he tried to get his second shot off, whipping across his face.

As the halberd came for him, Mordrec loosed his sting, the golden energy flashing from his palm to scorch across the Scorpion's flank. The man snarled and hacked for him, and the Wasp let his wings cast him sideways between two stalls, nailbow dragging in his wake. He almost barrelled straight into another man who was rushing towards the noise. For a moment he was caught between them, stumbling aside from the newcomer's scything claws. The halberd came down again and Mordrec bounced the haft bruisingly from his forearm, waiting for the claws to come in. Instead, the second man went down with a howl, and Mordrec tripped over him. He landed half on something hard and lumpy, and rolled off with a yell when he saw that it was Scutts' segmented back, the sting poised above him like a stiletto.

Mordrec twisted urgently to one side, seeing a brief glimpse of the creature's claws clasped about his fallen opponent's knee. Then the needle point of the sting lashed down into the luckless man's groin. The halberdier roared and raised the heavy blade of his weapon to strike, and Mordrec emptied the nailbow into him in an explosive judder of finger-long bolts.

When he looked round, Scutts had made herself scarce amongst the stalls. *And I hope that bloody Ygor keeps her on a firm leash.*

Dal Arche had a Wasp-issue shortsword out now, looking like a butter-knife compared to Ecta's greatsword. He could have flown away without difficulty but Hokiak still stood there, staring pop-eyed at the spectacle of a Commonwealer rushing to his defence, and so he led the Scorpion chieftain a chase about the market square, keeping out of the broad reach of that massive blade. Initially he had hoped to be able to feign his way past the Scorpion's guard for a

swift strike, but Ecta was both fast and skilled. Twice now he had almost caught Dal Arche with a sudden burst of speed, or an unexpected leap forwards that extended the man's reach four feet. Every time Dal tried to turn the assault, the sweep of the greatsword almost had him, every time he fell back Ecta drove for Hokiak. *Where are the others?*

Mordrec was heading for the market's centre when a couple of fighters crashed through a stall immediately in front of him. For a moment he saw only two Scorpions fighting, but then he spotted the shorter one as Ygor. The Wasp barked out a shout, the sort the Corps used to stop running slaves in their tracks. With a supreme effort, Ygor's adversary cast him down to the ground and started at Mordrec, obviously unsure whose side he was on. With a hard grin the Wasp levelled the nailbow at him and pulled the lever.

Of course, I should probably have reloaded the cursed thing...

The backhand blow of the Scorpion's clawed fist knocked Mordrec entirely off his feet, his head ringing with the force of it. For a moment his enemy was standing over him, hand raised to drive those Art claws down like daggers, then the man was running, seemingly without transition, and a moment later Scutts bounded past, pincers wide and body a sinuous curve. Ygor had recovered his crossbow from somewhere and got off a bolt that flew a good eight feet wide of the fleeing man, but a moment later a long arrow appeared like magic through the running Scorpion's neck, stopping him for a moment, upright and dead still, before he collapsed.

Without a word Mordrec and Ygor ran for the central square with Scutts pursuing them excitedly.

Dal was running out of options. He was relying on his wings more and more to keep him out of Ecta's way, and the Art was draining him slowly of his strength. The Scorpion seemed indefatigable and had found a rhythm now, was even giving the retreating Dragonfly a fang-bristling smile.

"About time!" Dal shouted, as Mordrec and Ygor pounded into sight. "You get the rest?" Then he kicked high into the air, passing entirely over Ecta's bald head to land in a crouch, rasping for breath, behind him. When the big man turned he saw three human opponents and a barely-restrained animal facing him.

He seemed utterly undaunted. He was barely breathing hard, they saw. "Oh this is good," he murmured. "Hokiak, you amuse me."

Mordrec had his hand out, fingers spread, ready to sting, and Ygor had reloaded his crossbow, dragging the string back with one notched thumb-claw. Ecta barely seemed to care.

"Come forth, my warriors," he bellowed. Mordrec was frantically counting in his head. He had done for two, and Scutts had stung another, and presumably removed him from the fight. Dal Arche had gone straight for Ecta, as they had planned. Had Ygor killed any others? That still left...

None. Apparently that left none. Nobody came forward to answer Ecta's summons. The Scorpion chieftain shrugged, looking from the newcomers to Hokiak. It seemed he would say something, some threat or piece of defiance, but then he had launched himself at the old man, sword drawn back, an unstoppable, unheralded charge. Ygor loosed and missed, and Mordrec held off his sting for fear of striking Hokiak himself.

Ecta fell at Hokiak's feet. The slender shaft of a longbow arrow stood between his shoulder-blades like a standard. For a moment nobody moved, waiting, and then a tall, angular shadow moved amongst the stalls, and Soul Je stepped out, almost apologetically, nodding briefly to his allies.

Hokiak stared at them for a long while. He had barely moved throughout the whole skirmish, still leaning on his stick as though he was just an old veteran enjoying clement weather. Eventually, and in tones that were hard to analyse, he said, "You clowns."

Mordrec exchanged looks with his allies, save for Dal Arche who was mopping gingerly at the red weal that his bowstring had left across his face.

"Oh you utter clowns," the old man repeated, but there was a chuckle recognisable in his tone now. "All right lads, out you come."

And out they came, more than a dozen of them: Mynan Beetle-kindens with levelled crossbows emerging from either side of the withered Scorpion, all of them staring at Mordrec and his fellows as though waiting for the order to shoot.

"You...," Mordrec started uncertainly. "But I thought that..."

"I *told* you Scorpions don't care about honour," Ygor reminded him in a murmur.

"And there's another two dozen ready to come in," Hokiak said slowly. "I called in a lot of favours. What do you clowns *want*?"

"Out," the Wasp replied promptly. "Safe travel out of the Empire. Papers, transport, whatever it takes to be out of the reach of the Rekef." He glanced at Dal Arche. "The Commonweal's nice, this time of year."

For a moment Hokiak regarded him disdainfully. "I hear Lyker got himself dead."

"That was... careless of him," Mordrec managed.

The old Scorpion could hold his face still no longer. He shook his head to hide it, but there was a grin somewhere amongst the yellowing stumps of his hutting teeth. "Myna's better off without you," he spat, and then held a hand out swiftly in case any of his followers took this as an order. "You're fools, all of you, to do this on credit, but I'm feeling generous all of a sudden. Come back to the Exchnge and I'll see what I can do."

He lent on his stick less, they saw, as he hobbled off back towards his den, and despite his years there was a decided new spring in his step.