

The Scent of Tears

by

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I was sold to Colonel Sigurt to cover a racing debt. Not the normal sort of gambling debt, you understand - I came from a family of good standing, and Father was not the sort of fool to squander the wealth he'd won in military campaigns upon idle bets. But he owned, as many Wasp-kind men of good family do, a mews of racing wasps, and he had long ago entered into a rivalry with Sigurt, for reasons that were never made entirely clear to me. Shared time in the Imperial Army, I understood, and some bitterness from their youth. Both men were loyal servants of the Empire, it's needless to say, but their rivalry was not an amiable one and it was conducted, among other means, by way of their racing teams.

So, as the long war with the Dragonfly Commonweal dragged on, the battles played out back home in the skies over Capitas grew more intense. My father's mews grew to over forty of the finest racing wasps including the breeding queen and they were not cheap to maintain. What with riders and handlers and food to provide for – wasp grubs eat enormous amount of meat and feed the adults with their sticky secretions, but racing beasts need expensive specialist nectars too for that extra edge – it became expedient for Father to accept sponsorship from other parties. This was on the understanding that his wasps would win races of course. When we accepted the Royal patronage and fielded a racer in the Emperor's own escutcheon it was a proud day for the Family Gunthar.

Then it all went wrong. There was suddenly something – a parasite, a fungal infection, we were never certain – in the nest, and the grubs withered like raisins in the sun. Without the young to feed them the adults went hungry; Father spent a fortune buying in gallons of feed, but it was inferior stuff at that quantity and our racing form dropped alarmingly. Prestigious races were lost. Two of our best free-born riders were lured away to join other mews. Our sponsors were suddenly demanding their money back. The Emperor himself expressed disappointment to my father's face. Our family went almost overnight from wealth to disgrace and near-ruin.

Then our breeding queen, who was several decades old and worn out replacing the dying grubs, succumbed to the sickness too.

Of course my father had to sell family assets. The wasps themselves were worthless because of the infection; nobody would touch our surviving racing-stock so he sold off household slaves and heirlooms of his military campaigns.

And finally he sold me.

I think it was enormously offensive to him that Colonel Sigurt should be the one to take his only daughter, but at the price offered he could not refuse: it was enough to allow him the possibility of starting afresh with new racers, though on a smaller scale. And there were few enough other offers; the bedchambers of the Wasp-kind are awash with slave women from every nation we've conquered: elegant Dragonfly-kind, nimble Fly-maidens, curvaceous Bee-women. Flesh is cheap in Capitas since the War began. But the sale was humiliating for him in the extreme. He could not bid me farewell the day they put a slave-collar about my neck and led me from the house where I had once been an honoured chattelaine.

As to my own feelings, I will not dwell upon them. We of the Wasp-kind are proud, the women no less than the warriors. I shall not be seen to weep.

I was taken on foot through the streets of the city to the grand house of the family Sigurt, and then made to wait in the servants' porch until evening before I was admitted. I bit my lip and refused to beg for water, even after hours on my feet. With only the wrought iron gate between me and the street, I could look back out at the world I had lost, at the caleches drawn by beetles with painted carapaces rumbling past and the view over Capitas down to the grand ziggurats by the river, at servants pausing to gossip as they passed one another and off-duty soldiers strolling about enjoying their time away from barracks. It seemed infinitely strange to me that the world could still look as it did the day before, yet suddenly I was no longer part of it.

Of course I could be seen there too, waiting in such a visible place, tethered to a wall-ring. My family's humiliation was very public. Throughout the day respectable Wasp faces peered at me from within the caleches that passed. Some I recognised as women I had once counted as family friends.

It was hard to enter that house, so similar to the one I had left, with its flat roofs clustered with flowering vines and its terraced gardens tended by Bee-kindred slaves. Back home I had everything I could desire. My father had been generous and indulgent of his family. Here I had nothing except by another's leave.

Colonel Sigurt rejoiced in my humiliation. That was the point of his purchase; certainly he wasn't extending aid to his rival from any kindly impulse. I was familiar with his face from social gatherings in the past; his sharp blue eyes and the nearly invisible brows; the grey-blond hair, shorn close at the nape of the neck, that flopped over his forehead. I soon grew familiar with his tastes and his habits. He was most appreciative of his purchase.

'Do you think your father's picturing this?' he would hiss in my ear as he pinned me to his bed. 'Do you think it haunts him?'

You know what? I *enjoyed* sex with Sigurt. It was the only time I got to hurt him. He hurt me worse, of course. But at least it felt like I was fighting when I gouged my nails into his skin or struck at his face or bit down on momentarily unguarded flesh. It was the only time I didn't feel like a slave.

He liked that too. With his weight crushing down upon my back and my face pressed to the rumpled sheet, he would draw his lips softly across my shoulders and whisper, 'You have such spirit, daughter of Gunthar.' And once, 'Not like that cold husk of a wife upstairs.'

Ah: his wife, Fyrtha. Her first words to me, spoken quietly in passing, were; 'Fall pregnant, and I shall cut you open myself.' She was the artificer of my excruciation. More so than Sigurt himself – for at least he was frequently away from home, attending the Emperor or his military superiors in the Tactical Corps. Fyrtha was always there. She was a tall, elegant woman with a mane of golden hair that I think was the last remnant of a great beauty. She had borne Sigurt children, certainly – there was mention of two sons in the Army, a daughter married to one of the magnates in the Consortium of the Honest. But these days Fyrtha had no children to care for and Wasp women rest no more easy under the yoke of idleness than do their men. Her luxurious life had turned wearisome upon her, I think, and a fall in the past that had hurt her back prevented her spending her energy in the traditional leisure pursuit of Wasp-kindred women; flying to the hunt. Her mind dwelt too much on little slights and grievances; she was a dangerous friend to her social equals and a terror to her household.

Given that I was one of the slaves Sigurt had purchased especially for his own entertainment – all of us Wasp-kindred, by-the-by, for he was blood-proud and wouldn't soil himself with lesser women - I was in a curious position. She could not

destroy me or obviously mar my looks for fear of angering him, but I was one who incurred her particular contempt because I distracted her husband from her bed. When he was away from home she would make me sweat and labour alongside the Beetle-kindens in the laundry house. And for the slightest infraction – a glance that was not humble enough, a sheet that the wind had blown off the line into the yard - she would have me whipped by Lars the doorkeeper, but only across the back. The food she let me have in Sigurt's absence was of the worst kind, often spoiled by damp or weevils, and though this persecution sounds petty I discovered how hard it is to remember one's pride when one is hungry day after day.

The one source of relief from Fyrtha's attentions came from her fondness for gem-wasps. It was a fashion that had spread among the wealthier families over the last few years, but she was particularly susceptible. Some people are. The sting of the tiny iridescent insects - worn tethered to a broach at the shoulder, where their black and green markings may be seen to shimmer pleasingly as they crawl about – is no more than a pin-prick and induces a temporary sense of euphoria. I'd regarded the habit as an entertaining distraction, but for Fyrtha it was solace and necessity. She would lie by the fountains on the terrace for hours in a haze of contentment.

There were times I envied her, and wished for the burn and the glow of the gem-wasps' poison.

One day I crawled into the sunny patch under the orchard wall to recover from my latest beating. My back was burning, my dress sticking to it where Lars' cane had broken the skin. Only the sun on my limbs felt good, and I cradled my head in my arms to cut off the outside world. My ears so muffled, I saw feet in the dust before I realised that anyone had come up upon me; brown feet in artisan's sandals, not soldiers' boots. I uncurled quickly, fearful of the weakness I was displaying.

It was a man. One glance at those warm brown eyes, that solid build and the fuzz of cropped hair haloing his skull identified him as Bee-kindens.

'Chattelaine Dagmar?'

My first reaction was of tremulous rage that he should creep up on me like that, but I swallowed the anger that burned in my throat. 'Chattelaine?' I sneered, my voice hoarse. 'Not any more.'

'Do you remember me?'

I stared at him. For what should I remember a Bee-kindens slave? He was dressed plainly, with a collar bearing the Sigurt crest as did my own, but wearing no other clue to his identity. Yet he did look familiar.

'Should I?' Bee-kindens slaves are everywhere in the Empire. They tend our gardens and furnished our houses and decorated our public places. Let Beetle-kindens do their artificing with metal and grease and steam; they have given our Empire machinery and firepower. But for beauty in creativity, for sculpture and painting and the gentler arts, we turn to the Bee-kindens. Upon the very wall surrounding the Imperial Palace the mile-long mural *The Triumph of the Wasps* records all our achievements and glories and aspirations, yet is the work of Bee-kindens hands.

'I used to belong to your family.' He stood with his hands knotted together, a look of trepidation on his face. 'Before I was sold to Colonel Sigurt.'

'Ah.' Suddenly he seemed to me not just a clumsy intruder but a friend, as I placed him in my memory. My voice softened. 'You were my mother's perfumer, weren't you?'

He perked up. 'That's right.'

'Effer...'

'Everel.'

'Everel.' I thought how foolish it was of me, a slave myself, to take offence at being approached by him, and it was a thought I was not used to. 'I'm sorry,' I said, tasting the awkward words on my lips. This man had been around all my young life, and I'd had no conscious memory of him.

He flushed a bit. 'Not to worry, Chattelaine Dagmar.'

'Don't call me that, or she'll have you beaten too.'

He nodded. 'Are you badly hurt ... Dagmar?'

I prickled. 'No worse than usual.' I was lying, as I happened; this was the worst whipping I'd received yet. I'd dropped a pitcher of wine and splashed Fyrtha's dress.

'Shall I take a look?' He drew from his pouch a pot with a wax seal. 'I have a salve here that's good for healing without scars. It's honeycomb and yarrow and—'

'I thought you were a perfumer?'

'Well. You know. I make myself useful where I can. Poultices and tinctures of all kinds.'

'Why?' I fixed him with a glare. 'Why are you doing this for me?'

He looked away, abashed. 'You're hurt. I don't like to see anyone hurt.'

Which was, I thought, why the Bee-kindred are now our vassals. The Empire is not afraid of hurting anyone, its own citizens included. I smiled weakly.

'Besides, I remember ... your family ... with...' He seemed to be having problems choosing his words. Eventually he settled for, 'I was not mistreated there, for a slave.'

'Are you treated badly now?'

He shrugged. 'She's not the easiest of women to please. But she appreciates the skills I bring to her household. Including some small medicinal knowledge.' He held out the pot of salve again. 'Will you let me?'

Warily, I nodded. As he moved behind me I loosened the knots of my neckline.

His hands were so gentle I had to bite my lip to stop myself crying.

Moments of kindness were rare in my life now, and I mistrusted them when they came. Even Sigurt could be perversely generous at times though. One afternoon when we were lying back at opposite ends of his big carved bed – Bee-kindred work that, too – he ran his fingers through the sweat on his chest, picked up the trickle of blood from the bite-mark I'd left on his collar-bone and laughed.

'I think you like this as much as I do, Dagmar. Or else you wouldn't put so much effort into it.'

I glared at him sullenly. I was saying nothing. The hand not on his chest lay with fingers loosely curled over the palm – relaxed, not threatening, but ready with a sting should I launch an attack. My very silence made him grin.

'I have something for you, Gunthar's daughter.'

I raised my eyebrows and touched fingertips gingerly to my swollen and split lip. I could still taste blood. 'I doubt I want it, Colonel.'

'It's a present.'

'I'm sure.'

'Look under the bed.' The jerk of his chin made it an order. I slid my aching limbs off the mattress onto the rug and looked. There was a box there, fairly small and plain. 'Go on,' he urged.

Cautiously I brought the box up into the light. The wood was undecorated except for a row of holes in the lid. It was big enough to hold a severed head, it occurred to me, and I braced myself inwardly.

‘You’ll like it, I promise.’

‘Your word means everything to me,’ I whispered, but he took no offence at the undisguised insult, for once. Sitting up straight and telling myself not to cry out, whatever it should be, I opened the box. Inside was a jet black wasp longer than my hand, which twitched its antennae.

‘He’s yours,’ said Sigurt. He sounded pleased with himself. ‘Male; don’t worry: no sting. Go on, lift him out.’

I scooped the insect from its container. It seemed almost torpid, but clung to my wrist and fanned its wings experimentally. Like all insects it was lighter than it looked. Its abdomen pulsed, glittering like polished jet.

‘He’s been starved down. If you go to the mews and get him some nectar, he’ll bond with you soon enough. You don’t have the Art of Speech, do you?’

I shook my head slowly. Then I looked over at Sigurt, who lay smiling, eyebrows raised in anticipation, watching me with pleasure and curiosity. I think now he might have been wondering if I’d just kill the little wasp out of hand to spite him. If I hadn’t been so sore and tired I might have thought of it at the time myself. ‘Why?’ I asked.

‘I thought you’d like him.’

This made no sense to me at all. ‘What?’

‘Don’t you? He cost quite a bit. Black is the fashionable colour right now.’

I gaped. ‘But I’m a slave.’

‘I can give you a present, can’t I?’ He was sounding a little irritated. ‘I can have you dress how I like, and look how I like, and if I want you to have a pet you can have one.’

‘I see.’ I didn’t. Not really. He’d completely thrown me this time.

‘Don’t you like him?’

‘He’s beautiful,’ I allowed. The wasp had climbed onto my forearm and I could feel its legs pricking my skin. He was a pet suitable for a real lady. My heart, which had been turning over in confusion, sank at the thought. ‘Your wife won’t let me keep him.’

He waved a hand dismissively. ‘Don’t worry about Fyrtha. I’ll have a word.’

I bit the inside of my cheek and nodded, almost forgetting myself for a moment.

‘You’re pleased?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now say “Thank-you”.’

I remembered my place in an instant. My eyes met his. ‘Thank-you, master,’ I said grudgingly. It was the first time I’d ever uttered those words to him without being forced to surrender by pain first.

‘No.’ He lay back. ‘Come over here and say “Thank-you” *properly*.’

Colonel Sigurt got his chance to show off both me and my pet in public. He took us to the races as part of his entourage for the Vespasian Trophy. Fyrtha was there of course, as were all the men and women of the great families of Capitas. She wore drapes of black and gold - Wasp-kindren women are keen to show support for their menfolk in the Imperial Army. I, being a slave, wore blue, but it was Spider-kindren silk and no cheap linen shift I’d been put in. I must have presented a strange, contradictory sight in my fine dress, with a tame wrist-wasp to hand and my Wasp-kindren features made up and my fair hair in an elegant coiffure: very much the daughter of Empire, except for the slave-collar about my neck and the bruise about my left eye which the make-up did not disguise. I know that many of the people that

came to greet Sigurt and his wife stared at me, their glances sliding ineluctably despite Fyrtha's obvious irritation.

'Yes, that is Dagmar of the family Gunthar,' Sigurt would say with a smooth smile. He was delighted to parade my father's shame.

I did not look anyone in the eye. How could I, when these people had once been my equals, my neighbours, some even my friends? Now they looked at me as if judging some racing animal for form and comportment. I kept my eyes on Lissi, my little wasp. Greedy by nature, he had tamed easily and no longer needed to be tethered to my wrist, but would sit at my shoulder and dart out to investigate brightly-coloured objects and other pets. He was a fine source of distraction.

Then the event began properly, with the parade of the day's racers in their family colours. Racing wasps are not like the big black-and-gold beasts of the Heavy Airborne, which need to take the weight of a fully-grown man. They are smaller and faster, their streamlined abdomens tending to a dark brown in colour, and they are ridden by undersized women and boys too young for military service. But the animals are just as skittish and aggressive as the Army wasps, and though their jockeys all possess the Art of Speech they have a hard time controlling their mounts. That is part of the skill, of course. Wasps of different families, being bred in separate nests, have a distinct desire to fight each other and we saw many a feint with venom-dripping sting come close to stabbing home.

I could not help looking for the silks of the family Gunthar, but couldn't see them on any rider. In all probability, I knew, my father had not managed to raise a team in time for this year's competition; entering for the Vespasian Trophy requires considerable investment. Certainly some of the mews owners were making their money back; people were betting freely and large sums of money were changing hands about us. The wasps tore back and forth over our heads buzzing, like scores of Beetle-kindred orthopters.

Colonel Sigurt's own team placed third overall, up a place from the previous year. He was satisfied, if not delighted. It was as he was leading us down the marble steps of the arena that he all but ran into my father who was hurrying the opposite way, talking intently to an irritable-looking Fly-kindred man.

'Gunthar!'

We all stopped, letting the crowd part around us. Sigurt and my father locked gazes, one with an expression of pleasure, the other with dismay. The Fly-kindred took the opportunity to slip away and I wished I could follow his example.

'Sigurt.' My father's voice was heavy. He wore, I could not help noting, the same robe he'd had on last year, the gold-thread trim looking a little worn. He'd lost weight, I thought, and his face was more lined than I remembered. Sigurt, standing two steps higher up and accompanied by his wife and assorted relatives along with an entourage of guards and household slaves, had all the advantages.

'A profitable day for you, I trust, Gunthar?'

'Not so profitable as yours.'

Sigurt nodded smugly. 'Ah - Have you seen your daughter recently?' He grabbed my arm and pulled me to the front. 'Give greeting to your father, Dagmar.'

All the blood had drained from my face. My father looked ashen. 'I wish you health, my sire,' I rasped. 'Is my mother well?'

He did not answer. He stared at me as if I were a ghost.

'She's looking well, don't you think?' said Sigurt breezily. 'She's come on well under my care, Gunthar. Learned a number of new skills. Shown a surprising aptitude for some activities.' He patted my shoulder and my skin crawled. 'In fact I'm

thinking of putting her on the entertainment rosta for the Regimental Reunion this year. Do you think she'll go down well with the junior officers? Or perhaps the lower ranks? Just think how well your family name will be known after that. You'll be quite famous.'

My vision started to go blurry at the edges.

'I have no daughter,' said my father quietly, his eyes flat. Then he walked away.

I made it all the way back to the house without throwing up. It was the only pride I had left to cling to. As soon as I was alone I ran out into the gardens, fled behind the box hedge down to the orchard terrace and scrambled behind the wall, where I spewed into the dust and then sat digging my fingers into my belly as if I could eviscerate myself. Lissi crawled over my shoulders and head, agitated, and nibbled at the exposed skin of my neck to try and get my attention. I barely felt it.

Everel found me there. He has an instinct.

'Dagmar. I heard—'

'Keep off me!' I sat up and thrust my palm out at him in naked threat, and he flinched. Lissi took to the air and buzzed around anxiously.

'Dagmar...'

'I said don't *touch* me!' I was coiled up like some scorpion disturbed under a stone, my arm raised and shaking. 'You're just Bee-kind - how dare you even *talk* to me like you know-' The utter stupidity of my own words struck me dumb mid-sentence. My face was going all awry, my throat knotting up.

Everel knelt, lifted his closed fist and slowly put it into my open palm, looking nowhere but my eyes. My fingers closed over his hand. 'Don't cry, Dagmar.'

I swallowed hard and managed to rasp out, 'I'm not going to cry.'

'Don't cry yet. I have something to help you.'

'Help me?'

'Come to my workshop. Come on.'

It took some persuasion, but eventually I let him turn his fist over palm to palm and raise me to my feet. He gave me a piece of lemongrass from his pouch to chew, to take away the bitter taste, as if I were a child being comforted with a sweet. Then he led me back through the terraces and the servants' courtyards, avoiding anyone else, to a small stone room with louvred shutters.

I held on to my pain all the way.

'Your wasp has to stay outside, Dagmar.'

'Lissi? Why?' My voice sounded dull and hoarse.

'This is a perfume workshop and wasps are very sensitive to smells. It could get confused, angry...'

'He doesn't have a sting.'

'He could fly into a wall and hurt himself. Believe me.'

So I told Lissi to wait outside and left him with a dab of syrup from my nectar bottle, before following Everel into his workshop. The door didn't even have a lock, and if you know anything about the habits of slaves that will tell you how much Fyrtha was feared by hers. Inside the room was lined with racks of glass bottles, each holding an oily-looking yellow or brown liquid. There were bottles of seedpods and berries and petals and dried leaves too, waxy-looking resins and powdery spices and curls of bark. By the hearth in the corner was a stack of copper pans and funnels of varying sizes and peculiar shapes.

The smell, a riotous combination of scents, was almost overwhelming. My swollen eyes stung.

'This is all yours?' I was surprised enough to forget my own woes for the moment: I'd never seen anything like this because Wasp-kind women of good repute do not wear perfume until they are married. 'Why do you need so much stuff?'

Everel, opening a shutter to let in fresher air, said a little stiffly, 'I was a member of the Perfumer's Guild of Szar before I was captured. This is all I brought with me. All a perfumer could ever need.'

I looked at a flask of juniper berries and then moved over to the racks of liquid. *Bergamot* read the first label I glanced at. Next along were *Clove* then *Rosemary* then *Lavender*. Some were unfamiliar, however.

'What's *Liquid Storax*?'

'It's the resin bled from the Liquidambar tree. Have you seen one? In autumn the leaves turn to brilliant red and gold – quite beautiful. Most of the groves we know of were in Beetle-kind lands, and they've been felled now. For firewood. To feed the charcoal kilns of Helleron. And thus the world is advanced.'

I didn't miss the edge in his voice.

'And *Velvetbloom*?'

'Ah. That's from a flower that blooms in the woods of Felyal. It has racemes of soft, velvety petals.'

'Is it a poison?' I could see the barbed sting symbol inked on the corner of the label.

Everel pulled a face. 'At this concentration they are all poisons, to some extent. But velvetbloom is rather more dangerous ... I wouldn't want to pull the stopper from that one, not here. The flower is pollinated by little wasps, in the wild, you see. It has a scent that to us humans is unremarkable, but to the insects it is meant for it smells like a dying wasp.'

I looked at him questioningly.

'Have you ever watched a nest of small wasps going about its business? They usually forbear to attack humans and bigger animals unless the nest is trodden on or directly threatened, or unless some of the guard wasps are swatted. We think they give off a scent as they die – a signal that they have been attacked. The others rush to defend the nest from anything they can see, driven by this alarm. So this flower gives off a similar alarm, and wasps cluster all about the flowers to sting them over and over again, and in doing so they pick up pollen and spread it from flower to flower.'

'But why would you want to wear that as a perfume?'

'Well, they don't here in the Empire. Obviously. But velvetbloom is an ingredient in a very old Moth-kind perfume, according to our records. And...' His face tightened. He looked at his hands. 'And I've known it used. In concentrate. There is ...' He swallowed. 'There was a Bee-kind stronghold outside Szar called Scop, and when the Empire attacked it one of our princesses of the royal blood holed up there with her loyal troops. It was well fortified, and high up, and difficult to get siege machinery to the walls. The losses the airborne Wasps were taking as they tried to attack from above were untenable. So the officer in charge of the attack ordered that bundles soaked in velvetbloom oil be dropped in over the walls of Scop. Then they released all the cavalry wasps, riderless, to attack. Drawn by the scent, they went into a frenzy. There were no Bee-kind survivors. At all.'

I looked at his blunt, patient face, the down-drawn corners of his mouth. 'Did you...?'

'My family came from Scop.'

'I'm sorry.'

'That your Empire conquered my people?'

I hesitated. ‘That you are sorrowing.’

‘All slaves live in sorrow.’

Blinking, I turned to look at the racks of bottles, the hard fist of pain and fear under my breastbone clenching momentarily.

‘It’s like a secret language. Or a library of the world,’ said I softly after a while. ‘I didn’t know there were so many perfumes in existence.’

Everel relaxed a shade. ‘You’ve probably smelled very few. You Wasp-kindens are mad for the sweet ones, all loaded down with vanilla.’ He waved his hand at the bottles. ‘But there are recipes here dating back centuries, for all the kindens. Even ones we have no contact with now. It’s the legacy of my guild.’

‘What does a Spider-kindens woman wear?’ I asked. I’d seen a Spider diplomat at a party once, and had been intrigued by the knowing, humorous glitter in her eyes.

‘Spider-kindens tend to like woody-based scents. Ant-kindens like them spicy, Mantis-kindens prefer variations on citrus notes.’ Everel reached out and plucked a bottle to show me. ‘This is a Spider-kindens scent.’

It was labelled in meticulous handwriting *Webs of Cedar*. I began to unstopper the bottle but Everel pulled it from my hands hurriedly.

‘Wait. These are concentrated essences – if you splashed some on your skin it would blister you. To be worn they have to be diluted with purest alcohol at least ten times over. That way the scent comes properly alive. To be used in a fountain, say, you’d have to dilute it fifty times over in spirit, and then again in the water.’ He brushed my hand with his. ‘Wait a moment. I’ll show you how to sample a little.’

Opening a chest that stood beneath his workbench he extracted the topmost of a heap of small raw silk squares. He unstoppered the bottle, holding it at arm’s length, then dabbed the handkerchief briefly with the oil. Re-stoppering the bottle immediately, he waved the cloth in the air a few times then passed it to me, holding it by the corner. ‘Don’t touch it to your nose.’

I bent my head over the fabric. The scent was warm, heavy and a little disturbing. Not unpleasant, but not a scent I could imagine wanting to wear. It did not compare with the alluring sweetness that had surrounded my mother like an aura and lingered in every room she passed through.

The memory of my mother made my heart sink again. ‘So what has any of this to do with me?’ I asked dully.

‘Ah. He sat down on a tall stool, hands on his knees. His eyes were wide and earnest. ‘Scents affect us all, in ways we don’t realise. They bring the past to life. They change our moods and our hearts. Rain on dust makes us nostalgic. The air of Spring makes us restless. Dagmar, I want to make you a perfume.’

‘You think,’ I whispered, ‘that you can make me feel better?’

He shook his head. ‘I think I may be able to make Sigurt feel differently about you. To need you more than he does now.’

I laughed harshly.

‘I mean – in a different way. There are scents that evoke tenderness, the instinct to protect; like the smell of a baby’s skin. Scents that remind us of home, of good food, of satisfaction. They’re smells that make us comfortable. We like to keep them around us. Ask yourself why some couples bond forever, and other fall apart no matter the initial attraction - the masters of my guild would have said that the secret lies in *scent*. The aromas of two individuals that, without either of them knowing it, blend into one harmoniously or clash irredeemably.’

Wide-eyed, I shook my head. Everel pressed on.

'I could, with luck and Art, devise a scent that worked upon Sigurt to make him content in your presence. To make him not want to lose you to any other man, not even for a moment.'

'You'll make him love me?' I laughed, my voice ragged.

'If it will save you.'

I walked round the worktable, running my hand over the grain distractedly. 'Why?' I asked at last. 'Why? – after Scop, and being enslaved? I'm Wasp-kind. Why would you want to help me?'

He sat with his mouth open, just a little, as if his words were still buzzing round inside his head and refusing to emerge. He even flushed a shade darker. Then he took a deep breath. 'There are forests to the north of here, on the hills above Lake Limnia –'

'Is this another perfume story?'

He just smiled sadly. 'The wasps there are big, armoured hornets, twice the size of a honey-bee. In fact, if they discover a honey-farm they can destroy a farmer's entire livelihood. The hornets fly into the hives and the guardian workers meet it at the doorway and try to sting it to death. But the hornet has such thick plating that the stings cannot sink in far enough, and the bees tear themselves apart and die for nothing, while the hornets bite their smaller foes in half. So a few scout wasps can kill a whole hive of bees and bring their brethren in to steal the honey and grubs.'

'But,' he continued, the ghost of a smile on his face, 'there are wild bees in the hills too: an older breed than the farmers' honey-makers. When a hornet finds their nest, the wild bees do not try to fight it. They let it enter deep within the nest. They do not sting it. They surround it instead, and cover it with their bodies many bees deep. The wasp cannot move easily, but it isn't alarmed. Then the bees begin to vibrate their wings and bodies, and their vibration creates heat. And with countless patient tiny movements, they heat the hornet up so much that it cooks to death.'

I almost laughed, but I was a little shocked.

He spread his hands. 'Do you know what I believe, Dagmar? I believe you Wasp-kind are a young culture. Like youths armed with sticks and intoxicated by your first sip of beer you run riot, wanting to fight anyone you meet. Well, that cannot last. It may take many years, but having an Empire will change you. Living with other kinden will change you, even though they are your slaves. Letting Beetle- and Fly-kind become citizens will change you, and you will not see it happening and you will welcome it.'

'You learnt artificing from the Beetle-kind. From us Bee-kind you will learn beauty. Already you have gardens and painting and music: we will teach you to love beauty so much that you can't live without it, so that war becomes unbearable. We will teach you luxury and civilisation and peace. It may take centuries of slavery and suffering, but in the end we will smother your cruel Empire with contentment.' His smile was sad, full of the knowledge of how much this was going to cost him and his kinden. 'So, where I can, I will change things. I will even teach Sigurt to love, if that can be done.'

We looked at each other for a long time. Everel's vision, encompassing so many years, had left me dizzy. Then I nodded. 'How do you make this perfume?'

'I'll need something from you. I need your tears. Can you cry, Dagmar?'

'Not in front of you,' I whispered.

He looked pained, but he fetched a glass bowl from a drawer and laid it on the table for me. 'I'll wait outside.'

Alone, I sat on his stool and looked down into the milky glass of the dish. Not for the first time I considered my other course of escape: it would be easy enough to sting out my own throat. But self-murder was an act of cowardice that would besmirch my family's honour worse than anything Sigurt or his regiment could do to me.

Crumpling my head in my hands, I let go and began to weep, my tears splashing one by one into the bowl.

And perhaps Everel's perfume did work. It's hard to say. I know that the first night I wore it, Sigurt lay behind me and traced his fingertip down my spine, through the beads of sweat, gently over the unhealed welts.

'I didn't mean what I said, about the Regimental Reunion,' he murmured.
'You know that. It was a joke.'

I stiffened, my breath seizing in my throat.

'I mean – I said it to provoke your father. You don't have anything to worry about.'

For a moment I felt like I'd forgotten how to breathe and could not start again. I rolled over onto my back, ignoring the burning of my broken skin, and stared at the ceiling. 'Why do you resent him that much?'

Sigurt sat up, reaching for the wine-cup by the bed. He shrugged. 'He scorched me over that jockey a few years back.'

'And before that you won that disputed finish on a coin-toss. And before that he beat you to the bloodline Queen ... It goes back years, one then the other. What started it?'

He looked into the depths of his goblet. 'Army stuff. When we were junior officers.'

'What happened?'

'You don't need to know.'

'Who started it?'

Sigurt looked irritated. 'He did. During the attack on Myna.'

'The Beetle-kindn city? My father was only a junior officer then.'

'We both were. We both led squads over the walls. Street-fighting then; dirty stuff. The city was a maze, and the bloody Mynans ... even the ones that couldn't fight wouldn't surrender. It was pathetic ... Children with sticks. After a while just the endless effort became exhausting.' He took a mouthful of wine. 'We were just hacking our way round corner after corner, and it all looked the same. Then I took my squad into this little courtyard, and before I knew it they'd pulled a net over at roof-level, and this squad of Mynans appeared out of nowhere behind us. They were taking us apart. Eventually it was only me on my feet. Then Gunthar showed up at roof-level.'

Sigurt's eyes were like stones.

'What did he do?' I asked.

'He rescued me.' He cast a sour glance at my face, but I'm not sure he even saw me. 'He blasted a hole through the netting and lifted me out by the scruff of my neck.'

I pushed myself up onto one elbow. 'He saved your life?'

'And the weevil boasted about it in the mess that night.'

I felt nauseous at his ingratitude. Was this what all my humiliation and pain was all about, after all? 'That's what you're angry about? That he saved your *life*?'

Sigurt seemed to register my existence properly, with a scowl. 'Don't you have any idea about honour, girl? Do you think it's something to be proud of, to be

overwhelmed by a mob of cripples and old women, and to be hoiked out of there like a sack of laundry? To be laughed at by all your peers?’

‘Would it have been better to die there?’

‘Yes!’ he shouted. ‘Of course it would, you fool - I thought our women knew better than that!’ His scowl became a sneer as he bared his teeth. ‘Maybe you’ve started to think like a slave after all.’

Sick with anger, I raised my open hand to him. He reacted fast, back-handing me so hard that he knocked me half off the bed. I nearly blacked out; the room was spinning, my head ringing. I slithered to the floor.

‘Don’t you think of trying that!’ Sigurt growled.

Everel would have understood what happened next. Lissi, who had been resting quietly on a post of the bed, flew up and buzzed around Sigurt, his motions jerky with agitation. My tame, gentle, loyal Lissi, frightened by my distress. He couldn’t sting, but he dashed into the Colonel’s face, his wings a blur. Sigurt recoiled with an oath, batting him away, and lifted his right hand.

‘No!’ I screamed, but the bright flash of energy was followed by the hiss of burning juices and Lissi exploded into fragments of blackened chitin. His transparent wings helioptered to the rug slowest of all.

The smell of burned wasp was enough to turn stomachs.

‘What?’ demanded Sigurt, his voice rising. ‘Why are you looking at me like that? I can buy you another one!’

But I kept on looking at him like that.

‘Get out!’ he exploded. ‘Get out of here! And send someone to clear this mess up!’

He forgave me though. The next day was set aside for a family reunion: Sigurt’s eldest son was visiting on leave from the military front in the Commonwealth. A grand dinner was laid on and members of the extended family invited. Lanterns were strung in the trees of the terraces in preparation for the long summer evening. The fountains were perfumed with rosewater and Grasshopper-kindens slaves with voices of exceptional sweetness sang from a balcony as the guests strolled about. Of course Sigurt would not miss the opportunity to show off his racing team so as the sun set they were scheduled to fly past in formation and show their paces.

I caught only glimpses of Sigurt’s son as the festivities wore on; my role was to wait quietly in the garden with a tray of gilded marchpane fancies and look decorative as the Wasp-kindens guests strolled about admiring the work of the gardeners. From what I saw the younger man seemed to be cast from his father’s mould. I wore my newest gift; a thick necklace of plaited gold thread that rested snug and heavy around my throat. Sigurt had put it on me personally that afternoon.

‘There,’ he’d said, his fingers stroking the nape of my neck. ‘That suits you better than the old one.’

What could I answer to that? It was costly doubtless, but it was still unmistakably a slave-collar.

‘You are...’ he’d mumbled, ‘precious, like this gold. To me. You know that.’

I’d lowered my eyes obediently and said nothing. Perhaps there was tenderness in Sigurt’s heart. But not enough of it.

The family Sigurt were relaxed and convivial, and the younger children chasing each other shrieking around the topiary, when Everel came up to me, his eyes averted diffidently from his masters. Of course they would not notice one more scurrying slave, regardless of the worried look in his eye.

‘Dagmar...’

I took a deep breath as he touched my arm.

‘Dagmar, talk to me. There’s a bottle of scent essence missing from my workroom.’ His voice was very low. ‘Do you know anything about it?’

‘Velvetbloom.’

‘Yes, that’s the one - Dagmar!’

‘You should leave.’

‘What have you *done*?’

I looked deliberately over his shoulder and he followed my gaze to where the ornamental fountains plashed and murmured, filling the air with a haze of perfumed water droplets that turned to rainbows in the afternoon sun. The scent of roses was glorious. Every squeeze of the pump sent atomies of rose-laden spirituous liquor into the warm air. It would have taken a keen nose to detect the smell of velvetbloom in that rich mix, though I’d poured the distilled oil into all five of the pre-prepared rosewater demijons.

‘Oh no,’ said Everel as he understood.

‘Run and hide,’ I whispered. ‘Pick a room with no windows and a heavy door. Though wasps will chew through wood.’

He locked my gaze with his own, horror in his wide brown eyes. ‘You can’t have...’

‘Hurry,’ I warned. ‘They’re nearly here.’ A flick of my chin indicated the ranks of racing wasps sweeping down toward us. Their dark bodies swooped in perfect formation, describing circles and loops to display the skills of their riders, skeins of mounted insects interweaving. There were maybe fifty of the beasts in all; the entire mews. Everel cast them one look, then his gaze swept the people on the terrace all about us: Wasp-kind and slaves. Men and women and children.

‘Oh Dagmar-’

‘Run.’

His hand closed around my wrist. I turned my palm over, opening it toward his chest. For a heartbeat he did not react. He looked stunned.

I hoped he could see the sorrow behind the implacable intent in my eyes. I did not desire to hurt the one man who’d showed me kindness.

Numbly, he let go of my wrist. Then he hurried away toward the buildings, stumbling, nearly falling over his feet

And now they are here. It is nearly done. The deep drone of the wasp wings has lifted to a higher, more frantic burr. Precision is lost, the formations fall apart. Wasps jag about, ignoring the riders trying to control them. The first jockey is thrown in mid-air. Sigurt gets to his feet, aware that something is badly wrong. The smile has vanished from his face. He knows wasps, and these are moving fast and erratic, their abdomens curled so their stings are fully unsheathed. Even before the venom, the strikes of those stings are going to be like the stabs of rapiers.

We stand in an invisible aura of death. It fills the air about us.

And I wait, proudly. This is my moment. This is the revenge of the Family Gunthar. It hangs on translucent wings over our heads, about to fall; a whirlwind of glossy chitin and elegantly curved needles.

It is beautiful.