

Camouflage

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

I'll start from when I got called up in front of Old Mercy - which was a journey of two days from the Sel'yon where I was stationed. You always got called to Mercy. He was not a soldier's soldier. He didn't go out to the battlefield to walk amongst the men, or even to giving his underperforming subordinates a dressing down.

Major Tancrev, that was his real name. He had a reputation, though: everyone knew that Old Mercy never had a man killed, no matter what: Captured enemies or those juniors he was disappointed in, he was meticulous in preserving their lives, often far beyond the point that even a skilled surgeon would have given them over. You understand, then, that his was not a *soft* reputation.

I was going, because Captain Kanen, who had been put in charge of the Sel'yon, had opened his eyes one morning and seen the sharp end of an arrow approaching at some speed. It was a common complaint just then. You'll not read about the Sel'yon in any of the histories of the war. It was a heavily wooded armpit on the map of the Commonweal, important to nobody save the wretched, stubborn, sneaky bastards who lived there.

Old Mercy was not even very old: a middle-aged man, strong-shouldered, square-jawed and fair-haired, quite the ladies' favourite. The more sedentary life of a tactical major was starting to show about his middle, but not as much as you might think. He held court at Yos, that had been Iose before we took it, and there he summoned the luckless sods like me who weren't doing well enough.

I found myself standing to attention in his office, whilst he reclined on a couch like some Spiderlands grandee. A Fly-kindens slave threw a scroll at my feet, and he beckoned for me to take it up.

"Casualty figures for your command, Lieutenant," he told me. I knew it all already, of course, but he liked making his point. "Why are these savages still troubling the Empire?"

This wasn't the first time someone from the Sel'yon detachment had stood before him. He knew full well what the problem was. Still, I trotted it out: "Sir, the Sel'yon is heavily forested, and we lack the troops to make a decisive strike against the natives."

"Your orders aren't even to strike, Lieutenant, just to *hold*, and yet you're losing men hand over fist."

"The local Dragonfly clan has holed up with a Mantis hold. They know the woods and the surrounding land very well, and that, with their Art, makes it difficult to *hold* them anywhere, sir. Our troops there aren't ideal for this sort of operation, sir. Give me another two hundred light airborne and-"

"Cannot be spared, Lieutenant. Not for something as insignificant as these woodsmen of yours. Lieutenant, had it been Captain Kanen standing here, then no doubt I would be having orders written giving you command of the detachment in his prolonged absence, together with my fervent wishes that you stabilise the situation before I have to request your presence personally. As Kanen has managed to evade true punishment for his incompetence I will give you a fair chance to prove that you are more able than he. One chance, Lieutenant."

Standing there before his iron stare I was closer to deserting than at any other time during the war. "Sir, I need more troops to hold the line at Sel'yon," I got out, staring straight ahead now because I could no longer meet his stare.

He made some dismissive gesture that I saw the shadow of from the corner of my eye. "I've sent you some pioneers. It's all that can be spared. You had best use them wisely, I think. On your way, Lieutenant, and have better news for me soon."

We reckoned were probably only between a hundred-fifty and two-hundred fighting men within the Se'yon, half the numbers we had. They were Mantis-kindens woodsmen and warriors, though, led by a Dragonfly headman and his family, and it would take more than two-to-one odds to clean them out. Instead, as the man said, our orders were to simply to keep them bottled up there. Had the headman been reasonable then we could have settled in for a relatively peaceful few months. Instead, the locals were holding a grudge, and were quite capable of making us pay for it. Scarcely a tenday went by without some scattering of Mantis-kindens creeping invisibly past our sentries and killing some of ours, double the guard as we might. We lost provisions, tents were burned down, and then Captain Kanen himself had been shot dead one morning from *within* the camp, in broad daylight. I wanted the manpower to move in and crush them, or perhaps some incendiaries to burn the entire Sel'yon to ash, but at this point the Empire had other hives to raid, and so we were being whittled down, and there was nothing we could do about it.

The quality of my troops was also not inspiring. About a third were light airborne, keen, skilled, swift and just the sort of soldier need to crack this particular nut. The balance, though, were auxillians from Sonn. The Beetles of Sonn had done well out of the Empire and won - or stolen - a great many concessions, but they were still obliged to put up troops for the army, same as everyone else. As it wouldn't do for the sons of Consortium magnates and factors to live in terror of conscription, the city elders' practice was to send the army their criminals, which meant a scattering of thieves and a great many debtors. So it was that the men lined up to defend against the ravages of the Sel'yon were tradesmen, factory workers, artisans, clerks and small-time merchants, and military training sat uneasily on them. They were equipped with chainmail hauberks, shields and maces, which would have given them some clout in a field battle, if their nerve held, but for a contested advance through tangled woodland they were just about the worst-suited men one could have asked for.

When I got back to the camp I sent for Sergeant Wanton, whose greatest contribution to the war effort was to never once find anything amusing in his own name. "Old Mercy says we should be expecting some pioneers," I told him.

"Yes, sir. They've arrived."

"How many?"

"Ten, sir."

I had hoped for a few more, but given Old Mercy's habitual generosity I'd not have been too surprised at the pioneers turning out to be two scruffy Fly-kindens. Ten was better than nothing, if they were any good.

Pioneers were an odd lot, and their position in army hierarchy was vague. Officially they were right at the bottom, beneath regular soldiers, on a par with unskilled auxillians like my Beetle-kindens, just above slaves. Unofficially those that lasted for any time at all tended to be good enough at what they did that the army handled them carefully. They were not quite soldiers, not quite mercenaries, not slaves but not entirely free. Their work required them to be out of reach of orders and officers most of the time, so they had more liberty than almost anyone in the army. At the same time, they were always suspect, and if they slipped up then the Rekef would take them with glee.

I had them lined up for inspection. They were a motley band. Half were Wasps - four tough-looking men, out of uniform, wearing armour of leather and dulled chitin under capes or long coats, not a piece of black and gold to be seen. There was also one woman, apparently the partner of one of the men. I groaned at that - setting one woman down in a camp of army soldiers was always trouble. Even Beetle-kind get the itch after a few years of campaigning, as plenty of Commonweal girls had found out. Of the balance, four were Fly-kind, who tended to make the best pioneers - fast, sneaky, good shots and they could see well at night, at least as well as the Commonwealers they would be up against. Most Flies avoid physical danger like paying taxes, but I knew full well that, when a Fly-kind gets put through the mill enough, you get a vicious little bastard at the end of the process.

The last of the pioneers stopped me dead, because Thorn Bug-kind will do that to you, and this one was uglier than most. The top of his head came about to my shoulder, but his back peaked a few inches higher, and of course there were the thorns on top of that. He was bundled in layers of ragged tunic and coat, a tattered scarf snagged about his neck, and a cloak over that, and every garment was patched and darned and then torn through again. What little I could see of his skin was shiny and nut-brown, but the thorns grew out every which way, twisted and irregular.. A lot of them were truncated, with the stumps sprouting a half-dozen smaller spikes like new shoots growing from a tree-stump, so that I wondered whether the creature had some uniquely Thorn Bug disease. The face was the worst. Even behind the stubble of small and large spines he was a nasty-looking member of the breed, long nose broken and reset crooked, with his pointed chin slanting the other way in a perverse kind of balance.

"And who in the pits are you?" I demanded, all military propriety slapped from me by the very sight.

"Auxillian soldier Cari, sir."

The creature's voice was low and husky, and undeniably a woman's. Nothing else in that bundle of rags and thorns suggested the feminine, most certainly not the face.

"Cari," I said weakly. "A Thorn Bug pioneer?"

"Try me, sir," Her eyes, in amongst all of that hideousness, were green and lively.

I didn't shrug, because imperial officers did not show that kind of casual weakness before their men. "It'll be the Commonwealers trying you, not me," was what I said, albeit a beat too late to be a proper riposte.

Our little slice of war started to change from that day. The pioneers knew their business. Cari knew *hers*, certainly.

Within two tendays, one of the Fly-kind and two of the Wasp pioneers were dead. The main force's deaths to the knives of the Sel'yon insurgents were just two, rather than the ten or twelve I'd have expected, and one of those two had been incautiously relieving himself outside the camp edge at night. The distrust and contempt that my light airborne and auxillians felt for the shabby pioneers was replaced by a wary respect. The female Wasp had not yet been raped or assaulted. And there was Cari.

She vanished for the first tenday, and everyone assumed she had deserted. I, on the other hand, had the sense to talk to the other pioneers. No, no, they assured me, she was out there. They didn't see her, not so much, but they found traces. They were just intercepting the Commonwealers as they tried to sneak past our pickets and cause mischief. Cari was in the deep Sel'yon, *hunting*.

One morning, a tenday and a half from when she arrived, I awoke to find she'd left me a present.

Enemy casualties were hard to estimate. Pioneer accounts were contradictory and the forest swallowed bodies. That morning, though, I was treated to a unique audience as I left my tent, yawning and rubbing my eyes. I nearly choked on my own yawn, I'll say, and my body slave screamed and bolted back inside. He was a twitchy little Grasshopper from the East-Empire, and he never did have much nerve.

There were heads: nine of them, on poles, neat as you like. One was Dragonfly, the rest were Mantis. They watched me with glassy disinterest.

Sergeant Wanton explained. "She pitched up before dawn, sir, with a sack. Had all these set up by first light and off again."

"Did it occur to you I might not *want* to see a lot of severed heads first thing in the morning, sergeant?"

Wanton had assiduously practiced a sergeant's proper lack of expression. "No sir, it did not."

I dismissed him and strode down the line of decapitation. Strangely enough, the more I looked on those slack, drained faces, with the day's first flies bumbling about them, the more I *did* like them. I had been fighting a losing war for too long. It was about time I had proof that the blood being shed wasn't all ours.

"Glad you approve, sir," came the voice. I stopped dead, only then realising that I had been grinning back at the dead heads. There was nobody about.

There was. I only saw her because she moved. The Sel'yon was a fecund place, and though we were on its edge, and had trampled our campsite flat besides, there were always nettles and ferns and cane springing up, growing at appalling rates. What I had taken as a stand of bracken had shuffled a place closer. Armed with that, I saw her.

She had foliage all over, knotted and twined about her into a meshed cape of green and fading brown. Her shape, that had always been at the edge of a human figure anyway, was lost in it. The eye passed over her and consigned her to the static and the vegetable. There was more to it than that, of course. I knew all too well how some kinden could call on their Art to hide them, for the Mantids of the Sel'yon were keen practitioners of it. I had not realised that Thorn Bugs owned to the same Art. Only now, seeing her afresh, did I note the crossbow over her shoulder. The dead Commonwealers had eyes better than mine, but they must never have seen her coming. I was glad she was on our side, and never so glad as just then when she appeared out of nowhere..

"Auxillian," I acknowledged her, with admirably steady tones.

She was watching me with a direct stare unbecoming of an auxillian, but then it was hard to actually look her in the eyes without flinching at the knotted carnage that surrounded them. I recovered my professional bearing.

"Who do these represent?"

"The Dragonfly lad there's a nephew of the headman. The Mantids... whoever I could catch. They're getting a mite less happy about just jaunting off into the woods."

"And you took the heads why?"

"You don't need to ask that, surely, sir?"

I wanted to slap her down for impertinence, but slapping down a Thorn Bug is always a self-destructive activity. She was standing just the other side of the row of posts now, directly across from me.

"You know how superstitious these Commonwealers are, sir," she said, her voice just a whisper coming from between those twisted teeth. "Does no harm to make them fear."

I sent to Old Mercy with reports of our progress in holding the line, hoping for a quiet life, and perhaps a minor commendation. What I did get proves that a little success can be worse for your health than any amount of failure, because Mercy decided that he wanted us to take the Sel'yon, or at least start making inroads into it. Was he sending us more men? A dozen heavy infantry arrived with his message, not sufficient to make any difference and yet arrogant and argumentative enough to start really getting on the backs of the Auxillians.

I had my orders, for all I knew they were a bad idea. There was no way we were going to catch them much by surprise, despite my having the pioneers sweeping the forest fringe for their scouts before we formed up. I put the Beetles on the wings, the newly-arrived heavies in the centre, and I made our front as broad as I dared, mostly only two men deep, and we moved in. The airborne ranged on either side and ahead, but the trees denied them their wings half the time. Still, they were used to fighting in skirmishing order, at range or in close as the situation demanded. If my whole force had been airborne I'd have cleared out the Sel'yon myself long before.

The Commonwealers had our number and no mistake. They started putting arrows at his from ten yards in, a nuisance at first, a menace pretty soon after. The heavies and the Auxillians were decently armoured, but any veteran will tell you about those big Commonweal bows. A clean shot could go through mail and still leave enough punch in the arrow to make a mess of the man inside. The Commonwealers didn't stand still, but they knew the woods better than we did and they could move faster. They were behind us soon enough, as well. If we held together we were slow and they picked at us. When the airborne, or individual maniples of the heavier troops, rose to the bait and went for them, then the Commonwealers were always there in force to make them regret it.

I had a decision then, to push on as per orders, or to fall back and bare my throat for Old Mercy's knife. I ordered the advance, such as it was, to continue. I was not one of my more inspired moments, but I was only a lieutenant, and more used to relaying tactical decisions than actually originating them.

Things went to pieces pretty soon after that. Our line was broken up by some precise strikes by parties of Commonwealers, mostly Mantis-kindens appearing from the trees and getting to blade range before anyone was the wiser. The arrows followed hard on them, once the Beetles' shields were in disarray. I sent messengers up and down the line with instructions to keep it together, but the Commonwealers had a habit of picking them off, and the entire advance turned into a series of skirmishes, with most isolated groups independently deciding to pull back out of the forest. Goes to show that soldiers have more sense than their officers, some times.

I was with the Wasp heavies when they came in for their battering. There was a feint of a half dozen Mantis-kindens at us with spears and swords, whilst a larger force assailed the Beetles down the line. Then it turned out *that* was the feint, was we were suddenly up to our ears in Mantis-kindens. The enemy were unarmoured but swift and very good, and the heavies did their best, but they were beset from all sides. I ordered the retreat and we began to back out, hoping that we'd run into some of the Auxillians we might have outstripped. Then I got an arrow through the leg and went down.

I lay there, expecting to find a Mantis about to cut my throat at any given moment - don't believe all that rot you hear about their vaunted bloody honour, they'll gut you without a second

thought, any chance they get. Either they had followed up the retreating heavies, or they were off fighting someone else. I was left with a few corpses for company and a long shaft gone right through my thigh.

I couldn't muster my wings at all. Having a shaft through you like that will play hob with your Art. I tried crawling, but the arrow stuck out too far both ways, and each time I snagged it on something I nearly passed out. The same applied for when I tried to snap the head off, which is what you're supposed to do, I've heard. Also, there was surprisingly little blood, and pulling the arrow out might change that in radical and unwelcome ways. I lay there, feeling my life creep slowly out from what, on a properly ordered battlefield, would not be a serious injury. The night was coming on, I knew, and Commonweal nights are cold.

I would like to say that I took this all very philosophically, knowing that it was my own failure as an officer that had got me in that predicament, but frankly I was cursing Old Mercy every which way. If you ever needed to prove to some Moth or Commonwealer that all that magic stuff doesn't work, then take me as evidence. If it was even slightly possible to put a curse on someone then Old Mercy would have burned up on the spot with the fire I was spitting about him inside my head.

Then there was someone stepping very near me and I stopped even those thoughts, as if they might somehow have betrayed me, led an enemy to me. I looked about, but for a moment I saw nobody. Then I realised that the nobody I was seeing was Cari. She was crouched right by me, festooned with greenery, blending in with skill and Art. Within the cocoon of her stolen foliage I saw her crossbow. She was scanning the trees around us.

"What are you doing here, soldier?" I got out, though my voice (so fierce in my head when I was biting at Old Mercy) was just a croak.

"When you didn't come back, sir, I thought I'd see if I could find your body. Didn't want them to, you know..." She made a chopping motion with her off hand.

"Get me out of here," I rasped at her.

She considered me dubiously. "Dark now, sir, and you can bet they'll be hunting. Bastards for the dark, Mantis-kindens. No way I could keep quiet with you over my shoulder. Besides..." I thought I saw her grin, "Don't reckon you'd survive my carrying you anywhere. Now, come morning the other pioneers are going to come out and look for me, and we'll get you out of the woods. I reckon you and I'd better keep company here 'til then." After a pointed pause she added, "Sir."

I wanted to be angry with her, and to assert an officer's authority, but I was cold and weak and probably the first person in the Empire's history who's actually been glad to see a Thorn Bug. I said - I could not stop myself - "You'll stay with me." It was a wretched, whining thing to say, and said in a whining way.

"As much as I can, sir," she said softly.

I kept losing her in the dark, with nothing of the human in her outline. Then she was kneeling right by me, close enough that a couple of her spikes grated on my armour. "Got something for you to drink, sir. It'll take the pain off a bit."

Of course as an officer you never drink anything a soldier offers you, whatever their kindens. Notwithstanding, I gulped it down and, true enough, everything seemed a great deal less urgent shortly thereafter. Lying there in the forest, surrounded by dead soldiers and with a nightmare vision as my ministering guardian, suddenly felt almost idyllic.

I muttered something to that effect, but Cari was busying herself about my leg, and taking long enough that eventually I propped myself up on my elbows to have a look. The moon was up

by then, and fighting its way through the trees with as much difficulty as we had done in the daytime. She had snapped the arrowhead off - because I could see it lying beside my leg, and as I watched she yanked the shaft free. No amount of numbing potion could quite cover that, and I yelped at it. Instantly she was still, her crossbow back to hand, waiting and watching. After a long pause she set to bandaging, and I stared at the spectacle, utterly absorbed by it. I had never seen anyone make such hard work of the task, nor had I seen Cari quite so awkward at anything. The simple act of wrapping a bandage three times about my leg and then tying it took her forever, as the cloth continually snagged and caught on her. I had a feeling that she must have left a fair few scratches on my hide, too, but it didn't seem of pressing concern just then.

"Must make life awkward, all those spikes," I told her, finding the words slightly hard to get out. "Must be all sorts of things you can't do."

She went still, but not in the same way as before. It was like a flinch, that stillness. Something retreated inside her, where all those sharp points could keep it safe.

"Mind you," I went on, because the words, once started, seemed to have a life of their own, "you've got it worse, you've got that, whatever-it-is you've got. I've seen you. Some kind of disease of the spikies. All of them gone wrong, eh? Sorry, I'm sorry for that. You're a good soldier. Shame, really."

Slowly she started on the dressing again. "It's not a disease," she said.

"Well what is it?" I have no idea why I cared, but it seemed to matter a great deal at the time. "You people, Thorn Bug-people, you're born all spickly anyway, but you were born even *more* spickly? Is that what is it?"

"We're not born like this. The world is not quite as cruel to our mothers as all that. It's an Art that develops early, though." She was whispering, scanning the darkness yet again. "But this isn't the way I was born, sir."

"Oh no? So tell me, soldier. That's an order."

There was a long silence, long enough that I forgot whether I had actually said the words or not, but at last she spoke.

"When I was just a slave, and not an auxillian, sir... when I was just a slave, a man decided he wanted to know what it was like to lie with one of my kind. Obviously there were... challenges involved. We are not easily raped, sir." She shifted position slightly. "I understand it was for a bet, or maybe some kind of game. It took the artificers hours to file me down to something vulnerable enough that he could have his fun. In truth, I don't think he enjoyed it much. More than me, though."

I had about a hundred rejoinders swimming about in my head, most of which would be standard army issue, concerning slaves, free men and lesser kinden. I didn't say any of them.

"I got into the army soon after. Better Auxillian than civilian, right?" she went on, her voice quiet and brittle, but just reaching me. "Pioneers suit me. Don't see many people, in Pioneer Corps. Can be your own officer, most of the time."

"You're very good at it." I don't know why, even in my state, I thought that weak praise was what the situation needed.

"I like blending in."

I laughed, just a coughing chuckle. I couldn't stop myself.

She shrugged, a soft rustle of greenery. "Sometimes it's a blessing to look like something else, lose your outline, be overlooked. And besides, there's no better way of getting close to your prey. You can't deny me that."

"I wouldn't want to." My leg was starting to throb as her draft began to wear off. There was still a fair amount of the night to go. I was considering whether it befitted an officer of the imperial army to beg more potion from an Auxillian when there was a clack, and a choked gasp from between the trees. It took me a moment to realise that Cari had loosed her crossbow. A moment later she was gone from my side, though I couldn't have told you where she went.

There were sounds in the dark. I hunched myself partway to sitting, a shaking hand directed out at the night. I saw nothing.

Then, just as I was about to collapse back down, someone jumped me. I got a knee to my chest punching the breath from me, and my hand was struck aside. I had a glimpse of a lean, angular Mantis woman with her dagger already drawn back, her face utterly expressionless. The only sound I made was a panicked inhalation.

Then she was thrown off me by an invisible hand, rolling over to lie still, all with barely a sound herself. In the moonlight the moth-scale fletchings of the crossbow bolt stood proud of her body.

Cari was back with me shortly after that. "Got them all, sir," she reported. "Just three of them come to look over the bodies. Maybe take a few trophies, hey?"

I refrained from saying that using an officer as bait was generally frowned upon in the army. I was suddenly extremely away that if she, who clearly had few fond memories of the Empire or the Wasps, chose to make me one more casualty of war, there would be little I could do about it.

"Don't worry, sir," she told me, still staring off into the darkness. "I'll watch over you."

Old Mercy was not much pleased by the affair, as you can imagine. It was only because of the Beetles that I was able to salvage any of it. We lost about one in three of the regular Wasp-kindens, but the Beetle Auxillians got out with less than one in ten casualties, thanks to a combination of durability and common sense. I was thus able to dress the whole disaster up as a scouting exercise and repeat my doomed requests for a stronger force with which to make the assault.

A tenday later, enter three hundred light airborne.

I was as surprised as anyone, but there they were, spoiling for a fight. Apparently Old Mercy had decided to smash the Sel'yon once and for all, and our 'progress', which existed almost entirely within my reports, was enough for him to secure the release of troops who had been idling elsewhere. My orders were for a swift, merciless raid, leave no opposition alive. With the new troops I reckoned we could give it a decent try.

I conferred with my sergeants, old and new, and laid out an order of battle to make best use of our new resources. The Commonwealers would know we had been reinforced, so no sense waiting around. We would allow the new arrivals two days to rest up and get their bearings, and then we'd be back into the trees.

After I'd packed the sergeants off their their orders, I did not call Cari into my tent. One of the Wasp-kindens pioneers, the one with the wife, already had my orders. It would not be fitting for me to consult with a mere unranked Auxillian.

No, so instead, I sought her out, which was easier said than done. I limped all over camp looking for her, and at the last she obviously heard about it, because she found me.

"You've heard." I wasn't quite looking at her, just standing there gazing over the camp. Anyone watching me would not have seen me conferring with a subordinate. Perhaps they would not have seen Cari at all. "What do you think?"

"Have the pioneers sent ahead of the line. We'll break up their positions, spoil their ambushes. Before we came, sir, the 'Wealers had a lot of home ground advantage, but we've been chipping away at that, and with the men you've got now..."

"You think it'll work?" A Lieutenant of the imperial army seeking assurance from a shabby little Thorn Bug wench. "You know Mantis-kindens..."

"I do, and they'll go down fighting to the last one of them, no doubt, but sir, there are perhaps eighty of them, maybe less. Send the pioneers ahead. Let the airborne get stuck in everywhere the enemy appear, mop up with the Auxillians."

After that, I thought for a while and then sent for the leader of the pioneers, to amend his orders.

We went in on schedule, stings blazing. I had the light airborne set a punishing pace, which was easy for me to say since I wasn't capable of keeping up with them. I went in with the Auxillians, but I told Sergeant Wanton not to stop until he was in sight of the Sel'yon fort. I felt I was being somewhat optimistic, in this, but once the orders were given and the men sent off, it was out of my hands.

My experience of that battle was basically a grueling march through a wood, at the best pace I and the Beetles could set. We didn't see a single live enemy all the way, and everything I know, I got from reports. The short story is that the imperial army excelled itself, admittedly with odds heavily in its favour. The light airborne attacked in force, swarming the enemy every time that they showed themselves, taking losses but not letting up. The slightly longer story is that those enemy were usually visible to be swarmed because one or other of the pioneers had already stirred them up. We lost three more pioneers in that action, but they did their job, the job that Cari had set out for them. They were the only soldiers we had who could meet the enemy on the Commonwealers' terms, spoil their ambushes and draw our airborne to them.

Two hours later my Auxillians and I drew up alongside Wanton's airborne, and the fort was indeed within our view. I was exhausted and, although I stepped out to greet Wanton on my own two feet, I had been leaning on Beetle shoulders for a lot of the way. Strange how sometimes we feel we have to make more of a show for our own people than for the Auxillians.

As ordered, the airborne had halted their advance to allow the heavies to catch up. Indeed, the pace of the airborne had been such that they had been in time to see the fort gates closing as they arrived. Wanton reckoned there couldn't be many people left in the fort, given how many of the Mantis-kindens had gone down during the advance - never easily, but stings and numbers will deal with most things. The Dragonfly headman who was at the heart of this, however, was unaccounted for, so he and his family and closest retainers were likely still holed up there.

The fort itself was nothing worthy of the name, a thing of slanted wooden walls and mounded earth, all built up around and between three trees. The base was broad, the top narrow and ringed with spikes of splintered cane, and there were plenty of arrowslits. Not a joy to take over ground or air, therefore, but such places are only as good as their defenders. It was time for the Auxillians to get their hands dirty.

There was sporadic arrow-shot as we stormed the gates, but the Beetles had come with big shields, and the airborne put enough stingfire into the walls to dissuade any sharpshooters. One of the Auxillian company artificers set a simple petard against the gates and then they made their hasty retreat. No doubt the Commonwealers thought they'd driven us off and were celebrating, because precious few shafts were sent after the Beetles. Shortly after that there was a

muted boom, the metal pot of the petard flew off into the trees, and when the smoke cleared, the gates were punched in as though some giant foot had stamped on them.

In went the airborne, and there was a brief, vicious skirmish: a half-dozen Mantis-kindens dead for nine of ours. Any enemy left had retreated to an inner bailey, another slanted wooden box with arrowslits. At this point I was considering just burning them out, but Sergeant Wanton pointed out that there were no arrows coming at us.

"Maybe there are no archers inside?" I wondered, and then, "Maybe they want to surrender." Certainly the list of possible outcomes that saw any of the defenders remaining alive was growing slim. "You're sure nobody escaped by air after we got here?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Sir!" one of the other airborne shouted. The gates were opening.

The Dragonflies had indeed fled into their fort, at the end, I later discovered, although they had left their Mantis-kindens followers outside to die. However, even as they closed the door on our troops, they had not known that they were already infiltrated.

Standing in the gateway was a familiar figure, all over spikes and stripped of her usual cloak of leaves. In the crook of one arm she held her crossbow, and the other hand was lifting a head high. I could not know for sure, but I was willing to lay odds that the twisted features were those of the Dragonfly headman who had made the Sel'yon such a miniscule thorn in the Empire's side.

We cheered her then, first the Auxillians and the soldiers of my original command, but soon enough the newer arrivals too.

What impact any of this had on the war as a whole I can't say. I don't imagine that Commonwealer princes were running up and down the halls of their palaces, decrying the loss of the Sel'yon. Old Mercy, though was very pleased indeed. After my detailed report I received, by return, a terse note informing me that he would be taking the unprecedented step of actually coming over to inspect the troops and congratulate them. He wanted them ready for the parade ground within two days, which was not going to endear him to them, and he particularly wanted to see the Pioneer Corps, of whom I had spoken so highly.

I had them ready for his inspection. He came with a sizeable escort of his own: medium infantry and a few sentinels, as though he was expecting a Commonweal resurgence at any point. As I say, his usual style was to demand people came to him, not actually go visit them. Possibly he'd forgotten what the outside world looked like.

I'd got my men into some semblance of order. The Beetles polished up nicely, although the airborne are never easy to keep in line. I had Sergeant Wanton stalking between the ranks with a stick, ready to belabour anyone joking with their neighbour, but even so there was a fair amount of shifting and shuffling going on. Major Tancrev, Old Mercy, had billeted his own men, and now he made his appearance, dressed in enameled mail with a cloak gusting behind him. I met him, and followed him down the ranks, just a step behind him, answering his occasional question about the troops. Despite his promise of congratulations, his praise was sparse, but at least he didn't actually have anyone mutilated for having dirty boots, so I was counting the whole exercise as a success.

Then we got to the pioneers, those that were left. They were not parade ground material, but they stared straight ahead as the major inspected them: the sole Wasp-kindens, the two Flies, then Cari.

"Well, Thorn Bug, eh?" he said, with that higher officer's infallible knack of stating the obvious. I had praised her in my report, because I've got at least that much decency, but Old Mercy did not personally commend lesser kinden, and so we passed on. Just as we were about to look at the Auxillians, though, he remarked to me, "I had a Thorn Bug once..." with a curl of his lip. I knew then. From his tone it could just have meant that he'd had one serving under his command, but I *knew*.

I could have done something. The whole business was in my hands and at my discretion. As a lieutenant in the imperial army I had a duty.

That night, after everyone had turned in, I got drunk enough that I didn't have to think about what the morning would bring, what I *knew* it would inevitably bring, barring any action from me.

She was gone before dawn, of course, and I never heard tell of her since, but who keeps track of Thorn Bugs, honestly? Old Mercy's people turned the camp upside down looking for him, of course, but I didn't help. I played the ignorant card and bumbled about getting in their way. Only towards noon did one of them realise that the number of Cari's grisly trophies was up by one on the day before, a new post added to her collection. The rest of him we never found.