

### **Heirs of the Blade deleted scenes**

*What follows is most of an entire subplot from the original draft of Heirs of the Blade which was cut because, fond of it as I was, it wasn't really contributing to the plot and the book was extremely long. It can't be readily fit back into the book, as the plot got reworked, the section with Tynisa meeting Gaved and Salme Alain in Siriell's Town being added.*

*These sections are unedited and uneven, and even if they had made the final cut they would probably have looked considerably different, so be kind.*

*Firstly, after arriving at Suon Ren, Tynisa and Gramo go to petition Prince Felipe's seneschal, Lioste Coren, who in this version was a rather more pleasant individual, but their conversation is interrupted by a stranger:*

"Lowlander!" the woman gasped, chest heaving. She was clearly not used to the exertion, a thin, angular woman with her hair gone a uniform dark grey, old enough that Spider glamour could not hide it. Tynisa and Lioste Coren waited patiently for her to gather herself.

"The airship," the Spider said at last. "The Beetle-kindens' airship..." Staring at Tynisa, seeing a Spider-kindens dressed in arming jacket, breeches and boots as a Mantis might dress, her face fell. "I've missed it. Please, has it gone already?" She was shaking all of a sudden, and not from her exhaustion.

"Its master will return in a couple of days," Tynisa assured her. "After that he heads south."

The woman took a moment to absorb this, and a vastly relieved expression spread across her face. "Fates be praised!" she exclaimed. "You've just arrived, young woman?"

Tynisa nodded wordlessly.

"Then take my advice, leave with me," the newcomer instructed her. "These are no lands for Spider-kindens, not just now."

Tynisa's heart, which had been reserving its judgment since the woman appeared, began to sink. "And why? I have been received with nothing but courtesy." She nodded at Lioste Coren, who was frowning at the Spider-kindens woman.

"Things have changed," the newcomer said direly. Her eyes found the little huddle of stone buildings on the edge of Suon Ren. "That must be the embassy I've heard of. Stone walls. Stone walls are good. We must go there, now."

She stormed off towards Gramo's domain without waiting for an answer. Tynisa raised her eyebrows at Lioste.

"I have no knowledge of what she says," the seneschal stated, seeming honestly baffled. "There have always been some few Spider-kindens in the Commonweal, those whose dealings to the south obliged them to find a new home, and who preferred our hospitality to your people's. Prince Felipe, most of all, has kept an open court to visitors of other kindens." His expression was solely troubled, and Tynisa could read no deceit in it. "We should see what the woman means. Perhaps a gang of brigands is seeking out your kindens. The prince will need to know."

When they reached the embassy, Gramo already had the Spider-kindens woman sat down, and was heating a kettle up over the fire. He nodded pleasantly as Tynisa and the seneschal came in.

“Poor Feanissa here has had something of a fright,” the Beetle remarked to them.

“That is your name?” Lioste asked, and the newcomer nodded.

*She is not afraid of him*, Tynisa noted, and it could not be that she believed Tynisa or Gramo, two strangers, would protect her. “This is Lioste Coren, seneschal to Prince Shah,” she introduced the man. “He would very much like to know what troubles you. We all would, I think.”

“So you can send Mercers to deal with it?” Feanissa asked darkly.

“If we had any. We have those at Suon Ren who can fight, and have done so in the past,” Lioste told her. “If that will serve, so. If not, then I shall send messengers for more aid.”

The Spider eyed him bleakly for a while, unto Gramo had decanted her a steaming bowl of something. Then she sipped appreciatively, nodded to the Beetle as to a servant, and said, “You know of Sel Mare, seneschal?”

Lioste nodded. “The commune,” he identified. When he saw Tynisa’s expression at the unfamiliar word he explained, “At Sel Mare, on the lakeshore, there has been a small colony of your kinden for many years. No more than a dozen at any time. Exiles, I am told. They called themselves the Seleuciel Commune.” He turned his gaze on Feanissa. “Most Spider-kindin in our lands live singly, avoiding their own kind. Do I take it there has been some falling out? If you have raised your hand against your fellows then I must detain you for a magistrate or the prince’s justice.”

“*I?*” Feanissa demanded. “I have done nothing. I am the last! The commune is no more. They are all dead save for me.”

“Was it bandits?” Tynisa pressed her.

“Bandits!” Feanissa scoffed. “Do you think a half-dozen Spider-kindin could not turn aside any number of bandits?” She bared her teeth in a humourless smile. “Monsters, girl. Beasts came from the lake. First poor Dalris was found dead, savaged and torn apart. He was always incautious. We mourned him but told each other he’d brought it on himself. Three days later the main attack came. They stormed the Commune, tearing apart everything in their search for us. Half of us died that night. The rest of us sought refuge with the people of Sel Mare, fools that we were. We thought we were safe. Another two nights without incident, we were shaken, but we thought it was over, whatever it had been. Then they came again, killed those that tried to defend us, killed my friends...” Emotion welled up inside the woman but she ruthlessly fought it down. “Two of us fled. They came from the lake, those things. Just animals, but they acted like no beasts I have ever known. We fled south, away from the water. Three nights later, when we thought we were safe, I woke to find my friend gone, just a trail dragging away from our camp. It led to a pond. There was no body. I knew then that I could not rest. Since then it has followed me.”

“It? They?” interrupted Lioste, almost angrily. “*What* has followed you?”

The Spider glared right back at him. “A ghost, a spirit,” she spat. “Something one of your speakers has raised up, perhaps, and not locked away.”

“You said there were animals...,” Tynisa prompted uncertainly. She caught Gramo’s eye and saw the Beetle looking concerned but quite bewildered.

“Things from the water, every time,” Feanissa confirmed, “but different things. Only their motivation was the same. Something rode them, something drove them to kill – and to kill *us*. Those that got in their way, they speared and cut and slew, but always it was our kind the creatures were after. If the people of Sel Mare had stood aside, not one drop of their blood would have been shed. I must leave here. Whatever moves them, it cannot follow a flying machine. I

hope it cannot..." She looked about herself, suddenly fearful. "And stone walls, stone walls, yes. You must shelter me here."

"Oh course, you are more than welcome," said Gramo weakly. "I shall prepare you a room. And food, drink, whatever you require."

Feanissa nodded, seeming abruptly exhausted by it all. As the tension tentatively began to release its hold on her, she seemed to age another ten years, her face haggard as soon as she let it relax.

"Come with me," she waned Tynisa. "You are not safe."

"I will send a messenger for the prince," Lioste decided. "Sel Mare is within his domain, though there has been no prince-minor in those lands for some years. It is always the case that, when the hand of the nobility is lifted, dark things creep in. The prince and his Mercers shall solve this."

Feanissa's expression held no faith in any of it.

As soon as Gramo had her room ready, Feanissa had retired to it with the stated intention of returning to human society as soon as something to eat was ready. Gramo did not seem remotely put out by the presumption. On the contrary, the unaccustomed abundance of guests was obviously a source of great pleasure for him.

"What about the people of Suon Ren?" Tynisa pressed him. "Surely they don't just ignore you?"

"Oh they're very good. The prince invites me to his castle sometimes. There are recitals, music, theatricals... Hunts and dances also, although I am somewhat unsuited to such pursuits. It's just," the old Beetle smiled wistfully, "I can never *be* one of them. It is not that they keep me out... I cannot fly with them, cannot think with them. I have become as much a Commonwealer as any son of Collegium, but it is not enough sometimes. So when I have as guests those who know the Lowlands, I confess I take best advantage of it."

"Well it doesn't sound like you'll have Feanissa for very long, anyway," Tynisa noted. "What do you make of her story?" She pitched her voice low enough that the woman hopefully would not hear.

Gramo shrugged. "Perhaps she's right. Perhaps there is some angry spirit."

The response baffled Tynisa. "I don't believe in ghosts and spirits," she stated. Inwardly something twisted awkwardly at the thought. Tisamon, her father, had believed in such things, and in his care she had seen too much, on occasions: sights that still hung on her mind the next morning, that sunlight could not dispel. She had been brought up and tutored by the practical people of Collegium, though, who believed in nothing that artifice and philosophy could not establish with experimental proof. She had learned every year in College that there was no such thing as magic, for all that the old Inapt kinden might claim otherwise.

She had seen horrors in the shadows of the Darakyon forest, since then, and in Jerez...

But magic was an excuse, a convenient excuse to cover all manner of crimes. *A magician made me do it*. No, that was cowardice, and sitting here with Gramo she decided that *one* of them had better not believe in spirits, and if he was unequal to the task then she would have to take up the standard of reason.

"These Spider-kindens were exiles. Spiders have enemies with long memories, everyone knows," she pointed out. "Some old rival of theirs must have found them. Beasts can be motivated by Art, or by training. There is no need to raise up some spectre to account for this. As a College man, you must see that?"

Gramo gave a weak smile. “Of course, of course, and yet... I see the Dragonfly-kind live every day of their lives as though magic was a real force, as potent and wild as the weather. I have come to terms with it. I do not pretend to understand it but, at the same time, I will not mock them for it. It seems to serve them well enough.”

*Until the Wasps reached them*, was Tynisa’s thought, but she left it unspoken.

“Who can say what may be true, far away from Collegium’s white walls?” the old Beetle murmured softly, and there was a young man’s longing in his voice, for far vistas and lost secrets, for the world to be something grander than it was.

He cooked, after that, busying away with some kind of thin soup, with bread and honey and crisp, raw vegetables, putting together a bizarre assortment of hot and cold, sour and sweet, the variety broad, the quantities mean. He served all on a mat he had laid out, that was woven of many-coloured rushes and then somehow lacquered over. Just as he was laying out the many bowls of it, Feanissa deigned to join them.

She sat at the mat readily enough to eat like a Commonwealer, and she ate heartily as well, clearly a woman whose priorities had not been feeding herself for the last few days.

“How far is it from here to...” Tynisa had to pause a moment to recall the name, “Sel Mare.” The Commonweal places all blurred together in her mind.

“I rode part of the way, walked the last three days. About a tenday in all,” the Spider got out between bites.

Gramo was pouring them each a bowl of something amber-coloured and hot, which must be the vaunted Commonweal tea, that Allanbridge had said was so very different. Tynisa sampled it, and found it rich and savoury, with an aftertaste of some herb she was not familiar with, more like a clear soup than anything else.

“Why not ride all the way?” she pressed.

Feanissa’s hand, reaching for a stick of some pale root, froze. “The horse died,” she said flatly, and with sufficient emphasis as to make it plain that natural causes were not involved. “I have outrun them so far, but they were always behind me. Some nights I heard the wings, heard the creatures thumping to earth. Clumsy, they’re clumsy away from the water, but so very determined. I’ve never known anything like it, never.”

Gramo put a hand out to touch her shoulder in sympathy, a Beetle gesture that would have been unthinkable down in the Spiderlands, but Feanissa seemed to appreciate.

Tynisa’s mind was working. *Spirits and ghosts indeed*. In her mind she was imagining some cadre sent from the Spiderlands to erase the last trace of house Seleuciel. Some enmities burned fierce enough that neither time nor distance could cool them.

“Tell me,” she asked, “Why did you come here, you and the others of the Seleuciel? What drove you this far?”

Feanissa put on her haughty look once more. “Things became... untenable in Siennis. You know the Lowlands, surely. There are precious few places where one might live a life of civilised comfort, you know? I could never be having with the Beetles...” She slowed, darting a guilty look at Gramo.

The self-styled ambassador waved the insult away. “Oh not for all tastes, I know.” He chuckled at a sudden thought. “I’m not sure I’d be comfortable in Collegium myself, if I was to return. The pace of life, you know...”

Feanissa nodded, obviously glad to be off the hook. “Well Daera said, why not here, and so we went north and north, and imposed ourselves on one headman after another, until we hit Sel Mare and it seemed the right place to stay...”

“And you never looked back? You never wanted revenge?” Tynisa asked her.

For a moment it seemed that Feanissa would retreat behind her imperious facade, and that would be that, but then something seemed to give inside her and her look became rueful. “My dear girl, who were we to think of revenge, and for what? We were just servants.”

Tynisa stared at her. “Servants?”

“No more,” Feanissa admitted. “Oh House Seleuciel goes on, I have no doubt, after doing away with our old mistress, and we, her poor household, eking out our days, our decades, far enough from home that we might never prove an embarrassment to the new regime. More than twenty years gone by, and we were...” Her eyes glistened with the memories. “I suppose we were content, to be no more than we were, to no longer be underfoot in the dance. And now...”

Abruptly her gaze refocused. “And you?” she demanded. “What drives you so far?”

“Three dead men,” Tynisa told her flatly, and left it at that.

*A little retrospective later (in this version there were several additional flashback sections dealing with Achaeos, Tisamon and Salma)*

What woke her was the door breaking in, but she was not aware of that at first, knowing only that she was standing in her shift at the foot of the bed, and that the hilt of her rapier was in her hand, as natural as breathing.

*What have I done?* For she could not see, just then, whether the blade’s dark metal was slick with blood. There was no rage in her, though. Only that convinced her that the bloodshed was not already over.

Then there was a final crash from beyond her room, as the embassy’s main door was torn entirely off its frame, and she heard Feanissa scream. In that instant the bloodied figure of Tisamon was there, as though silhouetted by lightning, and she almost heard his voice exhorting her to *move!*

She was out into the embassy’s central room on the instant, but wasted precious moments trying to grasp what she was seeing. Her eyes were keen in the near-dark, but the air was busy with insects blundering and buzzing, even though Gramo had been careful to extinguish the lamps. One bounced off her shoulder, then swung back and struck her arm. The savage jab of pain as it rammed its beak into her skin brought her back to herself.

Something huge was lumping itself through the shattered doorway, its carapace so broad that it had tilted itself on one side to fit. She had a brief impression of a great curved back, and a wide, flat head with scissoring mandibles, before it was wholly in and righting itself. Some kind of beetle, she saw, but instead of rising up and scuttling for her, it slithered forwards on its belly towards the door of the room set aside for Feanissa, splayed legs almost paddling it along. It was fast, despite that, and had almost made the door before Tynisa’s lunge brought her to it.

To her horror the rapier’s point, which had in its time sheared through metal armour without bending, skidded off the thing’s shell. More of the little fliers rebounded from her, always circling back, madly uncoordinated in the air and still trying to attack her. Something crunched underfoot.

Overhead, she heard a scrabbling as something landed on the roof.

She drove at the beetle again, and this time cut one of its legs away close to its body. *That* got its attention. It spun in place with ferocious speed and lunged at her, sending her stumbling back across the room to be out of reach of those razoring jaws. Swatting at the fliers with her free hand she feigned at it, as she would a human opponent. It simply hauled itself forwards, a swift,

unstoppable rush for a few feet before the drag of its abdomen stopped it. With nowhere else to go Tynisa jumped, got a foot on the sloping purchase of its back, and found herself behind it. Almost in Feanissa's doorway. Even as it turned again she had its measure. That short dash was all it could manage. She extended her arm, giving herself the most reach she could, and studied its blunt head for where best to strike.

It was then that Feanissa bolted from her room,

"No!" Tynisa shouted at her, but then the beetle rushed her. She could not have said whether she or the Spider-kindens was its target, but she managed to slap Feanissa aside.

The rapier found its way. While her mind was occupied saving the other woman, the sword took over its own destiny. When the beetle surged forwards the needle tip touched it at the rim of one of its dull red eyes. Tynisa felt almost no shock, the sword sheathing itself in the beast without stopping, until the beetle's rush had ground to a halt, with its mandibles gaping either side of the sword's elaborate guard. Tynisa sagged to one knee, even as a wildly buzzing insect knocked painfully against her head and dropped to the matting. Looking down she saw a backswimmer spin round and round, its legs paddling frantically as though it could row itself upside-down across the floor.

Light streamed across her, and she saw Gramo at his own door, lifting a rush light with a bewildered expression on his face. Even in that moment, with so much else clamouring for her attention, she saw how none of the flying creatures attacked him. They circled and arced only towards Tynisa or the other Spider.

Feanissa screamed again, though at what Tynisa was not entirely sure. Her eyes were wide as a madwoman's as she got to her feet, dragging another backswimmer from where it had clamped to the side of her head, the its lancing mouthparts leaving a trail of blood. Tynisa shouted at her to wait, but the woman was running for the ruined door, arms before her to ward off the fliers.

She had not seen what hung in the doorway. *Tynisa* had not seen it, and she had less excuse to miss it. It was almost all leg, suspended from the frame like a living web, its, oval body dark and lustreless and two feet long. Feanissa ran straight into it, and the pond-skater's beak, like a six-inch dagger drove itself beneath her ribs.

She made a shocked sound, instinctively clutching at her killer. By then the insect had begun to feed, holding her close with its little grasping arms as its legs maintained their grip on the doorframe. Tynisa lurched forwards, feeling dizzy with shock, and severed two of its anchors before despatching the creature. She remembered the kindens that had taken this stiling lake-killer as their standard, and she did not remember them fondly. The creature itself was worse even than they, she decided.

There was shouting outside, but she had no time for that. She knelt by Feanissa, hoping that there might be something she could do. She knew bug-wounds like, that, though. The initial stab was dangerous, but that first draught of the Feanissa's blood had finished the job, dessicating her from within.

Everything seemed quiet, as she stood. There were a few taps and bangs as the remaining airborne bounced and cracked from the walls, but abruptly all purpose had been taken from them. They paid Tynisa no heed, and the luckiest found the broken doorway and meandered into the night.

She saw some Dragonfly-kindens out in the dark, Lioste Coren at their head. A slender-bodied water-fly of some kind, as long as she was tall, lay arrow-pierced beside the embassy, legs moving feebly.

She met the seneschal's gaze and found an understanding there, for neither of them had credited Feanissa's story until it was too late.

*Tynisa believes that the Mantis-kindens are somehow behind what happened to Feanissa because of their general dislike of Spiders, and their presence in the area, so she goes out hunting them.*

She had not come to the Commonweal with any great number of possessions. Back at College she had been one for ornament and material comfort, and Stenwold's money had indulged her, to a degree. After meeting Tisamon, her priorities had changed. A Weaponsmaster did not need much to live. When she stepped out that night she wore her arming jacket over tunic and breeches, and a cloak against the chill of the autumn night. Her rapier was at her hip, less a weight dragging at her than a hunting companion prowling alongside.

She took one more thing, but that was no great weight, for all that it was a burden.

The skies were heavy with cloud, which she had not expected. The Lowlands were dry, seldom this cold even in the depths of winter, and the odds of a clear night were good. Now the waxing moon she had been relying on was blotting and obscured. The darkness would have been impenetrable to many, but Spider-kindens had good eyes. She could peer into the dim night and make out the roll of the land, and see the faint reflections that the hidden moon still cast in the canals to the north. It would be enough. However, she must not forget that Mantis-kindens eyes were just as good. *For that matter, so are the locals', if this turns out to be something a little more incestuous.* She believed Coren, though. He had nothing to do with it, and nor did his people here at Suon Ren. Tynisa knew the Dragonfly-kindens as a people of honour and peace, two traits that the Wasp Empire had exploited ferociously in the war.

She made good time through the fields towards the stark silver lines of the canals. She had wondered before now why they had two running parallel, one high in the hillside than the other. As she got closer she saw a curious broad ramp between them, and some kind of rope arrangement. She puzzled over it until she had almost reached the lower of the two canals, and suddenly realised that it was a simple hoist, ready for some beast of burden to be harnessed to it, and that the ramp was to allow cargoes to be shifted from one canal to the other. Certainly the two waterways diverged either way, but Tynisa could still not entirely see the point of the whole arrangement.

*Still, I have other priorities just now.*

The air had that subtle damp touch that told of standing water, and she slowed her progress, trying to get all she could from her eyes and ears. The rapier had found her hand without her needing to reach for it, but she was not sure whether it was in response to her own tension, or because of a genuine danger.

She was close to the first canal, seeing a ramp on her side too, a broad slope, flagged with heavy wooden boards, that the locals must use for unloading goods bound for Suon Ren itself. At its lower reaches the inky water lapped. There was a faint current pulling west, she saw, but sluggishly. It could have been five feet deep, or five hundred. Certainly it was not just the earthen watercourse she had guessed at. The walls were flagged with great slabs of stone, and the whole had a massive, solid construction utterly unlike the flimsy wood and cane of the Dragonfly dwellings.

She took a deep breath, calmed her heartbeat, and called out, "Mantis-kindens!" as loud as she could. Possibly they heard her back in Suon Ren.

Silence greeted her. The darkness was full of shapes of her own imagining.

“Mantis-kindens!” she cried again, raising her blade. “You’re hunting me? I’m here! If you have any courage in you, come try my blade, here and now!”

Still there was nothing save the lap of the water and the gust of the wind. The thought came to her of a Mantis longbow trained on her, the string taut back. Could she hear a faint creaking?

“I claim my right as a Weaponsmaster!” she shouted out, and in her left hand she held aloft the badge that she had earned in blood: the sword within the circle, the token of the ancient order that Tisamon had indoctrinated her into. “Come test me!” Her voice rose high and lonely into the night, sounding desperate and eager in equal measures to her own ears.

Something stirred in the water, and she fell into a defensive crouch instantly, sword extended and her weight on the front foot, ready to kick backwards at a moment’s notice. She saw a great bulk swell there, an oval body lurch and scrabble partyway up the ramp, its lower length still submerged. Two hinged arms were held out wide to embrace her, and for a mad moment she thought she had discovered some kind of water-mantis, hitherto unknown to Collegium naturalists.

Then she remembered other adventures, and that there were scorpions of the water, as well of the land. This was such a beast, neither mantis nor true scorpion but another kind of water-bug. Beneath the bulbous pale eyes that were most of its small head, a sword’s length of beak flexed. There was nothing in it of the savagery of the previous night, though. Having hauled itself so far out of its element it seemed to lose interest, poised halfway from the water, arms thrown out in threat. Tynisa had been listening, waiting for the approach of a master to this sluggish servant, but there was nothing. *It is as if some last ebb of that madness is left in the beast*, she considered, *but not enough to drive it to attack me*. Large insects such as this were a hazard to man, she knew, but most of them had learned long ago that to hunt man was to be hunted in turn. The few species that did not ever take up that fear of humanity were those like the great mantids of the Felyal, whose minds were ancient and dark, and more than a beast’s. This creature that confronted her now was just an animal, and whatever had driven it so far could not overcome its inbred wariness of humanity and its dislike of the land.

“Is that all you have?” she said, not shouting now, but in normal tones that carried across the water. “Leave the poor beasts to their natural lives, whoever you are, Mantis, Spider or spirit. If you have a quarrel, then it is with me. Here I am.”

The water-scorpion abruptly slid back into the water, vanishing without any trace save for an expanding ring of ripples. Tynisa had started to relax when she saw the man.

Or it had the form of a man, at least, and neither Mantis nor Spider, surely. On the far side of the canal stood a figure all in armour, but armour that had none of the glint of steel, nor the look of chitin or boiled leather. Instead the strangled moonlight picked it out only because it was pale as milk, a full suit of pallid mail fashioned in small, elegant plates. The helm seemed to have no visor, eyeless and blank.

She opened her mouth to repeat her challenge but her voice died within her throat. *Spirits*. She had scoffed at the idea, but that had been day and not the darkness leached at her courage. Had she not seen spirits in the Darakyon? She might equivocate beneath the sun, or in the cheery firelight of a Collegium study, but beneath this cloaked moon she could not deny the memories of what Tisamon had showed her, and she could not deny this.

*And Tisamon had always been deathly afraid of magic, a force that filled his life and his people’s history, and that mere steel could never fight.*



Somewhere in her memories, Achaeos was laughing at her. Her feet and her guts wanted her to flee but, all of a sudden, she was acutely aware of the golden broach in her left hand, the edges of it seeming to chafe in her grip.

*Am I a Weaponsmaster? Well then.*

She forced her sword up until it was pointed at that shape and hissed, "Come to me then," from between clenched teeth.

For a long moment her opponent stood motionless, a statue cast from moonlight. Then it had taken one heavy step forwards and dropped into the water, making a very real splash. She took up her guard again, waiting, and it was more than ten minutes before she had to admit that, whatever it had been, it was not about to rise from the waters and confront her. The master of the water-monsters had gone.

*Subsequently a band of Mercers turns up at Suon Ren accompanied by Gaved. They are hunting the killer too, and Gaved (in Salme employ) is acting as tracker. Tynisa and Gaved have their face-off in Suon Ren, not Siriell's Town, although the details are broadly the same. Eventually the two of them head off to hunt down the killer. News comes in of a body found near the canals, and the Mercers and Tynisa head off to investigate.*

As soon as the news reached them, the Mercers finished their food and drink and were readying their mounts in minutes, the mounts as obviously used to swift departures as their riders.

"Take me with you," Tynisa asked their leader. "This is my fight. At least let me face it with you."

The Dragonfly woman held out a gauntleted hand to her, and hoist Tynisa up behind her. "Hold on tight," she was told. "The saddle's not meant for two."

Despite the warning Tynisa was almost thrown off the horse's back as the Mercer kicked it into motion. Then the three Dragonflies and Gaved were coursing from Suon Ren in any easy canter, horse and rider together finding a path up towards the lines of the canals as if through a single mind. Tynisa had not come across such unity of purpose beyond the Ant-kinde, or those rare few who had the old Art that let them speak to their kinde animals. Certainly there were no such things as horse-kinde, but in their riding skill the Mercers might almost pass as them. Gaved jolted along at the back, making the best time he could, and Tynisa would have found him amusing had she not been concentrating so utterly on not losing her grip. She had ridden the odd horse before, but it was hardly a valued skill in the Lowlands, and she had never thought that it would repay any serious effort.

Allanbridge's note had given the best directions the aviator had been able to glean from his informants, and the Mercers seemed confident of where they were heading. Tynisa guessed that the Beetle viewed this kind of service as a good way of keeping Prince Felipe and his people happy enough to let him go and trade with people that were clearly less than respectable. She tried not to imagine what illicit plunder might well sit in the *Windlass*' hold right now.

The Mercer in the lead had his sword out and was directing it forwards to where a copse of trees clumped at the canal's edge. They were a curious breed Tynisa had not seen before, stocky, knotted trunks sprouting into a myriad of whip-like branches that arched and drooped as

far as the water. Their coiling roots overflowed the canal's bank and formed meandering lines down the inside of the stone walls until they vanished into the murk.

The lead rider stayed in his saddle, an arrow nocked to his strung bow and his eyes watching keenly for danger. The second to arrive dismounted, sword drawn, and headed into the trees. Then Tynisa's own steed had arrived, her companion of the saddle dropping to the ground in a moment's blur of wings and holding a hand out for her. She got down with as much grace as she could manage, just as Gaved arrived.

Inside the twisted little copse the bodies were not hard to find. There were three of them: two Mercers and a water-beetle almost the size of the creature that had battered down the door of the embassy. The story of the first Dragonfly-kindens' death was easy enough to read. Her leg had been almost scissored through at the thigh by the beast's mandibles. As she had fallen, however, she had somehow managed to drive her blade all the way to the hilt into the beetle's underside, between the small chitin plates where its legs sprouted. There was no other wound on the creature: that one desperate blow had been its end.

The other body was what had the attention of the Mercers, who were examining it tentatively. Tynisa frowned. This was no insect work, or at least no insect that she knew. The man's body was arched back into a tortured, joint-wrenching attitude, and half his breastplate had been scorched away, leaving a curiously smooth absence beneath which the corpse's clothes and flesh were charred. She thought she could see the outlines of bones there, and that they had been somehow warped and fused together.

Tynisa felt a curious jolt at the sight – no, not just the sight. A smell clung to the body, something that was familiar, an acrid scent that was more than simply burning.

*A Wasp sting?* But she knew those, sight, sound, smell and all. It would take more Wasp-kindens Art than she knew to cause so much carnage in a single strike. Besides, the iridescent armour of the Mercers was said to turn aside sting-shot, not that such protection had overly hampered the Empire in their invasion.

Her mind dug at the familiarity until it found her a memory: she and Tisamon were fighting, the surroundings cramped – not fighting Wasps but fighting *alongside* them, against an enemy that neither of them understood...

*A pale, armoured figure wielding a spear of blue fire.*

A figure such as she had seen the previous night, and been so blinded by superstitious talk that she had taken it for a spirit.

And in that realisation she knew, and hers eyes found Gaved, and she saw that he knew also, and had known for a long time.

*After another digression Tynisa tracks down Gaved.*

She found him at the periphery of Suon Ren, looking northwards towards the canals as he sat and gnawed at some bread and dried meat. His look to her suggested that he had been expecting her.

She crouched down on her haunches before him, ready to kick back and draw blade if she backed him too far into his corner and he tried to kill her. She understood now what he had been scared of. It was not the generalised villainies of his past. He was not even worried for himself, entirely. That realisation bought him a small measure of consideration.

“So,” she said, watching his hands carefully, “where is she?”

“Far, far away,” he answered swiftly.

“Liar,” she stated.

For a moment he glared sullenly at her, but then something went out of him and he asked, “How do you know?”

“Because there is a lake-kind of hunting Spiders, and you could never be sure that, if you sent her far, far away, he would not go with her, or there might be a second hunter. So...?”

“The leader of the Mercers is airborne, dragonfly-back. She rides with him. It was not my first choice, and I’d rather have had some other option but... you have seen how unerring the creatures are.”

“And the rest,” she prompted.

He bared his teeth, frustrated at not being able to hide anything from her any more. “What rest?”

“So even I know a dragonfly cannot fly forever. So she’s on the ground more than half the time still. If your Mercer-lord landed somewhere out there, what’s to stop the beasties coming for her, Gaved?” She met his defiant look without flinching. “You have some way of protecting her, of deflecting the attention of this hunter. So tell me.”

The Wasp looked away. “She said that they could track her by scent. Even back in Jerez she said that. When the hunter was near she could taste the machine oil in the water, she said. She told me he could find her the same way. Her people have masks, though, to throw such a tracker off the scent. She and I mixed up something, as close as we could get. Tallow and perfumes and aniseed and a few other things.”

“Your Mercer-lord must be enjoying the company,” Tynisa said dryly, and she saw his face flush angrily.

“He had better not *enjoy* her company,” the Wasp spat, and looked back up at her. “So, what will you do now? Will you tell the Commonwealers?”

“You could have stopped those other Spider-kind of dying,” Tynisa observed quietly.

“We have been trying to catch up with the assassin for days. He moves swiftly with the water, invisibly. We overshot him several times. Most often, by the time we arrived, there were just bodies.” Her stare did not waver and at last he admitted. “Some, though. Perhaps some we could have saved, but I would have had to admit... who the real target was.” His face twisted. “You can’t imagine how difficult it’s been getting them to accept me even a little. But I worked at it. I did all they asked, hunted with their Mercers through snow and hail and rain, and at last I thought I had a safe place for Sef. Somewhere she could stop looking over her shoulder all the time. And now this...” He took a deep breath, but Tynisa read the increasing tension behind it. “What will you do?” he repeated.

“*You*,” she corrected, “will mix me up a batch of this stuff, this master-smell of yours. Then tonight *we* will go out to the canals, where this lake-kindens must be, and wait for him to set his beasts loose. And when he does, and if we can, we’ll kill him. And then your Sef will be safe, and so will I, and that can be the end of the matter, although if our paths never cross again I’ll shed no tears, believe me.”

“Oh the same here, doubled,” he assured her. “And I accept. Tonight we hunt.”

*Tynisa has a very different and more formal meeting with Felipe Shah at this point, as he’s returned, but after that she and Gaved go hunting.*

When she left Felipe’s castle, Gaved was waiting for her beneath a darkening sky. For an instant, seeing him there, she took him for just a Wasp, an enemy, something from a simpler world. When her mind caught up with her eyes enough to recognise him, she found that she would have preferred the black and white challenge inherent in that. *Where do I go from here?*

“I’m surprised you’re still here,” she told him. It was an unnecessary barb, and she wondered if she wanted to provoke him to a fight.

“I’ve seen you handle that sword. You’ll be useful tonight,” he pointed out, choosing to believe that she had expected him to be off hunting on his own.

They began the shallow descent from the castle’s hill back to Suon Ren.

“I’ve mixed up some ointment for you,” the Wasp told her. “You won’t like it but, like I say, it’s all we could come up with to try and put the things off the scent.”

“It’s not as though I have to go on to a reception afterwards,” she remarked dryly, and to her surprise he snorted with surprised laughter.

“I take it your audience with the prince went well then?”

“That’s between me and him.”

Gaved shrugged and took her to Gramo’s embassy, which he had apparently commandeered to mix his perfumes. The scent hit her as she walked in, but it was not the vile reek she had imagined. Instead the air within the building was thick with a strange, slightly sickly odour that called to mind a profusion of dried herbs, ageing fruit and the rich earth.

Gramo Galltree himself was agitated. “My dear, my dear,” he accosted her the moment she walked through the door, “tell me you’re not going out there. It’s almost dark.”

“Staying in here didn’t work so well last time,” she pointed out. Gaved set a small pot of something murky in front of her and she knelt by it reluctantly. “You’re sure this will work?”

Gaved merely gave her another shrug, looking out at the gathering dusk and obviously keep to go. “Put it on all over, under your clothes. Just a thin wash should do. Don’t worry, I won’t look, and I’m sure your old boy here’s too polite to.”

Gramo coughed, pointedly looking away as Tynisa stripped off her arming jacket. “The seneschal has promised to defend you, my dear, this really isn’t necessary.”

“They tried that at the place Feanissa came from,” she reminded him. “I don’t want anyone dying on my account. And I can’t just sit behind walls waiting for my enemy. So I hunt. No locals, no Mercers, just Gaved and me.”

“The Mercers, they’ve...” She could imagine Gramo wringing his hands. “They’ve gone. Their leader...”

“Their own precious prince hasn’t come back.” She could hear the hard anger in Gaved’s voice. “He was off looking for the killer from the air. Sef’s with him.”

The ointment was thin and watery and stained her skin like wood-grain. “You don’t like him, I gather?”

“That’s between him and me,” the Wasp snapped, and she found herself smiling at that.

She was struggling back into her clothes now, all the quicker because of the chill Commonweal air. When she had laced up her arming jacket again with quick fingers and re-secured her baldric, she took a deep breath. “Well then,” she told Gaved. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Gramo wrung his hands and made to speak over and over, but in the end he had no words and they were gone into the dusk.

By unspoken consent they made for where the two dead Mercers had been found. Their enemy would be somewhere along the stretch of canal closest to Suon Ren, although what they would do if he simply kept to the deep water Tynisa wasn’t sure.

“Did Sef tell you how the lake-kindens was motivating all of the water-beasts?” she asked Gaved, as they left the outskirts of the Dragonfly town.

“She said that her masters had all manner of potions that could drive the animals mad, that they could even somehow put the scent of slaves into the water, and every creature would hunt them down. They did this for sport, she said.” His tone of disgust surprised her, given that his own kindens had surely done worse. “Whatever they’re using here is a stronger brew of the same stuff, perhaps. And Art. She said that the Speaking Art is not entirely unknown, amongst them. The water-beetles will be the most dangerous, then. The rest should be hunting out Spider-kindens scent, and they should pass you by.”

“Assuming this muck of yours works.”

She sensed the shrug. “Sef helped me mix it up. The lake-slaves have been hunted for a long time. There are various water-plants they know, that can throw the beasts of the scent. I’ve used the best approximations I could find here.”

She had to keep waiting for Gaved to catch her up. His eyes must be better than most Wasps’ in the dark, but they were Wasp eyes still, made for daylight. They were nearing the canal, that the moon lit a dull steel shade. The little knot of crooked trees crouched ahead of them, as though caught in the midst of some depraved act.

“These canals,” Gaved said, “the Commonwealers have got no idea. There are canals in the East-Empire, but we do it properly. We have locks and gates and the like. Here the only way they can get their goods uphill is to have parallel canals at different levels, and slipways between them. Madness. A handful of engineers would revolutionise this place.”

“Perhaps they don’t want it revolutionised.” Tynisa found her own feelings unclear. On the one hand she could see the rational, Collegium sense in Gaved’s words. On the other she was oddly protective of the Commonweal. It seemed a purer, more virtuous place than the Lowlands, and most certainly more so than the Empire.

There was a buzzing rasp and something batted past her cheek. Instantly her sword was in her hand, but the nocturnal flyer was away and then arcing back, baffled as a moth around a lantern. Then another insect fluttered past, some kind of broad-winged water-fly, spiralling up into the air above them and then dropping aimlessly. A moment later the surface of the water was practically bubbling with its denizens, here and all along the canal as far as she could see. Clouds of gnats danced frantically over a network of ripples, whilst small beetles spun and bounced and tried futilely to climb the canal sides. There was a slipway nearby, but only those creatures that found it by chance used it. There was no intent in the frenzy, just a blind desire to be out and hunting. Water-boatmen, stoneflies and caddis flies, some inches long and some the length of Tynisa's arm, spun and danced in frenetic patterns over the water, and some went flying off into the night and others dropped into the water, to swim or to drown. In the midst of it all, surrounded by a meaningless constellation of filmy wings, Tynisa stood and watched.

"Looks like your muck's doing its job," she managed.

Gaved nodded, ducking a particularly low-flying backswimmer. The tumult of insects extended all along the open water. Their quarry could be anywhere.

"Come on then!" Tynisa shouted suddenly, trying to avoid inhaling any of her smaller satellites. "You've hunted me! I'm here! Come on and finish it!"

She had expected nothing: it was pure bravado on her part. Then with shocking suddenness the pale figure rose up out of the water until it seemed to stand on the very meniscus, faceless helm directed at her and the tip of its lance singling her out.

For a moment none of them moved: the lake-kindens' sudden appearance had shocked the two hunters into stillness, and the helm of the armoured man cocked back and forth, seeing the meandering and victimless flight of the insects around them.

"How...?" His voice was hollow, but the helm seemed to amplify rather than muffle it. Then something seemed to possess him. "You!" he spat, striding forwards impossibly on the very surface of the water, and Tynisa wondered whether this could be the same man she and Tisamon had fought, and how she could possibly have made such an impression on him, but then he roared "Slave! I have you at last!" and she realised his mistake.

She thought that the wall of the canal would give him pause, but abruptly he was rising above it, and beneath him she saw the domed shell of a truly enormous water beetle, an ancient leviathan of the canal-ways, big enough to capsize a barge. The lake-kindens simply stepped from its back as it lifted him past the canal's lip, and then he was at her, lunging with his lance.

She swayed to one side, making sure not to cross the slender, pale weapon with her own blade. Even as she did so, Gaved unleashed his sting, but the fire of his Art dissipated across the lakeman's pearly armour without leaving a mark. The lance came swinging for Tynisa again, used more as a bludgeon than a spear, and she ducked low beneath it and drove the point of her blade at his neck. The mail there had seemed a nothing to her, just a lattice of small lumps or shells, but it felt like striking gravel and her sword's point skittered off it. She caught her balance and then had to throw herself at the ground to avoid his next strike, rolling and coming to her feet out of his reach. He was faster than she had thought, but in no ways skilled. He swung with fury

and abandon, and had he been wielding a common spear or sword she would have no fear of him. The charred body of the Mercer was clear in her mind's eye, however, and she retreated from him at a time as he advanced.

"You have grown tired of this desert place, have you, to seek me out?" his voice boomed. "Well I don't blame you, slave. Now put that stick down. Slaves may have no weapons, To arm a slave is death," he spat the words out like a mantra. "Slaves will do as they're told: to disobey is death. Slaves are slaves forever. There is *no* escape! You remember these words, slave?"

Gaved slammed into him in a blur of wings, grappling at the man's helm and stabbing with a shortsword for the eyeslit. The lake-kindens' free hand swatted at him distractedly, and Tynisa took the chance to try and drive her blade beneath the man's breastplate. For a second it dug in, and she thought it would pierce through, but then the lance had jabbed for her once again and she skipped backwards. With a wild blow the lakeman's gauntlet caught Gaved across the side of the head, knocking him to the ground. She thought that the Wasp was done for then, but the lake-kindens was as single-minded in his pursuit of Spider-kindens as his insect slaves had been.

Then the monstrous water-beetle had hauled itself half over the canal's edge, suddenly erupting in a sheet of spray and getting two sets of legs over the stone lip. Gaved, close enough to be soaked, gave a startled yell and scrambled back from it. The beast's mandibles were like scythe-blades.

Tynisa dodged another clumsy stab, stepping in close and smashing up at the lakeman's chin with her pommel, hoping to crack the faceplate of his helm as she had seen done once before. She might as well have punched the canal walls themselves, and then he had a fumbling grip on her arm that she only just squirmed out of. Gaved loosed a sting-bolt at the water beetle, obviously hoping to dissuade it from coming any further. His aim was exact, which was a mixed blessing. He seared out one of the creature's glittering eyes, and with a supreme effort it hauled itself fully onto the land and went for him with berserk speed, jaws open in a gape wide enough to scissor him in two.

Gaved's wings exploded from his back as he tried to launch himself out of the charging beast's way, but he was a moment too slow, dodging the jaws but knocked head over heels by the great curve of the creature's back. He fell heavily to earth, dazed, a hand directed back at the beetle, his sting scorching a dark line down its wing-case. Tynisa, backing up again before the lakeman's assault, saw the beetle shake its mutilated head and then lunge for him as he tried to get to his feet.

Her mind had already given him up for dead, and written him off as no great loss to the world, but the rest of her was already moving, lead by the sword. The lakeman's lance whickered through the air, missing her by inches, but then she was past the man, beneath his guard, driving with all of her speed to ram her blade between the beetle's head and thorax, slicing between the plates of heavy chitin and twisting her grip so as to sever as much of its internal architecture as she could reach.

It lumped to a halt, with Gaved halfway under its head. Its quivering jaws were open either side of him, and it seemed entirely possible it would bisect him even in death. It had no more movement left in it, though.

The Wasp, with one leg pinned beneath the creature's fallen weight, cried out a warning, and Tynisa turned to see the lance-tip plunging for her face. Her instincts took over, as they had so often before, but they were trained to fight more conventional opponents. Before she could stop herself she had brought her blade up to parry the blow.

The instant their weapons touched she felt as though someone had rammed a metal rod the length of her arm, from hand to shoulder, and smashed her across the head at the same time. A moment later she was on the ground, her hand twitching and empty, the rapier lost from sight and gone. She was not burned: perhaps some property in the sword's crafting had saved her from that, or perhaps the fire came only when the lance-tip touched flesh. It seemed to be a moot point, though, for the lake-kindens was standing indomitably over her, the lance directed at her chest.

She tensed, hoping to be able to writhe aside at the last minute as he stabbed down, but the man just stood there, and at last she heard a grating chuckle from within his helm.

"So it ends, eh, slave?" he said, wholly ignoring Gaved as the Wasp struggled to free himself. "At long last you know your masters? Do you seek forgiveness here, at the end?" The lance advanced another few inches towards her face.

"Perhaps," the lake-kindens continued. "Perhaps if you had come back to the lake. Slaves are not so easy to come by these days, in Scolaris. Our pastimes do eat into your numbers so. Perhaps there would have been clemency." His voice, which had been the softest growl, suddenly twisted into spite. "But not now! Have you *any* idea what you've put me through, slave? This hideous place, this air, this burning sun, sore feet and burning skin and my eyes always dry, and for *what*? For some stupid, simple-minded slave-girl? I said to Master Saltwheel that you would die out here, that the elements would do our work for us, but *no*, the law is the law. No escape, never any escape from the cities of light! *Did you think I wanted to go through all this for your pathetic hide?*" The booming voice rose to a shriek.

"So why not go back months ago? Tell them you'd killed- killed me?" Tynisa demanded. While the man was talking he wasn't killing her. The tip of his lance wavered wildly as he spoke. *Where is my sword?*

"You know!" the lake-kindens spat. "You *know*. Do you think Saltwheel would simply *believe* me? Just take my word on faith? You know what I'll have to suffer when I return, so they can be sure I've done my duty. Well at least I can go back now! Suffer or not, I can leave this horrible place." Abruptly his free hand was fumbling at his helm. "See!" he hissed. "See what you've made of me." Unexpectedly the front of the helmet slid up, and Tynisa recoiled from the face beneath. The man had been ugly to start with, his skin grey-white like a dead thing's, his eyes small and sunken, balanced by a great broad gash of a mouth that seemed to stretch almost from ear to ear. Even with all that against him, though, the man had become less pleasant still. Much of his skin was cracked and blistered, pocked with the bloody stubs of picked scabs and



flakes of peeling skin as though he had been in a fire. The masters of Lake Limnia did not travel well, she saw. She hoped for Sef's sake that their slaves were hardier.

"You see, you see what you've done?" the apparition demanded of her. "How *dare* you turn on your masters like this, slave? How dare you..." He blinked, his eyes red-rimmed and watering. An expression of doubt clawed its way through the broken skin onto his face and he began to fumble at his belt with mounting urgency. There were little blisters set there, into the substance of his armour, and now he cracked one open and dragged a torn and dog-eared piece of paper.

"Slave...", he said hoarsely, looking from the paper to Tynisa and back. "It... It's... *You're not her!*"

With a scream of frustration he lunged at her, but she was ready for him, rolling aside and then running, putting distance between them. She heard the blundering rush as he came after her, and then a brief bark of pain. She expected to find Gaved there as she turned, but instead there was an arrow lodged beside the lakeman's face, wedged between the helm and faceplate. An inch to the left and it would have taken the man through the eye.

Something huge roared overhead in a thunder of wings, and a moment later the little copse of trees was bowed to the ground by the weight of a great dragonfly perching there. Two figures sat astride its back and one was already loosing another arrow. The lake-kinde turned aside, the shaft shattering against his upraised arm, and a moment later the man was stumbling for the canal.

"No!" Tynisa yelled and ran for him, empty-handed or not. She heard the crackle of Gaved's sting and the golden fire slammed into the lakeman's legs. The armour held but the lakeman tripped to his knees and Tynisa was on him.

She drew her hand back, feeling the rapier's hilt comfortably in her grip as though it had never left and, as the lake-kinde looked up at her with more bewilderment than hatred, she stabbed him through his open mouth, without hesitation or pity.

In the moment after, seeing his eyes wide with misery and horror, seeing the blood rush out to stain his pasty skin, she felt fiercely alive and vital, more than she had since before the war ended. The Mantis-kinde part of her was dealing with her doubts and problems the only way it knew how. Her father was at her side, guiding her arm, so that she almost expected to see his bloody handprint on her sleeve. But of course he was not there in truth. They none of them were, not the Mantis, not the Moth, not the Dragonfly. She knew them for the creations of her damaged mind, after all.

Then she stepped back, withdrawing the narrow blade and letting the armoured form topple sideways. Wordlessly she went over to Gaved and, although there was a moment of alarm on his face, set down her blade and put her shoulder to the dead beetle's carapace. With all her strength she managed to gain him the few inches he needed to drag himself from beneath it.

He was running, then, heedless of her. She reclaimed her sword and stood, seeing him rush to embrace the second of the dragonfly-riders, the one without a bow. Tynisa's eyes were

just about good enough in the dark to recognise the Spider-kindens, Sef, and no doubt she was slicked and browned with the same herbal muck that Gaved had brewed up.

The sight of the Wasp getting his happy reunion raised bitter thoughts in her, but she fought them down. The man had been an adequate ally, in the end. It was good grace to be magnanimous about such things.

She turned to the archer, who was approaching the lakeman's body, and her world stopped dead.

Her hallucinations had always been corner-of-the-eye things, melting before her direct stare, unable to bear the weight of her attention, but here he was, in plain view, the bow in his hand, as though he had never been killed by the Wasps after all, as though it had simply been some raconteur's exaggeration, to say that Salme Dien was dead.

She couldn't breathe. She felt that her heart had ceased to beat. Her fingers twitched nervelessly, though her sword still clung to her grip.

"...Salma?" she managed.

And the man before her, the Dragonfly-kindens with the oh-so-familiar cocky smile, said, "Yes?"

*After Tynisa gets introduced to Alain he flies off for home, and she and Gaved have a much longer trek to Leose, which takes them through Siriell's Town, from which they end up being hounded owing to Tynisa's temper. After that, matters fall more back into the plot as seen in the published book.*