

The Chains of Helleron

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

Tereser Lockart was a woman who took care over her appearance. To the Commonwealer eye, Beetle-kinde all seemed to be locked into an inexorable plunge into old age, spreading waists, wrinkles, receding hair for the men and sagging elsewhere for the women. Seeing Tereser for the first time, a woman in her middle years, it was clear that the pragmatic Beetles were simply less bothered about the way they looked. Whereas a Spider maiden would spend an hour with her servants and cosmetics, and a Dragonfly noblewoman would have perfected how to bind up her hair before she came of age, the average Beetle was far too busy running the world to care. That was the impression that Mornen Corneles had of this colossal jumble of stone and metal they called Helleron.

Tereser Lockart had taken the time, though. The woman into whose chambers he had been invited was immaculate, her dark skin gleaming, pale-dyed hair coiled about her head. Her single-shouldered robe of Spiderlands silk had been cut to emphasise, rather than hide, her boldly curved figure, an abundance that the slender Dragonfly-kinde physique could not have approached. What struck the prince most, though, was her expression: here was a woman who was a queen within these walls, monarch of her staff of twenty-five, tyrant over the lives of hundreds. Tereser Lockart, governess of the Four Corners Prison for Insolvent Debtors. The casually rapacious way that she regarded him was worth more than any make-up or well-made wardrobe.

"You intrigue me, Prince Mornen," she told him. "It's not as though we see many Commonwealers in Helleron. I think our fine city air unsettles their stomachs."

"Experience is never wasted," Mornen replied, trying to match her casual, slightly taunting tone. "I think I discovered nineteen new smells never known to my homeland, just on the way here."

She did have an elegant smile, when it came naturally. It struck him that she must have spent a great deal to perfect her deliberate and artificial smile, and never guessed that, when humour caught her unawares, the genuine article was vastly more beautiful.

A servant stepped in, then, though Mornen had heard no signal, and a moment later he had a silver goblet in one hand, topped up with wine.

"A Commonwealer with a business proposition," Tereser continued, "is even rarer, especially one who claims to be a prince."

"A Prince-Minor only, alas," he admitted.

"Well, we're short of princes hereabouts, so you'll have to do," she shot back at him dryly. "And you say you have money? Another unusual trait for one from the Commonweal."

"I have valuable goods, so I'll have money shortly." Mornen confirmed. In truth he was dreading the selling part, as his people relied on barter and favours to drive their commerce, whereas Helleron was apparently the very world centre of coin.

"I suppose war changes even the most set in their ways, in time. Six years now, is it, that the Empire's been shafting you?" She was abruptly all hard business, and he felt as if he'd run into a solid wall. The playful Tereser was locked behind iron bars. "This is to do with the war, I take it?"

Prince-Minor Corneles Mornen, or Captain Mornen to his few followers, nodded. It was true that his homeland had been embroiled in a losing war with the Wasp-kinde for those years,

giving ground grudgingly, each foot of earth saturated with the blood of its people, but losing nonetheless. Mornen had been sent by his betters to raise more soldiers, the service being the price put on the legitimisation of his noble title, without which he was just another bandit chief with grand ideas. Unusually for both a bandit chief and a prince, however, he had shied away from sending yet more of his own reluctant peasantry to the battlefield. Instead, after coming into possession of certain valuables, he had taken some few equally reluctant followers and come here.

They said that everything in the world was bought and sold in Helleron, and so he had expected a great marketplace. Coming from a people of feudal provinces, ancient castles, peasant farms and great swathes of forest, he had been unprepared for such things as workhouses, factories, production lines and tenements. Tereser was right, there was something in Helleron to make a Commonwealer ill, but it was not the air, it was the *everything*.

Still, he was here for a reason, and so he sent Tereser Lockart his best smile. "I came here to buy soldiers," he told her. "But they tell me that it is illegal to sell slaves in this city. I find that the slaves they sell immediately outside, where it is legal, now most involve dealing with the Wasps, whom I have no wish to trouble. Then, as I'm almost ready to go home again, someone tells me this: there are prisons, where people go who have no money – no, less than no money: who cannot pay money that they don't have." In truth the idea of debt was a little bewildering to him, but he persevered. "These people are not slaves, but they can be bought. Indenture, they call it. And you are the woman I must treat with, who holds the keys to their chains." He approached her, setting down his goblet. "Mistress Lockart, will you help me?"

She watched him levelly, with a shade of her earlier covetousness. "You will have money, you say?"

"I will," he confirmed, hoping desperately that it was true.

She swaggered close, tall enough to look him in the eye. "We see so few Commonwealers," she repeated. "It's a shame, really." He could see himself reflected in her eyes, slender and golden-skinned. "Yes, I can sell you some indentures, though you'll find precious few *soldiers* amongst them."

"My second is ready to inspect those you have," Mornen told her. He was unwilling to use the word *lieutenant*, which the man himself insisted on.

"Without a down-payment? My late husband would be horrified at the breach of propriety." Tereser put a plump finger to his chest. "However, you're a foreign prince, after all, young and handsome, dashing in with flashing wings to sweep me off my feet. How can I say no?" Her voice had twisted, somewhere in the sentence, and Mornen suddenly saw through her: a woman in a city dominated mostly by men, ordering her joyless affairs in a business laden with cruelty, and all too aware of time's footsteps dogging her heels. She saw herself, and could mock herself, and even in the words of her mockery he saw what might have been some girlhood dream that she had never quite let go of.

Quickly, by sheer impulse, he leant closer and kissed her, one hand cupping her face to him. He had no idea if, amongst the Beetles, this was as casual a matter as it was with his own people, or if he had just shattered a thousand points of good behaviour.

Tereser did not seem to care.

A rabble, thought Valken. No officer of the imperial army would be seen dead with any of this lot. They'd be thrown out of the Auxillians, even. I wouldn't have them as slaves.

He was being overly pessimistic, though not by much. A few in the shambling crowd stood out as decent prospects: Ants, a Scorpion, a hulking Wasp who must be straight out of the hill tribes. The rest...

He shook his head. He had apparently cast his lot in with Captain Mornen's army of five, and now he was paying the price. Valken had been proud to bear the badge of a lieutenant in the imperial Fourth Army, and even he had to acknowledge that pride had got the better of him in the end. He had certain expectations concerning what it meant to be a soldier in the Emperor's colours. When his superior officer had fallen short of those expectations he had done what he considered to be the right thing. Apparently killing a superior on the battlefield set some manner of bad precedent, however, and it was only his run in with Mornen Corneles that had saved him from public humiliation and execution. He was still not sure how he felt about that. Being beholden to a Commonwealer was bad enough. Having been forced to *swear allegiance* to the man was bitter gall in his mouth.

And yet here he was in Helleron, helping the man raise an army against the Empire.

Oh let me look upon our recruits again. Let me salve my conscience. It's not as if they're going to trouble the Emperor's ambitions, is it?

Mornen had given him a strict brief, too. Had Valken been told to recruit scum, he would have bought them, marched them to war, armed them when the enemy was in sight, and shed no tears. Mornen, being a Commonwealer, had to go about the business arse-backwards, of course.

Volunteers...

These before him were the inmates of the Four Corners, or at least those who had been interested enough in the idea to turn up. They were a shambles of different kinds, all the poor bastards for whom mere poverty was not enough. Running out of money in Helleron would kill you, but if you owed someone enough, the city would keep you alive, so that it could sell your sweat and blood until you had paid the world back. After that, you could die, and you'd probably be glad of it. If they had all simply been profligate spenders and unwise borrowers then Valken would have given up then and there, but he understood from the jailers that many crimes in Helleron got classed as debt. If the victim shouted loud enough that they wanted reparation, then even a murderer could end up indentured or enslaved to the profit of the injured party's relatives. The Four Corners held a mixed bag of villains.

"Listen to me," Valken snapped, looking over them, bringing out the voice he had formerly saved for parades and battlegrounds. "There is a war on."

They stared at him dumbly, as if they had no idea what a war was.

"North of here the armies of his Imperial Majesty Alvdan the Second, recently ascended to the throne, are embarked in a conquest of that state known as the Commonweal. One would think that, between them, these two powers would muster sufficient spear-carriers to see to their business, but apparently it is not so. I am here seeking *volunteers*. I want those who will fight. For those who will come with me to the war, we will quit their debts, which I understand are important here in Helleron. For those of you that come with us and fail to fight, I will kill you myself rather than have you disgrace a civilised war with your cowardice."

"Civilised!" someone spat, the first sign of spirit from any of them. Valken had kept his eye on that one from the start, marking him as a promising candidate: a tall, lean Dragonfly-kind man, some Commonweal reject like Mornen, but with a tangle of fair hair unusual in the breed.

"Stand forwards, soldier," Valken addressed him.

The man bristled but elbowed his way from the crowd, ending up nose to nose with the Wasp. "I know your Empire," he spat. "Corruptors, destroyers, enslavers. No man is free who marches under the black and gold banner. Nothing would make me take up arms for your Emperor. I'd rather hang."

Valken looked down for a moment, controlling his smile. "Your name?"

"Kallen, and may it choke you."

"Well volunteered, Kallen." As he said the words he thought the Dragonfly might die of apoplexy. "My commanding officer, Captain Prince-Minor Corneles Mornen will be glad of you, when he goes to fight the Empire. I'll put your name on the list." He saw the utter confusion on the man's face. "Yes, I don't like it any more than you do, but there we go." He stepped round the seething Dragonfly-kinde and looked out over the rest. "Those that want out of this piss-hole, speak to your warders. I'll have you brought before me, to see if you're worth what they want us to pay for you. Don't waste my time. I understand I can charge you for it."

Archis Laena Tellis was an establishment known for reasonable food at modest prices, named after the three Spider-kinde siblings that owned it. Like so much in Helleron it lived a double life, in this case providing locals with a certain manner of entertainment that even that city's loose laws forbade.

Fighting for blood, sometimes to the death, was beyond the pale in Helleron. That was why so many gangsters and well-heeled merchants came to see it, and think themselves daring for doing so. The Spider-kinde made a good living out of the city's hypocrisy. In recent years an additional element had been added to the place's clientele. To the Wasp-kinde filtering in from the east it was home away from home.

Now, as two Ant-kinde bludgeoned away at each other in the pit below, armed only with the bone blades of their Art, a pair of imperial servants stood and watched, leaning close together so that their words would go no further. Around them the crowd shouted and bayed for blood and paid them no heed.

The older of the two, broader of shoulder and running a little to fat around the waist, was Captain Manser of the Rekef Outlander. His subordinate, a lean-faced, quick-handed man with dead, grey eyes, was known as Lystan.

"It's a strange thing," Manser was saying. "I've been in this city two years, and still it turns up news to surprise me."

Lystan shuffled, bored with the fight and bored with his superior officer. Manser would never just get to the *point*. It had occurred to him that this 'surprising news' might turn out to be something that he had done or failed to do, and that Manser was about to tear a strip off him, but if it was so, then let the man at least get it over with!

"I don't imagine you've seen much of the inside of Helleren prisons," the older man went on.

If that's a threat, it's an extraordinarily clumsy one, Lystan considered, but, "No, sir," was all he said.

"I keep an ear there, mostly in case someone turns up who could be reforged into a useful agent. However, the news that comes to me is not what I expected to hear at all. Someone is buying prisoners wholesale at Four Corners."

"Really, sir?" This did not sound as though it would end up as Lystan's fault. Indeed, he was not sure why he should care. "Mine labour, is it?"

"Soldiers, would you believe," Manser told him calmly.

“One of the local companies has got desperate, sir?”

“If only.” Lystan became aware that at last, in his ponderous way, Manser had got to the point. “It’s a Commonwealer, I hear. A *prince*, if you can believe it, crept all the way from the highlands to come and buy up Lowlanders to fight *us*. You can understand my surprise, then.”

Although not how you managed to sit on that news for quite that long. “You want me to kill him,” Lystan divined.

“Not quite. He’s very chummy with the governess there, I understand, and she’s an influential woman, not someone I wish to cross. No, I want you to go to the Four Corners and secure the loyalties of some of his new-found followers. Have them tell you just what’s going on, and then have *them* deal with the idiot noble. If nothing else, it’ll dissuade anyone from trying the same business, and we’ll get some blooded agents out of it, who’ll have nobody but us to cling to.”

Below them, one of the Ant-kindens collapsed at last. Manser smiled tightly. “Off you go,” he instructed.

The merchant that Tereser Lockart had sent Mornen to was named Bardry Mellow. Beetle names were confusing to him, and he couldn’t work out whether that meant that the man was more mellow than others, more mellow than he had been, or whether he simply had a mellowing effect on those around him. Certainly the last seemed unlikely, as Mellow was a hunched, constantly moving man, dark and balding and starved-looking, his eyes squinting from behind little discs of glass, spending his time crossing back and forth along the crates and stacks of goods in his warehouse as though constantly on the look-out for thieves.

Mornen had one thing for sale, but he had reason to believe that it was worth a fair sum to a certain kind of discerning collector. He had left the bulk of the article with his followers, with strict instructions to guard it with their lives. They were only recently come to his service, those three, having previously been his fellow slaves under the boot of the Empire. Mornen had asked an oath of them, and of the imperial prisoner Valken, before initiating his desperate action that had made them all free men. Of his little army of four, he felt secure in relying on Tadeusz, for the Bee-kindens had loyalty and reliability written all over him. Valken was more difficult, but Mornen knew that the Wasp would not betray him unless the man could convince himself that it was somehow justified by his strange code of honour. The remaining pair, however, he had his doubts about. They had been good enough travelling companions, to be sure: the young Roach-kindens vagabond named Arden Wil knew a hundred stories, and was a master hand at scavenging food, both in the wild and from the larders of others. His wild-looking companion, Ceccy, was the only Cicada-kindens Mornen had ever met, a mumbling, madly-bearded skeleton of a man who looked like a deranged hermit. As guards for their sole possession of value they left a lot to be desired.

Their treasure trove came in many pages, and Mornen had brought a few to show Mellow what they were selling. He watched the merchant carefully as the man laid them out, and saw that faint spark behind the man’s eye-glasses. *Greed.*

“These are, ahem, samples...?” Mellow swallowed convulsively, looking over the images depicted there. *The Book of Red Wings* was an infamous piece of Commonweal literature, depicting all that the elegant, golden-skinned Dragonfly-kindens had learned and devised in the matter of the carnal arts, each point, practice and position lovingly illustrated in grace and perfection by a supremely dedicated artist. Mellow licked his lips, his hands twitching over the pages like predatory spiders.

"I have the work complete," Mornen confirmed.

"Hmm, hmm." Mellowor composed himself. "There may be a buyer, I suppose. You must understand that we are a people of decorum. We barely think of such things, most of the time, let alone wish to, ah, peruse them in such detail. We are shy and retiring, to a fault."

Mornen thought of Tereser Lockart, her wiles and her enthusiasms, and said nothing.

"There may be some small value as a curio," Mellowor allowed. "Shall we say..." but Mornen had held up a hand.

"Let me say first, I do not understand your currency. We have no such coinage in the Commonweal."

A further avaricious glint arose behind Mellowor's spectacles, but Mornen forestalled him.

"I have requirements: debts that must be paid off, equipment that must be bought. You are a man of business, and you know how your city works. You can get me what I need, and get better value than I, a poor foreigner, would. Arrange for me what I need, and you shall have it. The better value you gain for me, the better deal you gain for yourself."

For a long while Mellowor considered this, head cocked on one side as he thought. From his expression, Mornen anticipated an explosion of Beetle outrage that this ignorant Commonwealer was in some way not *playing the game* as he should. However, at the last, the merchant gave a brief cackling laugh, utterly at odds with the rest of his demeanour.

"Oh yes, very good," Bardry Mellowor allowed. "I applaud you. We'll make a merchant out of you yet, Prince Mornen. Tell me your requirements and let us see what we can achieve."

Arden Wil was a pleasant-featured rogue, still a little gaunt from his time as a slave of the Empire, but with a sly smile and a casual air to him that had already charmed one of Lockart's more winsome subordinates into his bed. While Prince Mornen concluded his deals, his followers had been found accommodation in the Four Corners prison, and whilst such arrangements would not normally be to anyone's liking, Wil had already gone some way to making the place a home, or at least as much of a home as he ever made, before the unexpected return of someone's husband or father.

Now the Roach-kin was sitting with Ceccy, talking in a low voice that Valken could not make out. The Wasp liked neither of them, for all that they had both played their parts in securing their mutual freedom. The vagrant and the wild man watched the renegade Wasp pass with a great show of solemn respect, Wil even tugging his forelock as Commonweal peasants ought to, before their betters. Valken gave them a sour look, but he had other matters to consider. Only minutes ago one of Tereser's nephews, a stout lad called Borjon, had let him know that there were prisoners asking to speak with him. The first of the volunteers had arrived.

The vengeful Dragonfly Kallen was already on the books, betrayed into service out of his own mouth. Whether he would prove to have the courage of his convictions, when set against imperial soldiers, was another matter entirely, Valken considered. Still, there had been a few promising candidates in that crowd, and if they only snared one in ten of the Four Corners' martially capable inmates, he reckoned that would land them a solid fifty bodies to throw beneath the wheels of the imperial war machine.

Whatever Mornen thinks he's doing, he had decided, he shall not fault me. I'll find him all the fat he needs to grease his road to self-destruction.

Borjon had given an office over to him, some Beetle grain-counter's haunt with close, windowless walls and a pair of guttering oil lamps. Valken stared at the stack of parchment laid out there. "And this is? You want receipts for them?"

"There are a fair number waiting, Master Valken," Borjon explained. "You'll want to make notes."

Valken regarded the paper without love. In truth, his writing was not the easiest. It was an art that he had not considered it important to excel in, as a battlefield lieutenant, and he would be cursed if it was suddenly important now that he was some manner of military pimp, or whatever Mornen had made of him.

"You, go amongst the volunteers," he told Borjon. "Find me one with clerking experience and get him in here."

So it was that, shortly thereafter, a bald, overweight and grey-chinned Beetle named Jons Rowley became the second of Mornen's volunteers, signed up under the grandiose title of Official Company Clerk.

The next man in was a Beetle as well, a solid-framed fellow who at least looked as though he had done a day's hard work in his life, unlike Jons Rowley.

"Your name and your occupation," Valken challenged him.

"Symon Thatchall, farmer." The man had his chin up, obviously trying to look military.

"How does a farmer end up in a place like this?" the Wasp demanded.

"One year's bad harvest, master."

"And from bankrupt you're ready to turn soldier?"

Thatchall swallowed. "Master, I've a family. A wife, children."

Valken stared at him, because in the Empire things were different.

"If I don't find some way to settle my debts, they'll lose the farm. They'll have nothing. Starve, most likely. Now I don't rightly say I know much about Empire or Commonweal, but if your prince settles my account, I'll sign for his war."

"You realise that you might never return to them, this family of yours," Valken said, watching for the first cracks in the man's shell.

Thatchall just nodded, though, perhaps not trusting himself to speak. The Wasp checked Borjon's records to see the sum the man owed, which seemed to him a pitiful amount to carry the weight of a life. "Mark down Symon Thatchall," he instructed Rowley. "Welcome to the army."

Others followed, a stream of them. Some owed so much that Valken knew that not all the filth in the Commonweal would buy them from their chains, others were cripples, blind men, one-legged women, ancients and invalids. These he turned down, letting their pleas and prayers fall short of his meagre compassion.

So they came, the desperate and the indebted, life's failures. Arvängen was a Hornet-kinde, a violent vandal from the hill tribes who had smashed up a taverna and was now paying the price. Asto was some kind of petty criminal, a cadaverous Fly-kinde who never looked straight on at anything. Scolus was another gangster, a fief soldier, as they called them in Helleron. Vicentis of the Deluciel looked down his nose at Valken and claimed that, if freed, his Aristoi family would provide a grand army for Mornen's cause. Valken took his measure, knocked him down with a single blow, and then had him signed up on the basis that any army needed someone for the other soldiers to mock.

Jons Rowley scratched their names down in impeccably neat script, each of them just one more check in a small but growing list of would-be soldiers.

“Rufus Martwell, physician and distiller,” announced the bespectacled Beetle man before Valken next. The Wasp raised an eyebrow, impressed. Any military company would have need of a surgeon, after all, and perhaps his wretched luck was changing.

“What is he in for?” he asked Borjon. “Lost the wrong patient, did he?”

“No, Master Valken.” Tereser’s nephew consulted his records. “Jailed for non-payment of fines levied for impersonation of a physician and distiller.” The jailer’s smile, towards Martwell, was almost fond. “Charlatans and fraudsters, master, are a particular speciality.”

For a moment I forgot where I was, Valken considered, and look what nearly happened. “Reckon you can impersonate a soldier?” he growled and, seeing the sudden uncertainty in the man’s eyes, snapped, “Mark him down, Rowley. Rufus Martwell, *soldier and volunteer*. You’ll learn to feign a soldier or I’ll make you feign a corpse.”

Martwell’s protesting about-face, as he was manhandled away, brought a hard smile to Valken, and he set to his interviews with a renewed will. The hopeless and the clueless were marched before him, to be cast aside or marked down, with Valken making his own internal notes of who looked the most promising. Miles was a huge-framed Tarkesh Ant, grey-haired and of an age when a Wasp officer would be retiring. Still, he had husbanded a smouldering, hulking strength, and there was something familiar in his face, that Valken knew from old veterans elsewhere. *A man who’s looking for a sharp-edged way to die. We can surely arrange that.* “Mark him down.”

Another dozen followed, marked down or turned away on their own merits of lack of same. The day was getting late. Valken had Rowley take down the name of Needles, a gangling and unpleasant-looking Skater-kinden, and then decided enough was enough. He had betrayed a fair slice of his military training so far today, with recruits that the Empire would not have taken willingly as slaves. Time to seek out a bottle of Lockart’s wine and console himself.

“All right Rowley, leave the ledger,” he instructed his clerk. “Scratch your own name through, if you want. You’re no soldier.”

“I’d rather leave it, Master Valken,” said the portly old man quietly.

Valken stared at him. “You jest,” he said flatly.

“If it please you, master, I happen to believe that the tyrannical ideology of the Wasp Empire must be opposed,” the man said mildly. “I would like to play my part in that, even if it is merely as company clerk.”

There was precious little empathy to be had, in the cards that life had dealt Valken, but in that moment he felt crippled by it. “As you will then,” he told the man. “Be ready here first thing tomorrow. We’ve more of these useless bastards to sift through.”

After Valken had retired for the night, Borjon Lockart took his leave of the Four Corners prison in the direction of a local hostelry he was known to frequent. There he made himself visible at a booth table until the Wasp-kinden sidled in to join him.

“Master Lystan,” he noted. “Is your officer not joining us?”

“I’m handling this business,” Lystan said shortly. “What is this mad Commonwealer up to now?”

“Out on the town mostly. His turncoat Wasp is doing the work. Got a right list of wastrels, he has. I don’t think your Empire’s got much to fear.”

“Still,” Lystan allowed. “Not a good precedent to allow, we think.” He frowned. “He’s in with the governess, though?”

“Aunt Tereser, surely.” Borjon rolled his eyes. “In more ways than one, if you get me.”

Lystan nodded tiredly, having no stomach for Beetle innuendo. "Best that it's not seen to be our doing then. These prisoners they're rounding up, some right villains amongst them, I'll wager?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," agreed Borjon amiably.

"Well then you had better arrange for me to have a quiet word with them. The Commonweal fop murdered by his own charges. Very poetic."

The weapons dealer was one of those Beetle merchants who seemed perpetually delighted with himself and the minutiae of his business. He called himself a chandler, which Mornen had thought involved candles, but apparently, in Helleron, translated as someone who equipped armies with everything they might need. His name was Master Parser, according to Bardry Mellow, who had made the introductions.

"Weapons, yes, but how many, and of what?" Parser said, passing between the close-huddled stacks of his warehouse. The accoutrements of war around them were bewildering: racks of shortswords stretching floor to ceiling in a glittering wall of steel, Ant-model triangular shields, the complexities of a dozen designs of crossbow, buckets of stubby bolts, barrels of spears, whole wardrobes of leather cuirasses and chain hauberks, a veritable milliners' of steel helms.

"I need to arm one hundred, perhaps one hundred and fifty men. I'm not sure how far my credit will stretch," admitted Mornen.

"Ah, well then, there are always options for the gentleman on a budget. It so happens that certain quarters of the arms trade are thriving as never before, Master Mornen. I can suit your needs, Master, I can fit your bill." Parser chattered on in the same vein, leading Mornen through the maze of shelves, past clerks taking stock and labourers shifting it, until he presented a half-dozen alleys of military surplus with a flourish. "This shall suit your purse, Master, fear not. All of it at the very lowest prices, and no skimping on the quality."

"Why so cheap then?" Mornen asked suspiciously.

"Well, not so much call for it, you know, and there's too much on the market to bear a proper price. You look like the sort of discerning buyer who could use a little of the non-standard though, Master, the unusual. You won't find an Ant army or a Helleron mercenary company with this, but serviceable nonetheless, I assure you."

Mornen opened his mouth for a further question, and the words dried on his tongue. He saw a whole host of spears before him, the shafts scuffed, the long, narrow heads nicked here and there. He saw slender arrows bundled like firewood, stack upon stack, some broken, some with damaged fletchings. There were swords here, but not the mass-produced blades that the Helleron foundries turned out. He saw punch-swords, short blades jutting direct from knuckle guards, and he saw longer weapons, two foot of haft and two foot of blade to make an elegant and versatile sword that Mornen was entirely familiar with, from both ends. There was some armour, too, chitin and leather and mail patched together in layers, but that had fared less well. The moments of crisis that had divorced each previous owner from his protection were still clearly written there in broken links and shattered plates.

Much of it was painted in various simple patterns, weapons and armour both, advertising in whose retinue the bearers had fought and died. It was Commonweal manufacture, all of it, and Mornen had to stop his eyes roaming in case he caught sight of something worked in white and red that might have come from his own province's doomed attempt to resist the Empire.

It was all here, everything he would need to turn his Heleron criminals into a Commonwealer levy: give them a spear each, perhaps a leather jerkin if they were lucky, and they'd be as prepared for war as most of the Dragonfly-kinde's army had been.

No.

It was a simple enough word, but no true prince would have owned to it. A real Prince Minor would have understood the time-old ways of going to war. The nobles had their mail and their swords and their bows, and they had their levies, great masses of peasant spearmen to throw before them, to carpet their road with red. Of course, Mornen was only ersatz nobility. His father had been a brigand chief who had hacked out his own stolen principedom, and had tried to teach his wayward son the responsibility that his betters, the real princes, paid lip service to, but so seldom practiced.

Mornen had tried to resist the Empire, when the black and gold came to his lands. His people had armed themselves with their spears and defended their lands with a will, and the Empire had killed just enough of them to break their spirit, before rounding up the rest as slaves. Mornen had come to Heleron for his new army because he would not put his people through that again, and now he was faced with the prospect of sending his Lowlanders to their deaths in just the same way.

No.

"Have you bows?" he asked Parser. He was envisaging hunting bows, the shortbows beloved of brigands, cheap and simple and easy to replace.

"Crossbows?" Parser asked hopefully and, after Mornen had clarified, "Oh, *that*. Well, if you must, though it's hardly a way to equip a *modern* army. I have a few barrels of the things here, yes."

He gestured derisively, and Mornen looked down on a half-dozen barrels of bowstaves – not the little hunters' weapons he had sought but five-foot longbows, each one of them lovingly hand-crafted over many days, some of wood, others of composite bone and chitin, most of them still sporting chipped lacquer in some noble house's colours or other. Each had been some princeling or vassal's pride and joy, a symbol of wealth and power. Each had been borne into war by some rich bloodline's son or daughter, some favoured servant or retainer, stirring forth to defend the Commonweal from its enemies.

Each had come here, to this dingy and unloved corner of Parser's warehouse, sold in bulk lots for pocket change by a gluttoned imperial quartermaster corps. The ruin of a dozen provinces was being offered up to Mornen for a song.

The Commonweal did have bands of peasant archers, though never many, and none equipped with these splendid weapons. They were sporadically used for scouting and raiding, but to deploy them in open battle was not considered the done thing. They were called yeomen.

Of course the bow took time to master, time that he did not have. Of course his Heleren prisoners would, for the most part, have no experience of them at all. They would have from here to the battlefield to practice, however long that proved to be.

"I'll take all you have," said Mornen, and Parser just seemed delighted to have the offending items taken off his hands.

After the previous night spent searching for recruits in the bottom of wine jars, it took Valken longer than it should have to realise that Borjon was not leading him to the same room. Presumably Jons Rowley would be waiting there alone, quill poised over his scroll ready to prick more names. He would wait some time longer, though. By the time Valken realised something

was amiss, he was being led down a narrow corridor lined with windowless doors, the abode of the damned, the resting place of the debtors.

He stopped, one hand directed at Borjon, who plainly did not recognise the threat. “What’s this?”

“One of our prisoners, Master Valken,” Borjon told him. “He wants to see you. Wants to sign up, perhaps.”

“Then you bring him to me with the others.”

Borjon winced. “Well, this fellow’s a little special, master. Fact is, I said I’d give him a private word with you, and seeing as I owe him...”

Valken frowned, wondering whether the drink was still fuddling him. “*You* owe one of your debtors?”

“Oh well, there’s plenty of ways for a debtor to get credit. Advice, or putting their skills to use, or there’s always a game of chance, master. You’d be surprised how many here manage to wrangle a little coin, or a few privileges.” Borjon wrung his hands. “Anyway, I *said*...”

“Let’s see this prodigy,” Valken said, letting him off the hook. “Let’s hope he’s worth my time.”

At first sight, he conceded the point. *This* was what he was after, surely. He recalled seeing the hulking figure in the crowd, when he gave his speech. At last the Four Corners had something to offer him.

Scorpion-kindens were always big, he knew, but this was the largest he had seen, seven feet if he was an inch, and monstrously broad: from a bald, tusked head with tiny yellow eyes, the man descended in slopes and outcrops like a mountainside. His hands were enormous, decked out with thumb- and forefinger-claws like sickles.

“Morning, chief.” The voice was lazy and sly, edged around the snaggle of fangs with a minimum of slurring, not a thug’s so much as the sort of criminal who had thugs jumping at his every word. Valken marked it.

“You’re interested in taking the Commonweal road, are you?” He glanced around at the Scorpion’s cell, which was large enough to have been warden’s quarters once, with a high window letting in light and air, a bed with a bee-fur coverlet and even a tiny folding desk set out in one corner, at which the enormous man was sitting. “You seem to have made yourself at home here, Scorpion.”

“I’ve done all right, chief.” The colossal shoulders shrugged. “Might be I’m after different horizons. Any horizons, chief. Done good business here, but I reckon it’s about time I was on my way.”

“Name?”

“Grievous, chief,” and while Valken was nodding approvingly the creature added, “Grievous Arkwright.”

The Wasp froze, his expression one of candid bafflement. “*Arkwright*?”

“Good Beetle name, that,” the Scorpion-kindens mused. “Like the folks that raised me, chief. Taught me my numbers and my trade.”

“Stop, stop there.” Valken rounded on Borjon. “You’re wasting my *time*, Beetle.”

“No, no, master-“

“Just tell me what he’s in for.”

Borjon’s eyes searched out the Scorpion-kindens, and the big man stood, prompting the other two to take an immediate step back.

“A little misunderstanding is all, chief, on account of some ledgers.”

“You’re a *clerk*? A Scorpion-kindens embezzler?”

“That’s a harsh word, chief.”

“Do you *fight*?” Valken’s day seemed to have taken him into some alternate world of lunacy.

“Oh chief, I can do better for you than that. Every army needs a quartermaster.”

In that moment Valken saw the deal. Like every other man from the regular army, he knew just what opportunities the quartermaster had to line his pockets. Even in the Commonweal, where the locals had yet to find a use for actual coin, there would be loot aplenty for the grasping hands of Grievous Arkwright. He would be a rot at the heart of the company, Valken guessed, his influence slowly corrupting the soldiers until half of them would be in his pocket, by debt or by threat.

He was about to turn the Scorpion down flat when Grievous put in, “Now Lieutenant – did I get that right? – you should know I did a stint with the Consortium, in my time. I’ve tallied columns both sides of the Empire’s border. I know how to cook for a regiment, and how to scare up victuals for them too. Nobody ever went hungry on my watch, officer or man. And for discerning palates, chief, I’ve prepared a few memorable meals in my time. You ever sat down to an Arms-feast, have you, chief?”

A muscle at Valken’s jaw twitched, and Grievous nodded sagely. “Thought you looked the type, chief. I won the secrets of that off a Major in the Quartermasters’ Corps years back, but I don’t imagine they changed the recipe much.”

It was not the sudden rush of saliva that did it, so much as the leap of Valken’s heart, that feeling of privilege and danger, the sense of the *forbidden*. The Arms-Brothers were duellists, a semi-secret, semi-outlawed society of officers and swordsmen, with traditions as old as the Empire. The Rekef would try to root them out, but half of *them* were Brothers too, and the bond of secrecy and fraternity was unbreakable. *An Arms-feast, it’s been a long time...* The most occult of the Brotherhood’s rituals, the unthinkable meats...

“I’ll be watching you,” he warned, but Grievous smile showed that the Scorpion knew he had won.

Prince Mornen Corneles was woken by Tereser Lockart shaking his shoulder. He startled into full wakefulness immediately, wings flurring the bedclothes off, ending up somewhere near the ceiling, stark naked, blinking at her.

“What?” he got out.

“Get dressed,” she told him. “Business has come late, is all. I need you dressed and out of here.”

He guessed that he had slept for less than an hour after his and Tereser’s exertions: the night was still young. Still, the Beetle city ran to rhythms that owed nothing to nature, and it seemed entirely possible that some piece of profit had come her way at this hour. Mornen dropped down to his clothes and donned them neatly. Tereser had her business face on, giving away nothing, and he had no idea what constituted important business to someone of her trade. Perhaps a large consignment of prisoners? If so it would give Valken more choice. He was still waiting to hear his final budget from Bardry Mellow, to see how many of the damned he could buy into his service, and he trusted his Wasp-kindens second was making a list ranked in order of suitability for martial service.

Tereser watched him stumble down the hall, still ridden a little by sleep, and if there was anything in her manner to give away the game, he missed it. Thus it was that, on turning the

corner, they jumped him. Strong hands had hold of him in an instant. His instinctive blur of wings almost ripped him from their grasp, but enough of them kept hold of him or his cloths to drag him back to earth again. *The Empire-!* he thought, and the fact that it was Beetle-kindens that had him in their clutches did not rule that out. A moment later, though, when they had an arm twisted behind his back, a familiar figure stepped into view.

Bardry Mellower looked decidedly less mellow than when Mornen had seen him last. If he had been holding a knife then the Dragonfly would have feared for his life. The expression on the merchant's face was one of utter outrage.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

Mornen faced him blankly. "I have no idea what you speak of," he managed.

Mellower leaned in unpleasantly, taking a choking hold of Mornen's collar. "Your goods are incomplete, Commonwealer. *The Book of Red Wings*, you said, *complete*. Complete is worth a fortune. Incomplete is... trash. A tenth of the value. We're wise to that kind of trick here in Helleron."

"It *was* complete," Mornen protested, but suddenly he was unsure. The Wasps he had taken it from had thought it complete and saleable, but did he really know. As he racked his brains there was a shout from behind Mellower, and some of the merchant's thugs were abruptly facing the other way, going for daggers.

"Release him or I'll gut the lot of you!"

Mornen recognised the voice: the Bee-kindens, Tadeusz, one of his miniscule retinue.

"Hold, wait!" he called. In the little time he had been given a suspicion had been growing. "Mellower, you want your goods?"

"What do you think?" the Beetle snapped at him. "And I'll have them, or my losses out of your hide. Get your midget to put his sword down."

Tadeusz, at around five feet, was hidden from Mornen's sight, but no doubt there would be a stolen Wasp blade in his hand. "Put it down, Tadeusz. Swords will solve nothing." One deep breath, to steady himself and collect his thoughts. "Bring me Wil and Ceccy, quickly."

The awkward pause stood as confirmation of his worries. "Then go and *find* them," he added quickly. "They can't have got far, and Ceccy's hardly inconspicuous."

"Will do." No doubt the stocky Bee-kindens was looking murder at Mellower's men, who were probably not all that fond of him either.

"Madam Lockart!" Mellower snapped, and a moment later Tereser was there. Nothing in her face suggested that the captured Dragonfly had been in her bed only minutes before.

"I'll find a cell for him, shall I?" she asked sweetly.

"You do that," Mellower agreed. "And let his midget just see if he can put things right, because otherwise, well, I know I can get my losses back from the Empire, if nobody else. You just think about that, *prince*."

After Valken had retired to his room and his wine that night, Borjon fetched his other Wasp-kindens patron, Lystan. All in all the governess' nephew obviously felt that he was doing well out of the arrangement.

"What is the feeling amongst the prisoners, the ones who've signed up?"

Borjon considered. "Mixed, master. Some've caught the cause, keen for it. Others want a fight. Most just want out."

Lystan gave that a moment's thought. "I need men of that last quality, Master Lockart, but men who keep their mouths shut. Hard men." *Ironically, men who'd make the best soldiers*

for the Commonweal prince. “Bring them to me, I’ve a proposition for them.” He passed over a handful of coin, the latest in a string of little payments to keep Borjon on his side. He had no illusions about the Beetle-kindens’ fidelity.

The warden bustled happily off, and it was not long before he was back with a little band of prisoners in tow. Lystan received them in the same office that Valken had appropriated, because he was not blind to a little irony now and then. Seeing them there, and at least some of them hard men as he had requested, he wondered just why they had not just overpowered their jailer. They were not bound or shackled, and two at least were plainly far stronger than the Beetle. Still, they followed obediently at his heels. Of course in the Empire, slaves went everywhere, but then the Slave Corps had perfected how to break a slave’s spirit, to dull the eyes and mind with fear until escape was unthinkable. Lystan could not see that mark laid on the men brought before him – and they would be little good if it had.

“So what keeps you here?” he asked, not intending to say the words aloud.

They stared at him and, unable to take the words back, he pressed on with the train of thought. “Come on now, you, Scorpion-kindens, you could have snapped this fellow’s neck, and I’m sure the gates aren’t an impossible prospect, for a determined band of reprobates. All of Helleron’s out there, after all. Easy to get lost in it.”

It was the Scorpion that answered, too, whilst the others were just looking baffled. “Oh Helleron’s not an easy place, if you’ve not got money, chief. Hard as anything, Helleron. No place, no friends, plenty of people who know you should be in a cell rather than under the sky. After all, get fed in here, and don’t get rained on. Out there, when you’ve got nothing left, you’re meat. In here we still have something they can’t take from us.”

“And what is that?” Lystan demanded.

“Our debts, chief. Give us just enough value to make it worth keeping us alive.”

Lystan wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Well I can top that, as an offer, and top the Commonwealer’s too. Who’ve you brought me, Borjon?”

The Beetle, who had gone a little ashen at the talk of snapping his neck, recovered his composure. “Sir, the Scorpion’s known as Grievous. Miles is the Ant. This halfbreed’s known as Scolus. Rufus Martwell here is a clever man, and you wanted people who knew what was good for them.”

“And the Spider?”

“Vicentis of the Deluciel,” the prisoner introduced himself, with an elaborate bow.

“Heard what was going on and I thought it was better to bring him rather than leave him to gossip,” said Borjon apologetically.

Lystan examined them. The Scorpion looked as though he could break stone with his bare hands, and although Miles was old, he seemed tough as leather. Scolus was obviously a thug ready for the hire, whilst Martwell was a bald, solid Beetle, capable material with any luck. As for the Spider, well, he looked like a fop, with his mop of curly fair hair, and clothes that had obviously been expensive once upon a time, but Lystan knew that appearances meant nothing with their kind, and that Spiders lived and breathed deceit and murder.

“They’ll do,” he decided. “Leave them with me, Borjon. Best you don’t know what’s said next. Stay down the hall and I’ll shout for you.”

After the warden had gone he gave the assembled quintet of villains a thin smile. “Your man Corneles Mornen has hired you to fight the Empire. Have you any idea how piss-cursed stupid that is? Believe me, plenty of Mornen’s kin have found out the hard way. However, your fellows who signed alongside you are due some luck: Mornen’s not going anywhere, his fool

plan will not happen. None of your fellows gets out of the prison, and believe me, they're better off."

"How will all this come about, chief?" the Scorpion asked softly. "Here was I thinking him and his turncoat Wasp recruiting sergeant were dead set on throwing us all into the mincing machine."

Lystan's smile grew a little. "There will be a terrible example of what happens when a man tries to free criminals incautiously. Some of the very people Mornen is trying to recruit are bound to slit his throat in thankfulness, before fleeing the prison. One more dead Commonwealer, and believe me, it's not a commodity the world is short of right now. And seeing as the fool has got himself locked up this very evening, as Borjon tells me, the work will be so much the easier."

"And those wicked fellows who do the deed and run..." the Spider, Vicentis, prompted.

"Ah well, no need to be lost and alone in Helleron when you're on *my* books. I have associates who can find a place for you. The Empire's work in Helleron can always profit from willing hands." His smile was very broad indeed now, practically ear to ear. "Let's face it, you're not due a better offer any time soon."

"All right gents, now watch my hands, watch the cups, watch the ball, watch whatever you think is important." Arden Wil moved languidly, the wooden ball balancing on his knuckles before rolling down between his middle fingers onto the table, where he covered it with a wine bowl, one of three. It was the oldest game in the world, and everyone at the table knew it, and he shifted the bowls about with a nonchalant unconcern, ignoring the odd rattle as the ball struck the inside of one of them.

"Now, place your bets, gentles all."

They stared at him sullenly, the table-full of them. At Wil's side, Ceccy growled something unintelligible and upended his own bowl, slurping out the dregs. He was such a picture of savage dissipation that it almost seemed he should be chained to Wil's chair by the neck, a guardian monster from the furthest reaches of the world.

A number of them were tempted, obviously, to dispute that the ball was under any of the bowls, because that was the way that they did it, when they played this game. That was the classic little con. The first few times they had jeered him, for trying such a stale scam, and he had picked them out at random, asked them to lift up one bowl or another to reveal the ball sitting merrily there, laughing at them. Then sometimes the ball was there, sometimes it was not, each round a further series of expert cup-and-ballsmen caught out by this Roach-kindens hick from the Commonweal. They were, each of them, experts, but they could not tell him which bowl the ball was under, or if it was under any of them at all. He was not playing the game by their rules.

But they hated to be beaten, all the same. Each one of them was watching for the trick, and that was the real prize. If they could work out how he did it then they would be that much the more accomplished huckster.

Some money went down, a few silvers, more of the little clay chips that passed for small change. Most Commonwealers didn't know what to do with money, but Wil had travelled more than most. He had been to Helleron a few times before, though never alone.

He saw where the money had gone this time: most of them betting on no ball at all. He flipped the leftmost bowl with a thumbnail, the ball sitting like a new-laid egg in full view. Even the few who had guessed right knew that they had missed the trick, won by chance only.

"Don't feel bad, gents. It's magic, obviously, and who can second guess magic?"

Their scowls were only increasing. In the Commonweal this match of skill would be producing frowns only of concentration, and a camaraderie of kindred spirits, craft against craft, just like two Mantis-kin den duelling to the death would hold a mutual respect even at the last blow. In Heleron they didn't seem to have learned that easy comradeship. Instead they cared only for the money, and bet with him only because he had a trick worth their time. Only Wil knew that they would never learn it. It was a slice of quick-handed skill, and a little Roach-kin den Art, but it was magic as well, it really was. The surly Beetle-kin den and Flies and halfbreeds that he was rooking did not believe in magic, though, and so they would never learn.

He gathered in his latest round of winnings and looked up at them with his slight smile. The mood at the table was deteriorating. He had held them this far by their pride, their confidence in their own ability to see through him, but his constant winning streak had eroded that away, bit by bit.

"And it's early to bed for Ceccy and me," he concluded. He knew that best practice now would be to lose a few, let them think that they were in on the secret. Roach-kin den were a disliked people in many places, and they had learned that somehow you had to lose a little to win your way clear. The wine had been flowing freely, though, and in that moment Wil decided that he was going to simply make his graceful exit and leave them guessing.

He stood, and abruptly there were two or three solid, immovable Beetles between him and his graceful exit. "Now gents, let's not be sour losers," he suggested.

"Show us how it's done," one of his gambling partners grunted.

"Magic, like I said," Wil said, speaking a little more quickly, but keeping his voice soft nonetheless. "I've showed you a score of times, gents--"

"Sit back down, boy," said one of them, and now he had a cudgel in one hand, laid down on the tabletop. "You've a fine trick there, and it'd be a shame if it died with you."

Pissing Heleron, was Wil's thought now, recognising that, between the wine and their incredulity he had missed the moment when he might have simply left. *I always forget how mean-spirited they are, here*. There was no brotherhood of shysters in this man's town. Life at the bottom was grindingly hard, each man against his neighbour. There was not a drop of spare humour or charity in them. *Da always said this was a bastard city*.

"Filthy 'Wealer," someone muttered close by, and "Roach," from another, simply the name of his people but spat out as though it was a curse. There were more weapons on show now, the odd knife making its silvery entrance.

"Ceccy," Wil said, tensing to move, getting behind his friend. The stringly, bare-chested Cicada-kin den rumbled deep in his skin-and-ribs chest, a sound greater than it should have been able to contain.

But of course they did not know the people of the Cicada here. They barely knew them in the Commonweal.

The first fist flew, and Wil ducked back, barely swaying from it. Someone else grabbed Ceccy by the arm to sling him out of the way.

The rail-thin man, with his long, dirty hair and beard, drew in a deep breath and *shouted*. There was no word in there, or perhaps a word that no other kin den had ever needed to say: a single flat syllable that rattled the beams and broke the windows and flattened the half-dozen nearest Heleren, sending the rest of them reeling back.

"Go!" Wil snapped, his own head ringing even though Ceccy was facing away from him. In an instant the two of them had bullied their way through the staggering mob and out of the door, onto the cold streets of Heleron. They could hear more shouting, in all directions: Ceccy's

bellow had hardly gone unnoticed. Ahead of the, down the road, were armoured silhouettes, a watch patrol no doubt, or perhaps some leg-breakers from one fief or another.

A moment later the less concussed of the con-artists were piling out of the taverna and Wil and Ceccy took to their heels, without wine and without winnings.

Piss on Helleron, thought the Roach as he ran. Already the watchmen were shouting and giving chase.

For a building intended to keep people in, the prison had a surprising number of entrances and exits. But then those prisoners who still had some family or hidden resources could cling on to some standard of life within its walls, bribing the guards for wine or fine foods or brief liaisons with women or men of dubious virtue. There was something of the inn about the place, something of the retreat. Life in Four Corners was in many ways more comfortable than in Helleron at large.

There was a small tradesman's door set into a deep archway, reached through an alley that was barely overlooked. In such surroundings, with rubbish reeking at their feet, three cloaked Wasp-kindens would not be noted. Besides, people minded their own business in Helleron. Nobody wanted to share in the misfortune of their neighbours.

Lystan rapped three times at the door, trusting that his lackeys on the inside would be as good as their word. He hardly had the time to could to five before he heard the bar lift. His hopefuls awaited him, released by Borjon Lockart to do his bidding: Miles the Ant, hulking Grievous, halfbreed Scolus, the Beetle Rufus Martwell and that slender dandy Vicentis.

"Master Lockart's keeping his distance, chief. He says he'll make sure his old aunt doesn't get a whiff of what's going on."

Lystan nodded. "Where's the turncoat?"

"Valken, chief? Retired to his chamber. Finished his interviews, he has," the Scorpion explained. "Got an extra ration or two of wine with him tonight. Fond of his sauce, that one."

Lystan nodded curtly. "We'll give him a while to crawl into his cups. You two," he nodded at the men he had brought with him, "it is only fit that a traitor to the Empire falls at the hands of the Emperor's chosen people. That is your task. The Commonwealer gets no such honours. Death at the hands of slaves is too good for him."

"Oh don't you worry, chief, we've got a handle on it."

"The prince is still in his cell?"

Grievous' smile beamed around his snarl of fangs. "Chief, he's right where you want him. That fellow he crossed is a big man in the city, and a friend of the governess to boot. Your man's out of credit in this city."

"Well then." Lystan's hand darted into his tunic, and came back with a pouch that he tossed to the Scorpion. "Amuse yourselves until an hour after nightfall, so long as you stay this side of drunk. After dark, well, you know what to do. I'll be waiting in the same place Borjon brought you to me the first time. Bring good news."

"You'll not share a jar with us, sir? Toast the success of the venture?" the Spider, Vicentis, struck up. "The Four Corners has a good enough cellar if you have the wherewithal." His eyes kept straying sideways to the pouch that Grievous held.

Lystan bit back on his immediate response, and kept it from his face as only a spy could, simply shaking his head and waving them away. Inside, though, he shuddered. *Drink with scum like you five? I'd sooner spit on the Emperor's shoes.*

There was a courtyard out front, at the Four Corners, and it surprised many strangers to Helleron (some of whom only discovered it after being forcibly made inmates) that there was a thriving trade done there by various enterprising merchants. One wall had been shaded by a faded canopy, with cheap benches and tables set out to form a makeshift taverna. Across, a number of peddlers cooked and sold food nominally superior to the slop that the residents got. There were usually any number of little games of chance and skill, dice, cards, animal fights and various other ways to win or lose money. So where did the money come from? How was it that these wretches, who had less than nothing, were still able to afford some style of living? In truth, enough of them had relatives, or even debtors of their own, to furnish themselves with some mean manner of diversion. Others were skilled or lucky, and fleeced the wardens just enough for some pocket change, without accidentally managing to slam their own head in the door of their cells, which was a universally recognised side-effect of too much luck in the Four Corners. The place had its own petty economy, and in the city of the desperate even the most wretched opportunity found a superfluity of takers.

Lystan's little hoard found its way to the wretched taverna in short order, and the five murderers-to-be hailed up some liquid courage to steel themselves to the task. Grievous sat back, the bench creaking alarmingly with his weight, letting the others sample their watered wine, his eyes narrowed in thought.

"How are we going to do it?" Vicentis asked, licking his lips. He had been all composure before their Wasp patron, but now he was getting jittery. It was plain that he had little enough stomach for killing, at least with his own hands.

"Poison, for preference," Rufus Martwell put in. "There'll be some to be had somewhere."

"Not with that purse," objected Scolus. "And besides, how many people are you going to ask, before you get it, and nobody's going to be suspicious? We beat him, strangle him, cut him. Whatever."

"Cut him with what?" the Beetle demanded, slightly too loud. The others scowled at him.

Wordlessly the Ant, Miles, displayed his hands, with curved bone blades jutting from their backs. His Art had not stinted him, for ways to draw blood. He nodded at Grievous' hands too, equally fit for murder.

"All we need to do is hold the bastard down," Scolus agreed, satisfied. "And then..."

"Out," whispered Vicentis. "Helleron beckons."

"Queen of cities, Helleron," said Grievous, stretching. If his little eyes were watching his fellows just a little too closely, who was to know? "Been away and been back, and there's no place like her. She's a lady, this city. Oh, a great fat raddled one, and poxed to the eyeballs, but she can slap on the makeup and pass for an Arista if she needs to. Pockmarks're still there underneath, of course, but what of that? So, out at last. I been here almost two years now, lads. Not my fault my book-keeping was beyond the wit of my employers, eh? Not my fault they never found the money either. It was my accounts that were on the mark, I'll swear it. The errors were in their treasuries. Still, I can't see me getting another clerk's post, more's the pity. And I reckon you won't be dispensing much either, Master Martwell? I heard you was quite the celebrity when you got brought in."

The Beetle opened his mouth for the round of disclaimers he had worn threadbare over the last few months, the litany of crooked suppliers, ignorant clients and ill humours that had brought him down. Seeing the expressions of the others, he sighed and shrugged. "I'll find something."

"Streets of Helleron always crawling with opportunity thick as roaches," Grievous agreed. "Must be, or why should so many fortune hunters end up sleeping out of doors every night, if not to catch all the luck that flowed through them with the piss and shit? How about you, Scolus? Your fief taking you back?"

"No fief any more. If I'd not ended here, I'd have ended for good out there," said the former gangster. "The Lily-takers got taken down to a man, I heard."

Grievous grunted. "You takes your chances, as they say. Plenty of fiefs out there got empty chairs just begging for a new blade, eh? Some of them still got blood on the upholstery, for that matter. Why, a fly in my ear tells me the Truth-hunters are hiring..."

Scolus put his wine-bowl down hard. "And you know what they do to halfbreeds."

"So I do, my mistake," Grievous agreed gently. "Still, chances all over Helleron for men like us, eh? We might have a history and a lack of coin, but there's no stopping us once we're free, eh? Once we've not got these walls to keep us."

"What about the Wasp's offer. He said he'd employ us, didn't he?" Vicentis put in.

"Serving his *chosen people*," Miles growled.

"Why surely. I've worked for the Wasps before, like I was telling our man Valken," Grievous told them. "Busy, busy people, what with their wars and invasions. Oh, they've got their little ways, it's true. They can get a bit sniffy about halfbreeds too, but to be honest it's no more sniffy than they get about everyone else. Everyone who isn't *them*. Still, world's full of opportunities, eh? Always work in the Empire, for as many as you like. Why else d'you think they import so many slaves?"

"But he said work in Helleron," Vicentis pointed out.

"He did, and don't let me hear you say otherwise," Grievous agreed. "After all, they're bound to have all sorts they want doing over here, what with the borders so close these days. Opportunities, like I say. We're lucky fellows, really we are. Just think of those poor sods who have to stay here, when we can be out on the streets of Helleron, working our way up like honest folk, and with no lesser masters than the Wasp-kinde. Who'd not trade places with us, given the chance?"

"Well it's got to be better than the war the Dragonfly wants us for?" Rufus Martwell complained querulously.

"Oh, the Commonweal," Grievous agreed heartily. "Catch me going there. All that bloody *space* and *green*, and no walls keeping you in, and as for the *war*, well, who ever heard of any opportunities to be had during a war? Fool's business. We're best off here being the Wasps' boot-boys and slitting throats than go looking for a decent fight off in the Commonweal, believe you me." He stood abruptly. "Lads, I've a meeting between a wall and my bladder to broker, and I'll be a while with it. Perhaps some other business to take care of too, you know our bustling social calendar here. Don't wait up. You lads go impress yourselves on our new patron Lystan. I leave matters in your capable hands."

Lying back in his bunk, in a room appropriated from one of the Four Corners wardens, Valken paused with wine bowl raised, the slightly oily, harsh-tasting liquid washing at his lips. The prison was not exactly quiet at night. Enough of the prisoners seemed to be out and about rather than locked up that he had given up trying to find the governing principle that kept them all within the place's walls. As far as he could work out, a persuasive or resourceful prisoner could even enjoy regular nights on the town so long as he was back behind bars before dawn. A *madhouse*, he thought, and it sounded as though some of the inmates had come calling. He had

expected this. Discipline, he knew, was the only thing that kept the lower orders, the soldiers and the slaves, in their place. Discipline, what any good Empire and army were both built on, and the one natural resource that Helleron seemed to be lacking. The place was a festering rot-hill, full of maggots trying to crawl over one another to the top, filth on filth. *The Empire should come here and wipe it all away.*

He was unhappily aware that, when the Empire's inexorable progress did bring it here, there was likely to be precious little wiping. Between the Consortium merchants and the rich families and the venal quartermasters and officers, the Empire had plenty who would appreciate Helleron just as it was.

The scum here did not take him seriously, he knew. They thought he was mad, coming here to buy their indentures. Mornen *was* mad, of course, as Valken well knew, and it was only to be expected that some of the lunacy would have rubbed off on poor Valken.

He heard them try the door, and imagined them snickering to one another, about to play some prank on the recruiting officer.

Discipline. However drunk he was, the word felt like a rod of iron down his spine, and as the door edged open (for the wardens doors were the only ones in the place that didn't lock) he flung the wine-bowl like a discus, with all his strength, and it shattered in the intruder's face.

"Know your place!" Valken practically howled, as the man fell back with a horrified screech, the cheap wine burning his eyes. The second man and Valken locked eyes, each appreciating, in that moment, his error: the newcomers in thinking him incapable with drink, and Valken for thinking them anything other than a pair of Wasp-kindens assassins.

They both unleashed their stings at the same time, and both diving aside, so that the exchange of golden fire achieved nothing but to blacken the stones of the walls. Valken overcompensated and went down behind an occasional table, which bore the brunt of both attackers' wrath, splintering and flipping onto him. With an unexpected access of inebriate strength he hurled it at them, a surprising weight of well-carved wood that took one of the killers down to his knees. Valken let his hands speak, bolts of light spraying wildly about the room. He managed to miss the standing man entirely, but caught his stunned fellow in the back of the head as he staggered upright.

Then the other man was on him, dagger drawn back professionally and the other hand free for stinging. Valken fumbled for his wrists, feeling a wash of heat warm his ribs and char his tunic. For a moment the two Wasps were grappling, but the assassin was stronger, and sober to boot, and he bent Valken backwards over the bed. There was a brief, ridiculous tug of war over the dagger, and then the killer flicked his other hand free and tried to ram its palm in Valken's face.

Almost lazily a hand closed on that wrist and bent the entire arm back with languid strength so that Valken heard each joint pop and grind in turn. The nightmare figure of Grievous Arkwright loomed, seeming in that moment too large to properly fit into the room.

Valken killed his attacker quickly, a sting-shot to the side of the head, and then he was twisting off the bed, not away from the two dead men but out of arm's reach of Grievous.

"I was going to come and talk supplies, chief," the Scorpion said innocently. "Lucky I'm such a conscientious fellow, isn't it?"

Valken stared at him without love. "What do you want?" He was tense still, ready to let his Art lash the big man if the Scorpion so much as tried to close the distance. All of a sudden he was sober, a revelation entirely unwelcome.

"I'm sure you'll think of something, chief." Grievous drew back through the doorway like something boneless. "Strikes me, though, that if these folk were *here...*"

"Damnfool *Mornen*," Valken hissed, and a moment later he was past the Scorpion and pelting down the corridor.

Being stuck in a cell gave one plenty of time to reflect, and there had been many who had come to the Four Corners and discovered within themselves a hitherto unknown penchant for philosophy. Those like Mornen, at least, who did not have the means to bribe or talk their way out of the cell and into the wider prison society.

He could probably have inveigled his way out in due course, with a winning word and a smile, but Tereser Lockart's word was law, when she chose to apply it, and her word had him in here until the end of the world, if need be. He was unsure just what had prompted her iron resolve on this issue. *Perhaps she feels guilty, and fears that if I confronted her she would melt*, he considered dryly. More likely she was angry that he had shown her up in front of one of her peers.

I'm coming to the conclusion that this was something of a mistake. "This" in his context meant Helleron entire. The idea had seemed irresistible when it had come to him, but then he had never actually visited the pestilent place before. He had imagined something like a grand farmer's market, with the various professionals of the Beetle city trading their services and wares, perhaps with a lord's manor overlooking the square, and a few guards to keep out thieves and vagabonds, some inflated version of the little bartering fairs that the Commonweal saw. Oh, he knew this was not his homeland, but he had assumed the differences would be of titles and technique: the lord would be some council of merchants, and instead of barter there would be this coin that the Lowlanders were so keen on, and of course the range of goods and skills on offer would be different.

He had not heard of factories before, or workshops or debtor's prisons, or conceived of a city of so many thousands crammed in elbow to elbow. He had not heard of such abject poverty, the masses of the poor who would take any work at beggar's rates because it allowed them another day of starving only a little. Had such a place been described to him he would have thought, *well, surely they'd all leave then*. Even he, from a country where men and women were born onto the land and into the stewardship of some lord or other, and lived all their lives in the one village, on the one step-farmed plot, even he would have thought this, because he would not have understood.

He understood now. They had been spoiled, most of them. If a Commonweal farmer turned outlaw then those skills that had set him herding or tilling would see him foraging, building a shelter of a night, weathering the wilderness with a fair chance of thriving. He knew nothing of machinery or manufacture, but he had crafts and trades entire, from raw material to finished work. He would live. Drop a Helleren native into the wilds and the wretch would starve surrounded by food, freeze surrounded by shelter. His skills would encompass one small step in a grand endeavour, to fix machines or to operate them, to keep accounting books, to settle disputes, to fabricate some small part of some great thing. Not only could he not live in the wilds, he could not even live in the city without a webwork of others whose purviews were just as limited. Mornen understood that people flocked to Helleron in droves seeking their fortunes, for the prosperity of the city was plain to see. That wealth seemed denied to the actual people, though, a property that belonged only to the city itself, always in sight and always out of reach, and the fortune-hunters came and ground themselves down in the machines, against the walls.

The city shaped them into mere parts of a whole, and once that was done they had nothing, no hope, no independent life beyond the city's own.

And I want to make them soldiers. At his lowest ebb, close-pressed by the stone walls, sickened by the great mass of the Apt and the industrious piled one on the other in every direction, he wondered if dying to Wasp swords and stings was not the most mercy anyone was likely to show the natives of this place.

Then he heard the key click in the lock.

Lystan had been looking forward to *seeing* this troublesome Commonweal prince at last, albeit not for very long. The man had been imprisoned for a day or two, with plenty of time to brood on his fate, and now his worst fears would be realised: the Empire had found him, even here, even in this city of grind and grime. The look on Mornen's face, Lystan anticipated, would be priceless. It was worth his coming in person, just to see it. That and he would be expected to have seen the body, when he reported. Captain Manser was both thorough and untrusting in his debriefings.

At Lystan's back his makeshift murderers waited: the old Ant, the balding Beetle, the halfbreed, the Spider-kinde fop. Only the Scorpion had stayed away, perhaps pricked by a conscience that his frame, however large, had not seemed to have space for. Or drunk, perhaps, on Lystan's coin. That seemed more likely.

The door swung open: Mornen was revealed, and his eyes flicked to Lystan's Wasp-kinde face.

He smiled, broad and genuine. His expression had something of relief about it.

Lystan was disconcerted. "What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Honest villainy, at last," said Mornen Corneles, composing himself for the end.

Lystan wrinkled his nose, as though being accorded any virtue by a Commonwealer was distasteful. "*Honest?*"

"I have had my fill of Helleron," Mornen stated simply. "This place is unthinkable. There is more evil done by the citizens of Helleron to one another on any given morning than in half the Empire, and for far baser reasons. Come then, let it be done because of politics and conquest, rather than death by inches here."

He had his thumb-claws flexed out, Lystan noted, but no matter: the Wasp had no intention of getting that close. "Sorry to disappoint you, Commonwealer," he said, "but Helleron will get you after all. In fact I look forward to seeing it tear you to pieces. Kill him, as slowly as you like."

There was a moment of hesitation, as he had expected. The Beetle had shuffled to the back, the least violent by nature; Vicentis the Spider was to one side, not a man to strike the first blow or risk those claws ravaging his pretty face. At last it was Miles who stepped forward, obviously willing to match the blades of his Art against anyone's.

"Just get it over with," Lystan ordered, and the Ant ripped his throat out.

It was over that fast, a death far quicker than the Wasp had intended for Mornen. The prince stepped back to dodge the worst of the blood. He had his eyes on their faces, seeing that the moment had been infinitesimally balanced. Had the halfbreed moved first, perhaps the Wasp would still live, and Mornen would be fighting for his life. Had the Wasp said one word less or more...

Even in that second Valken came pounding up, reeling to an unsteady halt as he saw the scene. He nodded curtly to Mornen, as ever giving no particular sign of pleasure that his superior officer and moral creditor remained alive. Behind him, an enormous Scorpion rounded the corner in an untidy lope. A mean spark of satisfaction gleamed in his small eyes as he surveyed the night's handiwork.

"How goes the roster?" Mornen asked lightly, as though there was no dead Wasp at his feet.

"As complete as it will ever be. How goes your incarceration?" Valken returned.

"Eventful. On the morrow find Tadeusz and see what can be salvaged." Mornen looked from man to man. None of them would meet his gaze, and unfinished business hung in the air like a bad smell. Valken was looking back at the Scorpion, seeing collusion there even if he could not quite work out the details.

"Thank you for your help, lads," Mornen said softly. "Your good service is noted." He chose his tone carefully, banishing any interpretation of events that would speak of their near-guilt. "Be ready to march on the morrow. Valken-" He saw the man stiffen, and realised why a moment later. "*Lieutenant* Valken, have the men you have chosen armed from the stocks Master Mellower delivered. It seems possible we may have to stage an insurrection here to take our leave. These Beetles will sell anything to anyone, and it seems they don't think about the consequences of freeing and arming the inmates of a prison."

But he had underestimated Helleron yet again. On the morning came Bardry Mellower, all smiles again, as though it had been some wicked twin of his who had stormed into the prison demanding that Mornen be thrown into a cell. Tereser Lockart was with him, and she looked Mornen in the eye with a smile, even an inviting smile, as though history in her city was writ in water. Water, considered Mornen, that, given the hygiene here, someone had almost certainly pissed in.

Mellower was happy with him again. The *Book of Red Wings* was mysteriously complete. It was half the morning before he got to the bottom of it, wading through a sea of paperwork that the Beetles forced on him, warrants for the release of those men whose names Valken had picked out, dockets for the weapons and armour (and never a word about how some of them had come to be in the hands of his new-minted soldiers). He kept trying to force a confrontation, to face them down, to defy them, but they were doing everything he wanted, and he might as well try to grasp smoke.

Eventually Tadeusz turned up, the stocky little Bee looking smug, which was a new expression for him. "I've another two recruits, your highness," he explained. "Would you do me the honours and come and look at them?"

He led Mornen and Valken to one of the Four Corners' meanest cells and had one of the wardens unlock the door. Within, looking bruised, ill-used and decidedly the worse for wear, were Ceccy and Arden Wil.

"What's this?" Mornen asked, although it took little imagination to piece it together.

"These two reprobates had a bad night on the town," Tadeusz announced. "Shirking their responsibilities, getting into trouble, bringing you into disrepute. Lucky some responsible citizen was able to lead the watch to them, say I. Got them in just before dawn."

"About the same time as the missing page turned up?" Mornen guessed.

"As it happens," Tadeusz agreed.

"Page? I don't know anything about this page," Wil protested quickly.

“*Sir*,” snapped Valken. Everyone stared at him, but the Wasp was unflinching. “You will say Sir when you address an officer of this company.”

Wil’s eyes sought out Mornen, who was looking unhappy. *Still, we are an army now, and it is Valken’s work as much as mine.* He nodded once, and heard Wil’s faint echo of, “Sir.”

“Why did you take it?” Mornen asked.

But it was Ceccy that stirred himself. “She w’sa nai’lass’n’all,” he grumbled.

“She was...?” Mornen frowned.

“Pretty, he said she was pretty,” Wil said hollowly. “It wasn’t nothing dirty, or not much. Just a painting of a girl.” He shrugged. “Sir.”

There was something tormented in Ceccy’s wild look, some deep misery that recent events had taken the scab off. Above all, compared to most of the recent expressions Mornen had seen, it was an honest one. The prince sighed. “What’s to be done with them?”

“Your choice, sir,” Tadeusz told him. “Sign them up and pay their debt – it’s small enough – or leave them here.”

“You swore to me, you two,” the prince reminded his errant subjects. “Will you abide by it now? Will you when we return to the Commonweal?”

“Aye,” growled Ceccy, and after a while Wil nodded. “Soldiers then, for real, sir?”

“Better than prisoners,” Mornen confirmed, and then, “better than Helleron.”

There was no argument from anybody there.