

The Sun of the Morning

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

Prince-Minor Mornen Corneles had heard plenty of stories about the slaves the Empire took: luckless wretches seized by the score and crammed into cages, the cages put onto wagons and the wagons hauled off by lurching beasts of burden or the noisy, frightening metal engines that the Wasps had brought with them.

At least they get to ride.

It was part of his general luck, he considered, that here he was, slave of the Empire, and they were making him push his own wagon.

He was one of four prisoners sweating and straining to keep the thing moving over the uneven ground. The Commonweal of Mornen's Dragonfly-kindens was not well-supplied with roads and this was little more than a track worn by livestock finding the path of least resistance: neither goats nor aphids cared overmuch about even ground.

The traces at the back of the wagon had been designed for two fair-sized beasts pushing in tandem, but the Wasps had botch-lashed it all to one diminutive draft-beetle half Mornen's size, apparently all they could get. The uncomplaining creature had its hind legs clamped against the wagon's rear as it pushed with all its might with the other four limbs, moving the vehicle in reeling jolts over the path.

Before Mornen had joined this select fraternity of unpaid servants of the Empire, the three other slaves must have had a vile time of it attempting to keep the wagon stable, and even now it was a constant effort to keep the four-wheeled wooden box balanced and moving. From inside, the single piece of human cargo directed occasional tirades of blistering abuse at their mutual captors, the panting slaves and the Commonweal's standards of civic engineering.

The slavers themselves had an easier time of it, practically strolling along in the wagon's grinding wake, joking with one another, passing wineskins back and forth and occasionally lashing out at their captives with club or whip. Mornen himself had felt the lash more than once as he stumbled or made to stop for breath.

While Mornen Corneles was no mild aesthete nobleman, this constant wrenching physical work was wearing him down, for all the wagon seemed to make such dragging progress.

What made it worse was that he knew the stoic little beetle at the back was doing the grand share of the work.

It had been three days of this now, and Mornen knew that he couldn't take much more of the work. If he was going to make his move then it must be soon or both the strength and the will would have been sweated from him. He had no illusions about the slavers' reaction to a slave who could no longer push.

They had tied him to the wagon, but it was only with rope and the knots were shoddy. He would have thought that professional slaving men would have been better at knots than a sailor, but it seemed that their mechanical aptitude had spoiled them. His fellow sufferers were manacled to iron rings set in the wagon's side, but it seemed that the Wasps had not expected a fourth prize and had therefore been forced to improvise. They were lazy too, leaving their charges in the same bonds overnight. What was casual cruelty to them had given Mornen all the time he needed to tug and worry at his bindings until he was sure he could shuck his hands free at a moment's notice.

If they had been passing through woodland then he might just have slipped off, trusting to his feet and an outdoorsman's tricks to escape pursuit. Unfortunately, the wagon's track was along good farming land that gently undulated towards what had been the Commonweal's south-east border, before the Empire's invasion had set about the task of redrawing the maps. As it was, the slavers would be more than equal to the task of bringing down a lone runner: their hands would flash the golden fire of their stinging Art, and that would be that.

No, what Mornen needed was the sky. His own Art would conjure wings from his back, and then he would take his chances, betting his swift and darting flight against both the stings and the pursuit of his enemies.

They had bound him in more ways than one, however. Fly-shackles, they called them: a harness of leather about his back that drew his shoulders in just enough to stop him moving them easily. It blocked his Art, banished his wings and left him as earthbound as the others. It also made pushing the wagon that much harder, stopped him sleeping for more than an hour at a stretch, and could cripple him for life if he were left like this for too long.

But the slavers were slack. There was precious little in them of the discipline of the imperial army. Mornen had heard that, of all the Wasp forces, it was their Slave Corps that owned to the worst atrocities and vices. Certainly these men seemed little better than bandits, for

all they wore the hated black and gold. Mornen knew all about bandits from close personal experience: he knew that most men of greed and self-interest lived for the moment, for the near future at best. They neither planned nor took proper care.

So it was that he was close to making his exit from his captors. The Fly-shackles were an old set, and many a prisoner must have done his best to be free of them. They were scuffed, scarred and, at one armpit, slightly torn. Mornen's Dragonfly-kindens Art was good for more than taking wing: his claws were delicate curved razors like the mandibles of the dragonflies themselves, and they slid in and out of his thumbs at a thought. Each night, between his fitful bouts of uneasy sleep, he twisted his arms about until his joints screamed, so that he could gouge at the shackles' weak point. He widened it and widened it, working in tight silence, hunched in on himself so as not to warn his captors. If his strength held out just a little longer he would be free and then he would chance their stings. Better a burning death than any more life like this.

I seem to be spending my life running from one prison to another.

His mind skipped back more than two tendays. He remembered the long walk.

He had often heard the phrase used to describe prisoners walking to their executions. Execution, in fact, had been exactly what he had expected after the Mercers had taken him. His bad luck, which had been painting his life in bleak colours for some time, had excelled itself over the last few years.

His father, who had named himself the first Prince Mornen, had started off as a brigand chief with ambition, and had clawed his way up to becoming a self-proclaimed prince ruling a province that had been lawless for long enough that its people were glad of any guiding hand. Mornen senior had even managed a decade or so of relatively just governance. Then he had died suddenly and, even as young Mornen Corneles was trying to pick up the pieces, the Empire's invasion had come, rolling over little provinces and towns and crushing them beneath the wheels of its war machine. Mornen had tried to muster a defence but his noble neighbours wanted no more to do with him than they had with his father, and so they, and he, fell each on their own. The black and gold flag waved over all their palaces and castles now.

Mornen had been trying to arrange some manner of evacuation in the face of the advancing imperial line when the Mercers had found him. The Monarch's own hero-soldiers, the defenders of the Commonweal, had taken one look at the chaos and arrested Mornen Corneles

because he was impersonating a nobleman. The people of Mornen's province had been left for the Wasp-kindens.

They had told him he was being brought before the Monarch, an impossibly distant and hallowed figure that he only half believed in. As it turned out, Mornen was not so important as all that, and he had languished for a day at the pleasure of Prince-Major Lowre Cean who had apparently now been given the thankless job of trying to organise a defence against the imperial invasion. Why it was thought the man should have time to administrate criminal justice as well had baffled Mornen, but then pretending to nobility was treason, and perhaps a simple magistrate and headsman were unequal to the magnitude of the task.

After a day in the stocks, suffering the abuse of prince and peasant alike, he had been told that his time had come, that justice would be served. By then it had almost come as a relief.

They had not bound his hands but let him walk free into the vaulted hall of Prince Lowre's castle, a bright-armoured Mercer on either side suggesting an honour guard that he had hardly earned. The hall ahead had been crowded with nobles and their retainers, and Mornen had been more shocked than he would admit to see so many of them dishevelled, battered and scarred. The Empire's steady push into Commonweal lands had been inexorable and savage; obliterating what Commonwealer forces had been thrown together against it.

Lowre Cean himself had sat enthroned at the far end of the hall, a gaunt Dragonfly-kindens, the rich gold of his skin turned pale with age and his thinning hair white. There was a pack of petitioners, scribes and subordinates vying for his attention about the throne, so that the old man might have been some noble old beast brought to bay by a rabble of hunters.

Mornen had stopped, but one of the Mercers had put a hand to his back and pushed him forward. Just as he entered the room, just as all eyes had turned upon him, something had been thrust into his hands: a standard displaying a familiar flag – a crimson sun on a white field, the emblem that Mornen's father had devised when he made the self-devised progression from bandit chieftain to would-be prince.

Stepping uncertainly down the length of the hall, Mornen had felt every snarl, every scowl. Snippets of barbed comment had dogged his heels all the way to the throne.

‘...some jumped up brigand's son...’

‘...usurper and traitor... have his head...’

‘...should have left him for the Empire...’

‘...My lady, you should not *stare* at the creature so...’

At the last, Mornen had stood before the throne and the functionaries and parasites had evaporated, leaving him pinned by the grey steel gaze of Lowre Cean.

The old man's face had been unreadable at first, hollow with too little sleep and too many cares, but then a tiny twitch had emerged from the corner of his mouth and he had said, ‘Morning, Mornen.’

An uncertain ripple of amusement had eddied through the room. It had been clear that everyone there would prefer Mornen swiftly dead so that they could get on with the business of losing the war.

‘Te Sora province, wasn't it?’ Lowre had said, apparently more than happy to take all the time he wanted. Possibly sentencing a man to death was the nearest he was going to get to a break. ‘How long ago did the royal line die out there?’

Mornen had not answered, feeling that whatever he said would make no difference to the outcome, but some functionary had leant close and given Lowre the answer.

‘So long,’ the prince had mused, in the utter silence that, by then, had taken over the hall. ‘Lawless three generations then, and it is our shame that we did not take it in hand sooner. And you must have been just a child when your father decided that he had robbed and bullied enough to call himself a prince.’

One nameless noblewoman had decided that was a joke. Her harsh bark of laughter in that silence would no doubt haunt her to her dying day.

Mornen had held his peace. He knew the truth, or what he wanted to believe was the truth: Te Sora had been a nest of villains for as long as anyone could remember. Their victims were the peasants, the farmers and herdsmen, who were still desperately scratching an existence from the bitter earth, between raids and thefts, fire and the sword. Mornen's father had gathered his own band of bravos, to be sure, and set them on any other bandit leader in the province, but he had done it because *someone* had to restore some kind of order, and the Monarch had abandoned them to their fate. That his father had been something more than a mere robber-lord was Mornen's article of faith.

‘It seems a moot point now,’ Lowre had told his prisoner. ‘Te Sora is beneath the black and gold, and so shall we all be if we do not meet the Wasps with a grand army, and not just a rabble of individual retinues. You are not a prince, Mornen Corneles.’

Still Mornen had been silent but Lowre had prompted him, 'Answer me: you are no noble, you are a peasant in borrowed robes. Speak.'

And Mornen had looked the man in the eye and said, 'It's true, and do your worst.'

'Oh count on that,' Lowre had responded grimly. 'Your people suffer under the Empire, Mornen, but they are subjects of the Monarch and the Commonweal, though they may not have known it ere now. They will fight, if the right stick comes to stir them.' His face had been impassive, a statue's. 'But my Mercers tell me that your father did his ill work well, in winning their love. They will fight for *you*.'

Mornen had just stared.

'You will return to them, as they languish beneath the Empire's boot. You will stir them, you will rouse them to follow you. You will bring every able-bodied man and woman that can be spared to our great muster at Derosaka come spring. This war has gone on long enough!'

Abruptly the old man had been standing, spear-straight, the very image of warlike authority. 'We have let the Empire run rampant over the Monarch's sovereign lands for six years. Now the full force of the Commonweal will cast them back. It must.' His eyes, that had been scanning the assembled war-leaders, had returned to Mornen. 'And you shall do your part.'

And Mornen had replied: 'Why should I do this?'

Prince Lowre Cean had smiled, equally devoid of malice or humour. 'Because you are a loyal servant of your Monarch and your Commonweal, *Prince-Minor* Mornen Corneles, and you will fight for your father's dream.'

After that there had been no choice. What good was it being made a prince, if his province and people were in the hands of the enemy?

There was a hierarchy of misery amongst those under the black and gold heel. Mornen and his fellows were on the lowest rung, it seemed, but the man locked inside the wagon was something grander.

Mornen's three fellow sweaters, slaves not so much to the Empire as to the wagon's uneven passage, were a mixed bag. At night when the slavers made their own fire and their own camp, their bound charges were able to talk in low voices, though none of them had much to say.

Tadeusz was a dark, broad-shouldered Bee-kind, so short that he barely reached Mornen's chest. He was the strongest and the hardiest of them all, did the most work and

complained least. His eyes, when they lit on their Wasp masters, were coals of loathing. Chained on the same side as him was a young Roach-kinde man, the sort of rogue Mornen would have picked for cheating at dice or stealing livestock. He had his kinde's white hair and a rover's sun-touched skin and, of all of them, only he could manage an occasional smile. He gave his name as Arden Wil.

Last for wagon duty was a man of mystery, a rangy, wild creature of no kinde Mornen knew, his wiry body was stripped to the waist and his red hair long and matted. He was gagged with iron, a bizarre clamp that held his jaw entirely shut, and so he had little to contribute to their meagre moonlit conversation. He muttered all the time, though, a constant undercurrent of mutiny. He could only suck his food from between clenched teeth, but a cold and watery stew was all the slaves were fed, so he missed out on little. Wil called him Ceccy.

These, at least, were Mornen's comrades in adversity. The man in the wagon was prisoner nobility, a Wasp-kinde behind bars. Mornen had no idea what he had done, but the Dragonfly soon understood that the entire purpose of the slavers' journey was to pass this man on to their superiors back in the Empire proper. Once this had been done, Mornen and the others would no doubt be sold on elsewhere, for whatever poor profit they would fetch.

The slavers taunted all of their prisoners, but concentrated their vitriol on the caged man, telling him how he'd be hoisted in Armour Square, whipped and beaten and then put on the crossed pikes. The Empire, it turned out, reserved its true loathing for its own failures.

The Wasp inside the wagon was an angular, dark-haired specimen of the breed. He was probably tall, Mornen guessed, save that the space within the wagon was cramped, allowing him only to sit or to crouch. His hands were bound palm-to-palm before him and wound entirely with cloth, preventing him from using his sting. As the wagon rattled and shook the prisoner cursed and swore, and he would bring his long face to the hatch to glower impotently at his warders or, for scowling emphasis, even stick his whole head out of the square-cut hole in the wood to spit at them.

On the second night, with the Fly-shackles slowly giving in to his tortured clawing, Mornen had put his back to the wagon-side and hissed at the man within until he had his attention. 'What's your story?' he had asked.

The Wasp's face had shown at the hatch, colder than ever by moonlight. 'Lieutenant Valken, Fourth Army,' he had spat. 'That's all you'll get from me, 'Wealer.' Despite his captivity,

despite his bloody destiny, his position in the society of the wretched was a superior one and he obviously felt it deeply.

The road from Lowre Cean's hall back to Te Sora had been a long one, but being a newly-minted prince apparently entitled him to a horse. They had given him a sword, too, a proper noble's blade, two feet of hilt and two feet of blade. It had seen much use and the enamel of the guard and grip was chipped and ruined, but he had not taken issue with it.

Instead Mornen, Prince-Minor Mornen Corneles as he had somehow miraculously become, had set off for Te Sora as soon as he had broken his fast. Partly the plight of his people had driven him, partly the utter contempt of the assembled nobility who had witnessed his sudden change in fortunes. While there had been no outcry when Lowre had made the announcement, their collective hatred had made Mornen feel as though winter had come sudden and early to the hall.

He had been ordered to go amongst his battered, broken people and make an army of them. They had tried to defend themselves from the Empire once, to the best of Mornen's limited resources, and possibly the Empire had not quite noticed that they were there. Now his people were suffering the occupation: enslaved, beaten, robbed, raped. To those that remained, to those who had escaped the eye of their new masters to the extent that they could still manage to eke a living from the earth, their prince was returning.

Lowre's orders had been unambiguous: Mornen was to round up every one capable of holding a spear, take them from their land, deprive their families of their strength, rip them from everything they knew so that they could be another drop of blood in the Monarch's grand army. In return, Mornen's father's usurped title would become the truth. Mornen would be a recognised and legitimate prince and, by the retrospective magic of royal decree, the son of a prince. A bandit's ambition would become a noble's reality. The Mornen's red sun would rise at last.

He had not been sure that he could do it; but what else he could do? Lowre had kindled in him a fierce flame, a belief that the Empire *must* be resisted, and yet surely he did not have the right to demand that his poor, abused people should be forged into a weapon for that resistance.

The horse had taken him ever closer to home.

His mind had been full of his problems, that was his excuse. There had been days of trekking over all manner of countryside, keeping to the woods where he could, unsure of whether

he had passed the mobile border between free and occupied Commonweal. He saw a few Wasps, far off, and little enough of anyone else.

When the slavers had ambushed him he had been given just enough time to draw his sword and call on his wings. The horse had reared as he kicked out of the saddle, and the two searing bolts of gold fire that had been meant for him had instead taken the poor beast in the neck, killing it outright. Furious, Mornen had dived down on them, intent on taking his revenge. They had scattered before his blade but, as he had paused in the air, a whip had curled about his ankle and he had been yanked from the sky by a third slaver. Then the first two had bundled onto him, and pinned him down.

They had been going to kill him, mostly out of bitter disappointment. It had been the horse they had wanted, not some itinerant Dragonfly. They had taken his sword, commenting on its poor condition. One of them had put his palm to Mornen's forehead, quite casually.

‘Hold,’ another had interrupted, the man Mornen would later know as their sergeant. The faceless helm had stared down at him, only a T-shaped slit giving onto the darkness within.

‘If we've no horse to pull, make this bastard push,’ the sergeant had dictated, and so it was.

The day was ruinous, the track worse and the journey relieved only by the blackened spectres of two burnt-out farms. Mornen was young and strong and, though his father may have stolen a crown, he had not lived the life of an idle indulged princeling. Still, every joint ached, every tendon creaked. He knew that he could not last much longer.

The others, who had been doing this since before he joined, slogged onwards. Ceccy grumbled and growled behind his gag and Tadeusz knuckled low and put his shoulder to the wagon to keep it on track. Wil was the worst-off. Twice he stumbled and fell as they progressed. The slavers got him to his feet with a crack of the whip the first time, but the next time it was Mornen hurriedly hauling him up before their masters could notice. The young Roach-kindens shot him a worn-out smile of thanks.

And that night Mornen realised he was almost through the Fly-shackles and that he could be gone, then and there, the rope's poor knot thrown off, the leather severed with one last cut. A flash of wings and he would be off into the midnight where the Wasps' daylight eyes would

never find him. *Now! Go now!* The slavers were arguing about something around their fire. They might not even notice until the morning.

Mornen looked over his fellows: Ceccy and Tadeusz slept. Arden Wil was awake, staring up at the stars.

He owed them nothing. Even if he accepted the mantle of a prince's responsibility, which so many princes had shirked, these were not his people. They were probably not even Commonwealers, and as for the Wasp in the wagon...

He felt as though another day of this would kill him, as sure as if it cut his throat and left him by the roadside. He found that was the sticking point, though: no general call to an all-encompassing nobility but simply the hard grind he had shared with them. How much worse would it be for the three of them if he left them to it, three men doing what had been four men's work? Who would catch Wil the next time he fell? They were strangers to him, and yet they were the only companions he had.

He inched his way over to them, a caterpillar-hunch at a time, until he had his back to the wagon between the gagged man and the Bee, and then, with gentle prods of the elbow, roused both of them. Tadeusz woke instantly and silently, eyes glittering back at the moon. Ceccy grunted and tried to swing at Mornen with his shackled hands. One of the slavers glanced over and half-rose, but then something his fellow said caught his attention, the disputes of slaves suddenly beneath him. Mornen overheard the hushed words, '...never get an opportunity like this again...'

'Listen to me, lads,' the Dragonfly prince said in a low voice, not looking at his fellows. 'I'm leaving.'

They were all of them very still, save for a slight shifting from within the wagon that suggested Valken was listening too.

'I can slip these bonds, right now or any time,' he murmured. The slavers' arguing about the fire was intensifying, it sounded like four men trying to convince one.

'And you're telling us this, because...?' came Wil's soft voice.

Mornen looked at them. Their iron manacles would not yield to any power of his. At least three of the Wasps had the heavy iron key, though.

'What would you do, if you were free?' he asked.

Ceccy had an instant response to that, for all that it was incomprehensible to the rest of them.

A shrug from Wil. 'I'd do all sorts of things, if I had all the things I haven't got.'

'And you?' Mornen pressed the stocky Bee-kindens.

'Don't know,' came the thoughtful response. 'My home's under the black and gold, long time now. Nowhere to go, me.' He cocked an eyebrow at Mornen. 'You've got suggestions, no?'

'Come with me and fight the Empire,' Mornen told them all. 'The Commonweal's building a great army. It's sent me to fetch troops. Join me.'

'You'll free us if we slave ourselves to you?' Wil smiled tiredly at him.

'No slaves in the Commonweal, Wil.'

'Yeah, I heard that before,' the Roach-kindens returned with another careless shrug.

'I so swear,' Tadeusz stated flatly. 'I will come with you and kill Wasps for you. I swear it, by my city, by my queen.'

Mornen nodded. He glanced at Ceccy and realised that, for the first time since they had been so rudely thrown together, the man was awake and silent.

The gagged man nodded, just once. To Mornen's surprise Wil nodded with him, as though he had been waiting for Ceccy's decision.

Mornen bowed his head thoughtfully. 'Right then. They come to us in the morning. If I make my move right then I'll get the key to you before they know what's what. After that you've got to unchain yourselves – who can work their damned locks?' for he was Inapt himself: the mechanisms and machines of the Wasps were a mystery to him, even the simplest of them.

'Here,' Tadeusz nodded.

'Right.' Lifting his bound wrists Mornen knocked softly on the wagon side. 'And how about you, Lieutenant Valken, Fourth Army?'

'Go to the pits,' came the quietly measured response. 'It's just the kind of stupid plan one of the lesser kindens would come up with. I have faith in imperial justice.'

Mornen shrugged, feeling at best ambivalent about that. Then he heard the slavers approaching and bowed his head in feigned sleep.

There were five of them, all burly Wasp-kindens men in the black and gold tabards and closed helms of the Slave Corps, the most hated and reviled uniform that any man had ever donned. Mornen had heard that even the regular Wasp army spat on the slavers, but still they

were always in the vanguard, keeping pace with the imperial advance so that they could pick over the choicest morsels of Commonweal flesh.

‘Look at it,’ one of them said gesturing at the wagon. ‘Think what’s waiting in there. It’ll be *easy*.’

‘It won’t work. They’ll catch us,’ another complained, the one dissenter the rest were still trying to sway.

‘Have you any idea how *big* the Lowlands is. We’ll have tendays to spare before they realise we never arrived, and by that time we’ll be living it up like generals. Money can buy you anything in the Lowlands, *anything*.’ Mornen recognised that man’s voice – this was the slavers’ sergeant.

‘It’s a big war. They’ll assume the Commonwealers got us or something,’ the first speaker put in. ‘Happens all the time.’

‘And them?’ the dissenter indicated the slaves.

‘Sell ‘em,’ the sergeant stated. ‘In Helleron or in the Empire, who cares? Sell ‘em to the Scorpions, sell ‘em to a mine. Nobody cares what a slave’s got to say.’

The wavering slaver took a deep breath, sounding hollow within his helmet. ‘What about *him*.’

Mornen was keeping his eyes down but he knew from the very tone that they meant their prisoner.

‘Sell him, will you?’ the dissenter continued hotly. ‘Officer, he is. He’ll know. It’ll get back. They always believe an officer. Crossed pikes for deserters, always.’

‘Nobody’ll care,’ the sergeant started, but one of the others interrupted with, ‘We’ll have to kill him then. No tales from dead lips.’

There was a thoughtful pause and Mornen pictured the five of them looking at the dark hatch, or perhaps Valken’s face peering out. Then the slavers were returning to their fire, murmuring in low voices, now five conspirators united.

After a surprisingly long time there came a dry voice from within the wagon. ‘Dragonfly-kindens,’ it said, ‘I may have had a change of heart.’

Mornen smiled to himself. ‘Swear,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘You heard me. Swear to me. Swear you'll turn on your own. Swear you'll fight for the Monarch.’

‘Death on you, you pox-rotten mongrel bastard!’ Valken hissed.

‘Swear, or stay.’

‘What's a Wasp's word worth, though?’ Wil murmured. ‘Let him rot there.’

‘You heard him, Lieutenant Valken, Fourth Army,’ Mornen said. ‘What's your word worth? It must be worth something or you'd have given it freely already.’

There was a sullen pause that became longer and longer, until it seemed that dawn must find them before Valken's response did, but at last the Wasp's quiet, flat voice said, ‘I swear on my honour, and if that's not good enough for you then to the pits with the lot of you.’

Now he had committed himself to freeing the others Mornen found he had no confidence whatsoever in his own plan. There were five Wasps. How was he supposed to keep them occupied while even one of his fellows freed themselves? He should go now, just shrug the manacles and fly. The Wasps would not be expecting such a trick. He would be away before they could burn him from the sky.

He took a deep breath, seeing the slavers group up, about to come over no doubt and settle their business with Valken.

It was a strange thing: his father had brought him up with all manner of stories about bad princes, cruel princes, lazy princes and mad princes. His father had tried to be a prince, though, and tried to be the sort of prince that the Commonweal *should* have. Perhaps there were such men, perhaps Lowre Cean was one. Mornen did not know: he had not had much opportunity to move in elevated circles.

But his father had taught him exactly how a prince should behave: the ideal prince was the shape left by all the failed princes of his stories. And now Mornen *was* a prince, and all the responsibilities the title brought with it were immovably on his shoulders. These luckless slaves had sworn themselves to him. That meant that they were *his people*. He had a duty towards them that was like iron: if he tried to break it, it would break him first.

He felt a moment's sour despair at the father who, coming from a life of brigandage and plunder, had saddled him with such a sense of right and wrong.

Three of the Wasps were coming over. Clearly the sergeant had delegated this piece of murder to underlings and they were none too happy about it. Ignoring the slaves, the three Wasp-kindens paused in a loose circle about the back of the wagon, looking at the dark square that was Valken's window.

'Hey, lieutenant,' one of them said, almost nervously. 'Wake up, lieutenant.' The slaver opened and clenched his hands, working up to the courage required to kill a bound man trapped in a wagon.

Valken sensibly made no sound. The three slavers glanced at one another, and from the camp behind them their sergeant shouted, 'Get on with it! Do it and let's be rid of him.'

'Just stick your hand in and sting him dead,' one of the three suggested.

'Why don't you?' was the instant response. It made Mornen wonder just how far the discipline of the imperial armies went, if these bullies could not bring themselves to murder a helpless man just because of the spectre of an officer's rank badge.

The closest of the three had a key at his belt, dangling from its thong. Mornen felt his heart speed, knowing that the others were watching him. Overnight he had severed the last scraps of the Fly-shackles beneath his arm, and the rope around his wrists held its place solely because he had the loose ends in hand.

'Piss on this,' said one of the slavers and took that final step forwards, hand directed into that small window. Mornen was frozen, waiting for the clear and definite decisive moment, unable to act.

Tadeusz kicked the slaver in the knee with all the force he could manage and Mornen heard the joint crunch. The Wasp was down in a second, howling, and Mornen found that he was free of his rope, shrugging off the leather shackles. The closest slaver to him was reaching for his club rather than blasting a valuable slave with his sting. Mornen got a hand on the haft of the key and yanked, snapping the thong and pulling the man off balance. Wil and Ceccy were wrestling with the man Tadeusz had downed, now, trying to keep hold of the Wasp's wrists. The Bee-kindens himself reached urgently towards Mornen.

The key-less slaver fetched the Dragonfly prince a solid punch to the gut, doubling him over, but Mornen's Art flung his wings out, the air shimmering and dancing about his shoulders, turning the move into a full somersault that dropped him awkwardly before Tadeusz. The key fell somewhere between them and the Bee lunged for it. For a moment the slaver with the

damaged knee had his hand to Tadeusz's collar, yanking him back, but then Wil had found the man's boot knife, fumbled it out with shackled hands and driven it into the slaver's groin.

'Mornen!' It was Valken's voice. Even as the two slavers at the fire had leapt to their feet, there was still one man free to put a hand to the wagon's window, determined to rid the world of Valken before the slaves were disciplined. Mornen shouldered the Wasp aside and added a solid kick to the man's chest to keep the slaver off balance, the man's sting flashing splinters from the wood. Then the Wasp that had punched him had grabbed Mornen's arm, wrenching it back.

'Mornen!' Valken shouted again. He had his hands out of the window, bound at the wrist with rope, but secured palm-to-palm only with cloth. 'Free me!' the Wasp prisoner ordered. Mornen himself was fighting for control of the slaver's club, though, the two of them twisting this way and that, neither able to gain the advantage, and the sergeant and his second were running up.

The Dragonfly saw out of the corner of his eye that the sergeant's patience had run out. The man had a hand out, directed at Tadeusz as the Bee fumbled with the manacle lock. Mornen called his wings again for a split second, the force of them throwing his opponent sideways. In the next instant he felt the solid crunching impact as the sergeant's sting-shot seared into the slaver's back.

The dying man clung on to him, screaming, which gave Mornen a moment more of protection against the next shot. He reached back with one hand, hooked his thumb-claw into Valken's bindings, and then threw his wings and his weight against them.

It was mostly a mistake. He realised that when his thumb popped out of joint, sending agony screaming down his arm. He fell to the ground atop the still shuddering Wasp, unable to think of anything except the pain. Some part of him was expecting the burning punch of a Wasp's sting to slam into him any moment, but he couldn't imagine that it would hurt him any more than his abused hand.

He heard the lash of the sting, shockingly close. Someone fell across his legs: the man who he had kicked, a rough circle charred through his black and gold tunic. Valken's smoking hands retreated into the wagon and the wooden door jumped as he made it his sting's next target. The wood about the bolt cracked and twisted.

The sergeant arrived then, directing a hand down at Mornen. His companion was going for the other slaves with a club, shouting at them with the utter indignation of a man faced with people who just didn't know their place in the world. Mornen snatched a wild glance at his fellows and saw Wil still chained and Tadeusz, for reasons beyond him, fighting to get the gag off Ceccy.

‘You,’ the sergeant told him, ‘are more trouble than you're worth.’

Mornen stared into that faceless helm and the world exploded in screaming.

The sergeant dropped to one knee, his shot going wild. No wonder: Mornen's head felt like the clapper of a bell being rung by a maniac. The sergeant's second was on the ground with blood about his ears, his eyes rolled so far that only the whites were visible.

Ceccy's gag was off. The wild man was down on his hands and knees, gasping for breath, his face mottled red and purple with effort. It still took Mornen a moment's more staggered wonder before he connected the appalling sound with the man who had made it.

The sergeant's count of fallen slavers verses live slaves finished at about the same time as Mornen's own. Then the sergeant had him, hauling him up to use him as a shield against his rebellious property, one hand wrenching Mornen's injured arm and one about his throat. The Wasp got as far as ‘Now you listen here-’ before Valken's sting shattered the wood around the bolt and the wagon door flew open.

The caged Wasp had his bound hands directed before him, at the sergeant, at Mornen – it was hard to be sure.

‘Steady now,’ the sergeant gasped, speaking too loud, but then they were all a little deaf just then. He retreated, dragging Mornen with him, as Valken stepped down from his prison. In the pause Mornen could hear the industrious scratch and click as Tadeusz dealt with Wil and Ceccy's manacles.

‘Steady now, *sir*,’ Valken corrected, with evident and enormous satisfaction.

‘Now listen, sir, it's not...,’ the sergeant began, but it was clear that no amount of equivocation was going to save this situation. ‘Look... there's treasure, a fortune,’ he got out. ‘It's hidden in the wagon. We can split it, sir. We'll be rich men.’

‘You appear to be hiding behind a man of inferior race to dissuade me from killing you, sergeant,’ Valken noted crisply. ‘I hope you're aware of the tactical limitations of that.’ He smiled, perhaps the coldest and most clinical display of humour Mornen had ever seen.

It must be now, and Mornen's wings flashed. He had intended to fling the sergeant away from him, dance out of reach and let Valken do what he wanted, but the slaver's grip on his wrist was stronger than he had thought and his injured hand sent a crippling wave of pain through him, dropping him to his knees.

For the merest second Valken's open palm followed the Dragonfly down, but then it jerked up and sent a bolt of fire into the slit of the sergeant's helm even as the man was raising his own hand.

Mornen made getting to his feet a priority above all else, finding himself rising to meet Valken's icy stare. The Wasp's hands were down, but that could change in a moment. Mornen tensed, to fight or fly, he did not know which.

'So, what's a Wasp's word worth, Lieutenant Valken?' he enquired warily. The other slaves were all free now, a peripheral presence weighing on both of them: what would they do? How swiftly would they intervene and how much would their presence influence Valken's decision?

'I have lived a long time with only my word, Captain Mornen,' stated Valken at last. 'I'm not willing to devalue it just yet.'

'Captain?'

'If you're going to command a lieutenant of the imperial army, you need a rank. You don't think you merit major, surely?' Again that smile, and this time Mornen saw a brief glimpse of the world of exhaustion behind it.

'So you're one of mine, are you?'

'For now, Mornen, for now.' The Wasp sat back into the wagon's doorway, looking about at the dead slavers.

'So you can tell me what you did, to get shipped home for the crossed pikes?'

Valken's smile was terrible to behold. 'I killed a superior officer because I disagreed with his orders, *Captain*. They look askance at that in the army.'

'Y'd'ty bas'sd,' Ceccy growled, or something very like it. The removal of his gag had not made him that much more comprehensible.

'How did he do... what he did?' Mornen demanded pointing at Ceccy. His ears were still ringing from the man's shriek. That thin frame had surely not been capable of encompassing such a shattering wail.

‘You don't know the Cicada-kindens then?’ Wil asked him. ‘Some powerful Art, they've got.’

To Mornen the Cicada-kindens were something belonging to stories from distant parts of the Commonweal where few people travelled. Of course, the Empire had changed all that, throwing together all manner of unlikely neighbours. He made to mimic one of the Roach-kindens' shrugs and stopped with a grimace.

‘Let me look at that, y'highness,’ Wil suggested, Tentatively Mornen proffered his injured hand.

‘You're a doctor, Wil?’

‘Live on the road enough and you pick up most things.’ The Roach-kindens bowed his head over the hand and closed his eyes, obviously enacting some healing mantra that his people had taught him. Whatever he was doing, at least it didn't hurt.

‘Now,’ Mornen said, turning back to the others, and Wil did something unspeakable to his thumb that dropped him to his knees, so unexpectedly, unreasonably painful that he was utterly silent with it, teeth clenched against the slightest sound.

When he was in a position to take any notice of his surroundings again he found that he could move the offending thumb once more, although he felt that ten years had just been wrenched off his life. He got to his feet, noting the way that Ceccy and Tadeusz were *here*, balancing Valken *there*, maintaining a fragile status quo to cover his brief incapacity.

‘Thank you,’ he managed to say to Wil. Valken's look was darkly amused.

‘Hoi, watab't treh'shr!’ said Ceccy. The man was pointing at the wagon urgently but it took a moment for his barbarous accent to unravel sufficiently to allow them to understand him.

The five of them exchanged looks, the sergeant's words recurring to them all simultaneously. It was to Mornen that the other former slaves looked, however.

‘Let's have a look at this treasure then,’ he agreed, unhappily aware that the tenuous loyalty of his new companions might not survive their sudden enrichment.

‘False floor to the wagon,’ Tadeusz had already identified. ‘Good place, for hiding loot. Have it open, one moment.’ He set to work searching for catches while the others stood by and watched. Using ingenuity and brute force, the Bee-kindens had levered up the wagon's floor in only a few minutes, and the others crowded close to see the loot, even Valken.

‘What the blazes is that? Paper?’ the Wasp exclaimed. Tadeusz's work had exposed stack after stack of flat parchment, each piece held in a gilt wood frame. Mornen guessed that there were perhaps two hundred there in total, the weight of the frames contributing considerably to their misery of the last few days. On each piece could be seen elegant Commonwealer calligraphy, and images in the finest style of Dragonfly high art. Each one, every single one, depicted men and women of Mornen's kinden engaged in what was euphemistically referred to as ‘the soft arts’, pose after pose, couplings and triplings and more, invention after invention of the erotic to the most complex and elaborate degree.

‘Treh'shr!’ breathed Ceccy reverently, as though he had found the secret of life.

‘Stab me,’ Valken murmured, squinting and turning the pictures one way and another to try to make sense of them. ‘What is...? Is that,..?’

‘So this is what they were taking to Helleron?’ Wil asked, ‘dirty pictures?’ He shrugged once more. ‘Well they say there's a buyer for everything in that place.’

‘This is a masterwork copy of *The Book of Red Wings*,’ Mornen identified somewhat shakily. He knew it because it represented one of the noble vices his father had so railed against. ‘This is... I'm told it's a classic, or sorts. There will be collectors, I have no doubt, who will pay for this – for all of it, complete. Not the frames – we can take the paper out and load the beetle up with it, and damn the wagon. The paper itself is the value.’ He looked over at the Roach-kindens. ‘Wil, you've been to this Helleron?’

‘Twice. They'll trade with anyone, but they don't like my kinden much, there.’

‘They don't like your kinden much anywhere,’ Valken remarked, but Arden Wil ignored him.

‘They sell slaves, in Helleron?’

‘Outside the walls they do,’ Wil confirmed.

Mornen glanced about him, face to face. In Tadeusz's was the unwavering loyalty that his kinden were known for. Wil and Ceccy were obviously wary but seemingly willing to give him a chance at leading them, at least. Perhaps it was not loyalty, exactly, but that staying with him at least as far as Helleron was better than going it alone and falling to the next band of slavers that might come their way.

‘I was charged, in the Monarch's name, to find soldiers to fight the Empire. You have all sworn to me, in this,’ he reminded them. ‘My poor people are not soldiers. Those that were are

dead or slaves already. Perhaps some were even taken to Helleron for sale.' He felt like a wingless man crossing a chasm by constructing the bridge as he went. He could fall at any time. 'In Helleron, this,' he waved a hand at the wagon's contents, 'will allow us to find and equip soldiers for the Commonweal's army. In spring I'll meet Prince Lowre Cean with a force such as he's never seen. Now let's get these things out of their frames and wrapped against the weather.'

'An army of slaves,' Valken tasted the words. 'How progressive. We'll make an imperial of you yet.'

'No, not slaves. I'll take only men who will swear themselves to me voluntarily.' Mornen looked the Wasp straight in the eyes, remembering the man's claim about his crime. 'Do you *disagree* with my orders, Lieutenant?'

'Oh no, Captain Mornen, not yet,' came the Wasp's dry reply. 'You're going to take a wagonload of Commonweal filth to Helleron in order to buy up an army of *volunteers* to come and fight the invincible imperial army. I don't think it can be done, *sir*, but, by the Emperor's bloody knees, I want to see you try it.'