

The Prince

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

There were two other men in Cordwick's cell. One was dead and the other was showing far too many signs of life

When the Wasp-kinde had taken Maille Castle from the Dragonfly-kinde they had taken it mostly intact, and Cordwick was given to understand that the task of turning Commonweal fortification into imperial garrison had fallen to the engineering corps. He gleaned this by what the Wasps had done to the cellars, which spoke volumes of the lengths artificers would go to, to stave off boredom.

They had converted the cellars into a prison, being Wasps. Their technical difficulty was that Maille Castle was constructed over a subterranean river. The ancient stones of the fort above formed an arch straddling nothing, a bridge over nowhere, each end soundly founded in the rock, and the middle suspended over the hidden watercourse. Architecturally, it was a piece of genius. Defensively it had been less than useless, and the Imperial Sixth had captured it in just a day. Now the war, that they were calling the Twelve Year War, was effectively done, and the border of the Empire had swept on far from Maille, and the place was a storehouse and a prison and a staging post for the Slave Corps.

The aforementioned cellars were a great vaulted space buried beneath the castle's arch, and floored only with dark water, where the river plunged ten feet into a roiling pool before coursing on between the rocks. Denied a conventional oubliette to store their captives in, the engineers of the Sixth had become ingenious.

Of the men in Cordwick's cell, the dead one had been Dragonfly-kinde. He had been wounded before he was lowered in and had died shortly after and, despite Cordwick's vocal complaints, none of the guards had seen fit to remove him. The third man was the problem. The third man had been brought in bound, wrist and ankle, spitting death and vengeance. His legs were already free, and he was slowly working at the leather thongs pinning his hands, wearing them away against the rough iron of the bars, gnawing at them with his teeth. His eyes were fighting mad. He was itching to kill someone. The barbed spines of his arms, that had made such short work of his ankle-bonds, were twitching and fretting, demanding to be slaked with blood. The problem was that the cell itself was shackled shut, an impediment that was never going to yield to spines and teeth. The problem was that the cell they were in was an open lattice cage suspended over the inky waters of the pool below by a mere rope, which rope was attached to, by Cordwick's estimate, a particularly fine example of a Shewner version 5 winding engine. The problem is that the only blood available for the raging, very-close-to-escaping prisoner to paint the bars with was Cordwick's, and after that the prisoner would be free to do nothing but, by dint of some effort, sever the rope and send himself and the two corpses, one older, one fresher, hurtling to a watery tomb. The fact that Cordwick Scosser, fellow prisoner, soon-to-be-fresher-corpse and failed thief, would already be dead by this point did not rob the thought of any of its horror. Death by drowning was a terror to him, even at such a remove.

Cordwick knew Mantis-kinde, or he'd thought he did. He knew the Lowlander Mantids, back closer to home, were brooding, sullen, backward thugs, and that was fine. He had thought that the Commonweal breed was different: quiet, ceremonial, unflappable and usually in service to some Dragonfly noble or other. His cell-mate was a Commonweal local but he seemed to be

the exception to the rule. To be blunt, he seemed the sort of mad killer that even the Lowlanders would have felt was overdoing it.

"Look, you Mantis-kinde like stories, don't you? I know a hundred of them, heroic and tragic as you like," he tried. The Mantis prisoner continued to worry away at his bonds, which were looking alarmingly frayed. Other conversational gambits that he had rebuffed included "Those Wasps are bastards, aren't they?" and "So, what are you in for?"

My mother always said it would end like this. It was an assertion that did not bear too much scrutiny. In telling the young Cordwick, on the occasion of his precipitate leaving of home, "You'll come to a bad end, you'll never amount to anything," the old dear probably hadn't been envisaging quite these circumstances, but Cordwick was willing to bet that she'd take the credit for prophecy, if she ever found out.

There was a taut little sound that was leather giving way under great pressure, following by one that was a Beetle-kinde thief whimpering. He had tried calling for the guards several times already. Now he opened his mouth one last time as the Mantis turned to him, his hands free and on his face an expression of morbid delight. Cordwick's voice died in his throat.

A second later he screamed with fright and released tension as someone landed atop the cage. The Mantis lunged upwards instantly and had the newcomer been an incautious Wasp then things might have gone badly. As it was she was a Fly-kinde, and she was four feet up the rope on the instant, leaving the Mantis clutching at empty air.

She was a neat little thing in a tunic that the hanging lanterns showed as black and gold. Her hair was cut short like a soldier's, too, but something about her had already given the lie to that, to Cordwick. He was good at reading people nine times out of ten. Of course, the tenth time was always the important one...

"Enough of that," she snapped at the Mantis. "Evandter, yes?"

The Mantis crouched below her, poised to spring as though there were not solid iron bars between them. "I am Evandter. Kill me or die, Fly, or go. You are of no interest to me."

The Fly-kinde studied him. "You're the famous Evandter, are you? Scourge of a dozen principalities? Rogue and kidnapper, murderer, enemy of princes? Who'd have thought you'd end up in here, eh? I heard you were drunk when they brought you in. Drinking toasts to your own health, was it? Celebrating the fall of the Commonweal?"

A shudder went through Evandter that Cordwick identified as sheer panned rage. *Don't antagonise the bastard!* he thought frantically, but that would be stoking a fire that was already roaring.

"My master has an offer for you," the Fly said.

"I want nothing from your master, Rekef bitch," the Mantis hissed. Cordwick considered this, and decided he agreed. A cocky female Fly-kinde in imperial colours almost certainly led to the Rekef eventually.

"He offers death by the sword," she went on. "I won't say it'll give you a chance to regain your ancestors' approval, because from what I gather you pissed on that a long time ago, but he reckoned you'd rather die fighting than on crossed pikes."

"And what do the Rekef-"

"He's not Rekef, neither," the Fly said sharply, and then, more softly, "Piss on the Rekef, I say. I'll have naught to do with them."

There was a pause in which her words echoed in the vaulted space. Cordwick craned about, seeking out the single doorway that led up to the castle proper. There were two guards

there, always. They had been the object of his desperate pleas since Evandter had started on his bonds. Now they were gone, vanished away.

Evandter's gaze had obviously followed Cordwick's because the Fly said, "Oh they think I'm Rekef right enough. They're not expecting trouble, and I'm good with pieces of paper. When I call them back, they'll come with the keys and you and I will walk out of Maille like old friends, Evandter. What do you say."

Cordwick saw the Mantis grin death up at her. "Call them," Evandter said. "Set me free."

"Swear, first," the Fly told him, calm as you please. "Swear by the health and life of Nysse Ceann that you will serve my master, not as slave but as sworn bonds warrior."

Evandter had gone utterly still as the name - a Dragonfly woman's name, Cordwick assumed - was uttered. "So," was all the Mantis said.

"Swear," the Fly repeated, "or I go, and you stay."

"You name me murderer and enemy of princes," Evandter growled softly, "and yet you set your life by my word."

"I name you kidnapper, and my master says that by *her* name even your word is good, though it would not be worth a hair else," she replied.

"Then I so swear, and may you and your master regret it all the days of your lives."

"Good enough for me", the Fly said, almost cheerily, and she dropped down to the cage. Evandter made no attempt to strike at her.

"What about me?" Cordwick asked. There was a moment of bewildered silence as Fly and Mantis regarded him.

"Who the spit are you?" the Fly asked eventually.

"Cordwick Scosser of Helleron, procurer," he told her, mustering what dignity he could in a cage too low to stand up in.

"That mean pimp or thief where you come from?" she asked him.

"Procurer of *goods*," he stressed, as if pressing a claim to the aristocracy.

"Well, thief, you're not in my brief. You stay here."

Cordwick, who a moment ago would have been happy enough to share the cage with nothing more threatening than a corpse, suddenly felt the yawning chasm of dark water below him. "Please, you can't just leave me here."

"Doing good deeds for the sake of it got put on hold after the Empire invaded," the Fly told him, without sympathy.

"But I'll be executed, or enslaved!" Cordwick insisted.

"You'll be in good company. It's very fashionable these days. Everbody's doing it." She stood as tall as she could and called out "All right, sergeant!" in a voice that rolled and resounded across the cavern until the waters claimed it.

"No no," Cordwick said hurriedly. "Look, I don't know what your master's about or who he is or if he's the Rekef or what, but I'm useful, I'm a good thief. I can get in just about anywhere, talking or lock-breaking."

"Yet you're the one on the wrong side of the bars," she pointed out. A Wasp with a lantern had appeared at the portal above.

"*One mistake!* Don't let me rot here just because I slipped up once. Please, I'll serve your master 'til my dying day, please, please don't leave me in here. Don't leave me to the Wasps." A sudden inspiration struck him. "You're Inapt, or you'd have brought the keys yourself. The Mantis is Inapt. Your master, I bet he's Inapt. Locks, machines, door-catches, incendiaries - you want them? I'm your man. Come on now, give me a chance."

Her solemn eyes regarded him, a weight of doubt that seemed to great for her small shoulders to carry. "If I say kill him, will you kill him?" she asked, even as the guard above took wing to come down to them.

"I'll kill him even if you don't, like as not," Evandter said lazily. "Better to tell me if you *don't* want him dead."

The Wasp's wings brought him up on the cage's very edge, as far from Evandter as he could manage. "You're done?"

"I'll take them both," she confirmed and Cordwick felt like weeping in relief.

"Papers only said the Mantis," the Wasp muttered stubbornly, but it was clear he believed her Rekef credentials because he was already fumbling for the keys. Cordwick had never tried to pass himself off as Rekef but he had met a few of the Outlander recently, as he set about his one-man mission to get rich from the Commonweal invasion, and he knew that the regular army held them in utter dread.

"You fly, Beetle?" the woman asked him, as he ended up crouched atop the cage, gripping the bars. She and the Mantis and their jailer were standing there quite happily, heedless of the drop and the water. Cordwick shook his head, and saw a suffering expression come to her face, already regretting springing him. Still, if she changed her mind now it would look odd to the Wasps. *Just get me out of the castle, Cordwick thought, and then you never need see me again.*

"I'll call for the winch," said the jailer, clearly amused.

There was nothing in the world so lovely as the sun, Cordwick decided as he was led out into it. Even in the stockade that the Wasps had bound about one arm of Maille, where men and machines and beasts jostled for space, the air was cool and fresh, the freedom and space intoxicating. He took deep breaths, turning his face to the sky and squinting against the light.

When he next looked, the Fly was regarding him dubiously, seeing him in good light as a Beetle-kinde man in ragged clothes, just the right side of young, just the wrong side of thin - which still made him relatively slender for his kind - short, slope-shouldered, a mild, dark face and thinning hair. Beside him, Evandter looked like some olden-day personification of death, his dark hair worn long and half-shrouding his lean, angular face, his pale skin laced with random scars. The jagged barbs flexed and jutted from his forearms, as though possessed of their own bloodlust that was entirely separate from their owner's.

"Lieutenant." A Wasp bustled up, followed by a Grasshopper slave who set down a little table with quill and ink, pilfered Dragonfly loot. The Fly-kinde made her mark on a few pieces of paper and the Wasp nodded. "You're sure you're safe with him," he asked, nodding at Evandter and ignoring Cordwick entirely. "I can detail you some guards if you want." He seemed genuinely concerned, but perhaps it was just that he wanted to do right by the Rekef.

"Him?" she scoffed. "Have you heard how many nobles he gutted, the banditry, the raids? He's done more harm to the Commonweal than half the fighting Seventh." She didn't quite claim that Evandter was a Rekef agent all along, but the implication hung in the air clear enough.

When they had trekked far enough for the slopes of the Commonweal countryside to put them out of sight of Maille, the Fly-kinde turned to Cordwick. "You really can't fly?" she asked him.

"My people aren't known for it," he replied, in understatement.

"Then let your feet take you where they will, thief. I can't see you're much use,"

A wave of glad relief washed through Cordwick, only to crash against the intractable wall that was Evandter.

"No," the Mantis said, and when the Fly quizzed him he said, with relish, "the Beetle paid the same price I did for his freedom. If he walks free, then so do I. Otherwise he's bound to the Prince's purpose as I am. Or I'll open his throat now, if you don't want him slowing us down." He had Cordwick's collar instantly, without his arm seeming to move, dragging the Beetle close and putting razor-edged spines to his neck. For a horrifying moment the Fly hesitated, then: "We walk," she said, disgusted either at the Mantis, Cordwick or her own soft-heartedness.

After they had gone a mile or so in stony silence Cordwick judged that her ill temper had ebbed sufficient for him to prompt, "I'm Cordwick Scosser, of Helleron, by the way."

"Yes, you said." She frowned as Cordwick pointedly stretched the silence. "Tesse," she told him shortly.

"And you work for some prince, the Mantis said," he proceeded carefully. Evandter snorted with derision.

This time Tesse's look at him was cruel. "Prince Lowre Darien," she pronounced carefully, and, "Heard of him, I take it?" as Cordwick choked.

Lowre Darien was a name known to a lot of people, mostly imperial soldiers, but the stories had filtered down even to such as lowly thieves trying to filch war-plunder from its rightful conquerors. Prince Lowre Darien, who had led the coalition of principalities that had smashed the Sixth Army, and who had fought the Empire to a brief standstill outside Shan Real. In a war that was a catalogue of defeats and retreats he was one of the only Commonweal leaders to boast even a halfway success. More stories were told of his personal courage than his military acumen, though. He was the man who could walk in and out of imperial camps like the wind. He freed slaves and killed enemy officers, and Rekef men, especially Rekef men. The Empire had been after him forever, assassins and freelance hunters and the cream of the Outlander, but his name refused to go away and, even now the war was over, word of his exploits kept coming. The Monarch had signed the Treaty of Pearl in craven surrender but Prince Lowre Darien had not been a signatory and for him the war was still raging.

From death sentence to death sentence, thought Cordwick, because anywhere near Lowre Darien - or even someone pretending to be Lowre Darien - sounded like a mighty unhealthy place to be, but at the back of his mind was a spark of curiosity. To set eyes on the Wasp-killer, the hero of Masaki, the man who stung back: that would be worth a little risk. That would be something to regale his fat, rich friends with, when he was fat and rich himself, and stealing like a merchant steals, rather than like a poor and honest thief.

Whatever Cordwick was expecting, the army of enamel-armoured Mercers, the castle hidden in a wood, the golden splendour of a Commonweal warrior-lord, none of it was there. The tangled stretch of trees that Tesse led them to was in a hollow so rocky that even the locals hadn't tried to step it and plough it, let alone build a secret fort there. Instead of a hundred sworn champions, ready to drive the Wasps from Commonweal soil in fulfillment of their destiny, there was one man and one woman, and Cordwick looked at the man two or three times before realising that this was *it*. This was the man himself.

Prince Lowre Darien was lean and slight of frame, like most Commonwealers, although perhaps a little taller than most. His dark hair was raggedly cut, as by a man with a knife and a mirror, and Cordwick reckoned he could see a little grey over the ears. His golden skin was smeared with grime, that made him seem older. Instead of a Mercer's scintillating armour or the

gold-heavy robes of a nobleman he was dressed like a successful bandit, hardwearing leather backed with coarse silk that was either dirty or dyed mottled, with a long hauberk of cloth-backed chitin scales, and shoulder-guards of the same. Beside him, on the rock he sat on, was a worn pack and a quiver of arrows. The bow was in his hand, a servicable recurved shortbow, not the elaborate man-high weapon of a noble but that of a bandit who must fight and run. His eyes were the only part of him that convinced Cordwick of who he was. They were the colour of amber, and they held all the noble fire and mastery that every other part of him had been stripped of.

His companion, whoever she was, was not this Nysse woman the Mantis had sworn on. She was a surprise for Cordwick, because she no more belonged in the Commonweal than he did: a slender Moth-kind, grey-skinned and blank-white-eyed, dark hair intricately plaited into a braid that fell to past her waist. She wore a tunic, breeches and sandals, in the style of the Commonwealers, and they looked strange on her. Her face was inward, clouded with secrets, but in Cordwick's experience that was true of Moths whether they had any secrets or not.

Seeing the Fly-kind and her baggage approach, Lowre Darien stood like a man readying himself for a fight. Evandter's progress towards him slowed and stopped and the two men regarded one another coolly.

"Prince Darien," Tesse said, but very quietly, and he did not glance at her. Nobody paid any attention whatsoever to Cordwick.

"So you've lost her," Evandter stated flatly. "Seems a shame, after you went to so much trouble to take her back from me."

"The Wasps have her at Del Halle," Darien confirmed. His expression, gazing on the Mantis, was utterly without love. "Well guarded."

"A trap," Evandter said.

Darien nodded. "For me," he agreed, "and yet she is mine, and I must free her."

"And for this you come to me? If she is *yours* why should I help you regain her?"

"Did he swear himself to me?" Darien asked Tesse lightly, and she nodded, too caught up in the tension between the two men to speak.

Evandter sneered. "To the pits with swearing and oaths. Why should I?"

"Because your oath holds only to when we have freed her. If you will cross swords with me then, I will oblige you," Darien told him.

The words transformed the Mantis, just for a moment. In that brief second his mocking expression, all the slouching despite of his stance, had vanished away, and Cordwick had a brief show of a younger man, a brighter one, some Evandter that might have been, had the world not been so very wicked and taught him so well. Then the old snarl was back but the Mantis was nodding. "Lead me, my prince," he invited, with a curl of his lip.

"And who is this?" At last those amber eyes pinned Cordwick through, and the Beetle stammered out his name.

"He's a thief. Cordwick Scosser. Evandter wants to kill him, or keep him about. Send him away, I would," Tesse explained, "or let the Mantis have him."

"Cordwick Scosser." Darien pronounced the Lowlander name carefully. "You understand what we're about, here?"

"Off to rescue some noblewoman," Cordwick replied guardedly.

"To rescue Nysse Ceann, because she and I are promised, because it is my duty, and because I love her," Darien confirmed. "Did you swear yourself to me?"

Did I? Even as he wondered, Cordwick had opened his mouth for the instinctive denial, but Evandter said, "Yes," before he could say, "No."

The Mantis grinned coldly. "Oh he didn't say it as an oath, but his kind never do. Your Fly let him out because he said he would help. 'Serve you to his dying day,' were the words, I think. Free him and I'll kill him as an oathbreaker."

"What is he to you?" Darien asked.

"He talks too much and I want to kill him," Evandter replied. Cordwick looked between the two of them: relics from an age that industry and the Empire was scouring from the face of the world, and yet here he was caught between a prince's duty and a Mantis' bloodlust.

"If it's all the same to you," Cordwick said faintly, "I'll help in the rescue, if that's all right. How far to Del Halle?"

They moved across the face of the Commonweal like fugitives, far from any princely procession that Cordwick had imagined. Then he brought to mind the fact that this countryside, the ditches and the copses, the untilled fields and the hollow, abandoned villages, none of this was the Commonweal any more. The Empire had, after considerable choking and gnawing, swallowed it all. Prince Lowre Darien was dethroned, in the shadow of his enemy. These were the captured principalities, taken in blood, sealed in ink when the Monarch signed the Treaty of Pearl.

They moved more by night than by day, avoided any human contact. Darien hunted for them, his bow bringing down stoneflies or goats gone feral. He moved through the grown-wild land as though he had lived under the stars all his life. Evandter was seldom seen, ranging ahead or dragging behind or off murdering children for all Cordwick knew. Still, whenever they paused or rested or started a low-burning and sheltered fire, there he was, the professional brigand emerging from the landscape.

The Moth woman was seldom absent from Darien's side, and he conferred with her often. Cordwick understood that she was some manner of advisor, and then that she was some manner of magician, who told Darien where to find game, and had found for him the whereabouts of his lost love. Her name was Philomaea, he learned from Tesse, and she had been in Darien's retinue since before the war. If she had dressed for it, and made up for it, she would have been beautiful, but it took Cordwick a while to realise this because she had that quiet, drab look that most Moth-kindens had, all in-looking and severe. He saw what she could be in the rare moments when her face truly came to life, and that was only when she looked directly at Lowre Darien, which was only when he was not looking at her. This was so guttingly tragic that Cordwick, who was used to having people to talk to, wanted to discuss it. As Darien scared him, Philomaea ignored him and Evandter actively wanted to kill him, however, he was left with Tesse, and he could not talk to Tesse about *that* because, when she stole glimpses of Lowre Darien, her expression was the same.

She was a tough and prickly little thing but she needed to talk too and, although she ventured the occasional lighthearted banter with Darien, there was too much bottled up within her to keep that going. Philomaea ignored her, too, and if Evandter hadn't got as far as threatening her life, he was still not much of a conversationalist. So it was that, when they stopped to rest out the noon hours, under cover and hidden away, she spent her words on Cordwick. They were derisory words, mostly, but it was better than hostile silence. Mostly she mocked his credentials as a thief. How could a Beetle-kindens possible survive on what those thick fingers could abstract? This allowed him to ask about her own pedigree. She was imperial Fly-kindens, as he'd guessed, and she told him she'd done five years as a Consortium clerk, in

which time she learned to fake official documents with great precision, before she left to pursue her chosen career, taking with her several hundred gold imperials originally slated as Slave Corps back pay. What was her chosen career? Cordwick asked her.

"*Thea repa*," she replied mysteriously, on the basis that he would certainly never have heard of it. Cordwick was a people person, though, and fond of street entertainment, specifically as an opportunity for his thick fingers to do as much abstracting as humanly possible, and his face split into an incredulous smile.

"What? Little Miss Superior is a street-dancer? Ribbons and knives and that? *And* a thief, and who knows what else you've had to do, when prancing about in the air wouldn't pay your way! Why we're well met, Miss Tesse, all thieves together."

"Is that why the Wasps caught you, Beetle? Your big mouth?" she demanded. To his surprise her hard shell was cracked, she seemed almost on the verge of tears.

"Pretty much," he said pointedly turning the conversational lamp onto himself. "I was dressed as a Consortium factor and talking my way into the big war loot depository in Shoal Acer, only I got carried away with my life story and someone saw the holes."

She looked at him cautiously, gauging his willingness to let the previous subject sink out of sight, and even then she snatched a quick look at Darien, sleeping just then with Philomaea watching over him. *I see*, Cordwick understood. *Not good enough for him, is it? He's a prince and you're just a rover and a thief, but you're doing your absolutely tiny best to be the prince's right hand woman, capable and loyal and utterly professional.* She was younger than he'd thought, too, perhaps no more than twenty. She would have been a mere child when the war started, not even on her ill-fated apprenticeship at the Consortium.

"So..." He glanced about, seeing a conspicuous absence, and ventured. "The prince and Evandter, then," getting the stress on the Mantis' awkward Commonwealer name wrong. "They go back a ways."

"Oh they tried to kill one another a good ten times before ever the Wasps came," she confirmed. "Darien was a great bringer of justice, a Mercer and a magistrate, and Evandter was the man he never quite caught. And he was a bad one, certainly. A confirmed killer, for sheer love of blood, and a brigand leader who abandoned his men to save his own skin. He was the greatest villain of three principalities, and Darien was always after him. There are songs, even, stories of when they clashed. They fought, oh, half a dozen times, they say."

"This is because the prince stole his woman?"

Tesse goggled at him for a moment. "No! Idiot Beetle. Nysse was betrothed to Darien, and to get at Darien Evandter stole her away. Kidnapped her, holed up with some cutthroats in a cave somewhere, set an ambush. You've never heard this story?"

"I prefer making them up to hearing them," he told her.

"Must be the strain of listening to someone else's voice for so long," she sniped at him. "Well, Darien turned up and killed the cutthroats, and Evandter turned up and met him at the cave mouth, and probably Darien thought that the Mantis had laid the girl open, raped her and cut her up, you know. But the story goes that Evandter just told him he was a lucky man, and fled, and Nysse was unharmed, untouched." She smiled, and for once it was an expression that fit with her age. "Didn't believe a word of it, until Himself sent me to fetch the Mantis out of Maille. They say she charmed him, used magic, used her Art, but you know what? That doesn't last, not like that. You saw how he was, when I said her name."

"And he's good for his word, you think?" Cordwick pressed. "I mean Mantis oaths normally, yes, but even then only if they respect you, and this one..." but Tesse's expression had

changed, and Cordwick hurriedly changed the subject, understanding from her look that Evandter had rejoined them. *Still*, he thought, *maybe Evandter respects the prince, and so maybe his word will hold*. The thought carried on, thought, to darker waters, because it was just as evident that Evandter hated Lowre Darien as no man had ever hated man, the gall-bitter, vitriolic hate that the envious have-nots reserve for those that have. When they had rescued Nysse Ceann there would be blood. The two old enemies would fight their last.

It would have been a little under a tenday's clear run to Del Halle. There were Wasps about, but they were still consolidating their vast gains from the war, spread thin and lording it over the populace only because they had killed off every noble or leader that they could catch, leaving the dispirited peasantry to trudge back to ruined fields and broken villages. Avoiding Wasp scouts, messengers and soldiers on the march would have been child's play to any of the travelers.

Then they came across the slavers: two great automotives grinding their way over the hilly landscape, the rear sections made into cages into which perhaps two hundred Commonwealers were crammed. The vehicles, overburdened, moved at a walking pace, and most of the twenty or so Slave Corps guards walked alongside, only their officers and artificer-drivers riding.

Lying along a hill crest, lost in the long grass, Lowre Darien watched.

"No," cautioned Philomaea, when he returned to them. "This is not your quest."

"We will free the slaves," the prince announced to them all. "It will be simple."

Evandter snorted derisively, a sound that was becoming far too familiar. "You mean we kill the Wasps and release the others. That *is* simple."

"You've lost your taste for blood?" Darien asked him archly.

"I'd happily finish the slaves as well, for the crime of being stupid and weak enough to be caught," Evandter said lazily. "Let's be at it."

"You make your entrance," Darien instructed him. "Kill all the Wasp-kinde you wish. I will slay those who goad the machines." He turned to Tesse and Philomaea. "Take up your bows and make a good accounting of yourselves." Those amber eyes turned on Cordwick. "You are a thief, you say? Steal the slaves from those machines."

This isn't theft was Cordwick's mantra as he made his way to the abruptly halted slave wagons. Theft, for him, was an exercise in being clever, in getting in, getting the goods, and getting out without anybody being the wiser. Theft was also more definitely nothing to do with hurting people. Scosser Cordwick had a terror of hurting people that was born from a childhood understanding that people would hurt him back twice as hard if he did. This wretched circus, therefore, was not theft.

Darien had kicked off the festivities by flying straight at the driver's bench of the lead automotive. He had two small punch-swords, like glorified brass knuckles only with foot-long blades projecting from them and little pearly round shields to cover the backs of his hands. He had cut apart the two Wasps he found there almost instantly and was away even as the slavers realised they were under attack, dodging and arcing in the air to come about for the other vehicle as the crackle and snap of sting-fire lanced the air around him. By that time Evandter had made himself known.

The prince's retinue was low on armaments. The two women had a tatty shortbow each and a varied selection of arrows. Darien had his swords. There had been nothing left to arm the Mantis but Evandter had not complained. As Cordwick ran in, utterly unremarked, he saw why. Evandter was killing the slavers. He raced through them with an erratic, zig-zagging swiftness,

never staying still for longer than it took him to strike a blow. Each time he crossed Cordwick's eyeline he had something different: a club, a shortsword, a spear, all ripped from the hands of the Wasps and turned on them without mercy. Between these chance acquisitions, taken up and cast down without care, his barbed arms spoke for him. He fought close up, tearing throats, ramming his spines through eyeslits, ripping at groins and armpits and guts, wherever the blood was easiest to get to. Then Darien was back, killing off the driver and officer in the other cab even as they tried to follow Evandter's red progress. Added to the mix, sporadic arrow-shot came from beyond the edge of the fray, catching the Wasps off guard as their attention was monopolised by the two killers in their midst.

Cordwick reached the first automotive unspotted, less because of any great stealth on his part than that he had become the least conspicuous thing in the locality by some margin. The locks securing the heavy bars were solid and unsophisticated. He had already manufactured some new picks from discarded military surplus on the road, a securing pin and some stout wire becoming the tools of his trade. They were makeshift poor tools, but it was a clumsy lock and he had its measure, springing it in half a minute and passing on to the next.

All the while he was aware of Darien and Evandter fighting and, as they circled and moved around the fixed point of the wagons, on the ground and in the air, he understood that they were working as a matched pair, driving the Wasps into each other's path, herding and dividing them. It was as though they had worked together for years, or were linked mind to mind as the Ant-kindens were. *Or*, Cordwick thought, *it's as though they really, really want to duel one another, and have just expanded the killing space between them until all the Wasps fit into it.*

The second lock took longer, more for lack of repair than greater complexity. By the time he had tripped its tumblers the fight was done and Evandter was stalking from body to body, either extinguishing any remnant sign of life or mutilating the corpses, it was unclear which.

The prisoners had formed an uncertain, awkward mob between the two machines, looking about them at the devastation. As a mass, they spelled out the words, "What now?" Cordwick agreed with them. All very well for Darien to come down and shed some blood to save his conscience, he considered, but will he feed them? Will he take them someplace safe? Cordwick would freely admit that the Prince and the Mantis had produced a skilled piece of bloody-handed performance art, but in his eyes there was nothing that clearly defined the supposed hero from the admitted villain. Killing people, even wicked people, was hardly a skill confined to the virtuous.

He glanced at Evandter and saw his thoughts mirrored in the man's sneer. It was clear the Mantis would happily butcher the prisoners as well, and solve their problems with his characteristic finality.

"Listen to me," Darien said. He had hopped up onto the top of one of the automotives. Despite the grimy clothes, the bandit's mail, he had an undeniable authority about him. He did not have their trust, but he had their attention.

"If any one of you wishes to remain in the hands of the Empire, stay with the machines and they will find you. Tell them our descriptions, tell them you could not prevent us. It may help. I speak now to those who will venture a little for their freedom."

They had quieted entirely but their stare remained suspicious, waiting for him to name his price.

"Who among you has any woodcraft? Hunters, woodcutters, poachers, bandits even. I will not judge you. Step out and make yourselves known."

Cordwick wouldn't have moved, but almost a score did, stepping to form their own small band away from the rest, until Darien asked them to separate, to each stand alone.

"Now, you others, take yourselves to these men and women, so that each one has followers." Darien made no attempt to organise or divide them, and the result was uneven, some of the self-professed woodsmen having a few, others having more than a dozen. The Prince nodded approvingly nonetheless.

"Perhaps a tenday's travel from here to the west is the border between the free Commonweal and the captive principalities, newly drawn. Hear me: make for that. Avoid towns and villages. Avoid the roads. Travel by night where you can: our eyes are better than theirs. Each group of you must move alone. The border itself is not secured, not yet. The Wasps will make it a line of forts and watchposts soon enough but for now their numbers are spread across all their stolen lands, and they have not the hands to bar the door to those who have a will to escape them. Head west, and do not stop until you are free."

"And if they catch us?" one of them asked bitterly.

"Then say nothing of this, nor of being prisoners. Say only that you were turned off some distant village somewhere. You will be no worse, I hope, than you were before I came. If you are caught by any other than the Slave Corps then no doubt you will be better. The Wasps need men and women to labour in what are now their fields. You may simply be made their serfs, and not taken away as their slaves." His voice was mild, clear and kind, and it loaned them confidence, enough to start out where before they might just have crouched in the ruin of their former masters until new masters arrived.

Not one stayed behind. The little bands of Dragonfly-kind and Grasshopper-kind trekked off away from the fight, and soon they were lost to sight, each on its own private mission, each with the blessing of Prince Lowre Darien.

When the Prince's retinue set off again, Cordwick put himself next to Tesse. She was looking at Darien's back, and the only word for her expression was adoration. When she caught the Beetle looking at her she scowled, but then said, "Do you see?"

"I'm beginning to," admitted Cordwick. What he actually felt was mild resentment. As a man in his chosen line of work he lived off his firm belief that he was simply cleverer than most people, and that most people were rogues who deserved to be robbed. Lowre Darien was a thorn in his ideology.

Del Halle was another of the old Commonweal castles, that had been built in some previous age, and which the Commonwealers themselves had scant use for before the invasion. When the Wasps had rolled in, however, the locals had rallied to their ancient fortifications to muster against the invader, and the leadshooters, the incendiaries, the rams and the trebuchets of the imperial armies had brought them down or cleaned them out, one after another. The old stones did more service to the Wasps themselves, who used them as seats for their new governors, re-edified them and strengthened them and fitted them with artillery. Such was Del Halle. The town it overlooked was thoroughly occupied and while the townsfolk, whose exchange of serfdom for imperial slavery had not markedly altered their lots, went back to the fields to repair the damage that a dozen years of war will inflict on careful agriculture, there was a Consortium office set up in what was once the headman's house, and drafted auxillian soldiers, Bee-kind from some forsaken part of the east-Empire, patrolled the streets.

The castle itself was not the spanning marvel that was Maille, of unfond memory. The original structure had been a four-storey square tower, but the Wasps had been busy, and

installed a large ground floor, and a smaller floor above, making the whole thing look like a makeshift cousin of the ziggurats they favoured back home. It stood on a rise, with a good view of many miles of newly imperialised countryside, and must be the garrison commander's pride and joy. Looking up at it, Cordwick's professionalism was piqued. He saw at once that this had been a lynch-pin of the imperial advance, every window narrowed down to a slit, every hatch reinforced, and the top of the tower roofed over with plenty of slots from which defenders could shoot flying attackers.

Prince Lowre Darien looked on the castle of Del Halle with nothing but determination. If he considered the defences, it was merely to acknowledge that the Wasps were taking the value of their prisoner seriously.

That evening found them on a bluff that overlooked the village, but was still beneath the watch of the fortress. Darien and Evandter had both taken up posts where they could study the Wasps' refortification of Del Halle, and Cordwick knew exactly the kind of entrance both were thinking about. Not a frontal assault, for not even Lowre Darien's legend included taking castles single-handedly, but denied the chance to be forthright the old Inapt kinden always fell back on the same kind of skulking business. Stealth and creeping, prying a way in, stalking corridors, silent murder. He understood the Commonwealth had boasted some limited success, with this tactic, but of course the Wasps had been *outside* the castles in those days, not inside and with plenty of opportunity to update the place with, say, locked shutters. Even Cordwick's eyes, which were half-blind compared to Darien's, could see that there were no conveniently open windows for the sneak to make his entrance. *If I were here to rob the place, I wouldn't risk it.* Levering open shutters was a fool's game in a place so obviously well-stocked with soldiers.

But it was plain that Lowre Darien's legend also failed to include giving up and going away.

Time to let him hang himself? Looks like the Empire's given him more than enough rope. And Cordwick laughed at the thought, because it reminded him of a joke he used to make. Everyone looked at him in annoyance. Darien was liaising with Philomaea now. Whatever counsel she was giving him, it was not what he wanted to hear.

"But you're sure she's there," he insisted, breaking from his whispering.

"I..." The Moth woman's face twisted. "Yes. I think. All the signs say yes."

"Then I will go there and I will bring her back," Darien said simply. "I defy prophecy."

"My prince, *please...*" the Moth hissed desperately, and Cordwick saw she was almost in tears. "You will die."

She was a seer, and Darien was one of those superstitious people who believed in that sort of thing, Cordwick saw. His face had a desolate, despairing cast then, perhaps for the first time in his life. "I cannot leave her." The 'cannot' was said as though it referred to some absolutely insuperable physical barrier.

"Oi," said Cordwick quietly, and prodded Tesse in the ribs. She scowled at him, her attention briefly wrested from Darien. "What?"

"You want him to live?"

"What sort of stupid question is that:?"

"You want him to go to Del Halle?" he asked. "You're sane enough that you know the best way for him to live is to leave."

"He won't leave," she said, and he saw that she understood. Whether it was the seer's doom or just common sense, she knew the odds.

"It was your idea, how you got Evandter out, right? Darien was all for storming in?" When she nodded he went on: "Will you back me? I have a plan."

He put on his most confidence-inspiring expression, that had robbed several men and women of their valuables almost by itself, and she gave him a tiny, distrustful nod.

"Lord Prince, your highness," said Cordwick Scosser the proletarian, loud enough to break through whatever impasse had grown between Dragonfly and Moth, "we have a saying, where I come from."

Darien regarded him, and while the Moth glared and the Mantis sneered, he waited for Cordwick's next words.

"Give a man enough rope, he'll hang himself," the Beetle explained. "Give him too much, he'll make a hammock." Seeing that the Prince did not understand he elaborated. "There's a whole load of swords and armour in that place. They could hold off an army *and* they could keep out a single thief or assassin, and it's a rare place that can do both. They must have sentries and patrols and all manner of fun going on inside. Your lass is in there, and you want her, and they know it. They're ready to take you, is how I see it. It's like a trap, sprung and tensed to snap down the moment you put your hand into the jaws." He saw that his Apt metaphor had lost his audience a little, but the meaning was plain.

"All this I know," Darien told him. "And yet I must go."

"The thing about traps," went on Cordwick as casually as he could, building his courage, "is that if you know they're there, you can disarm them, step round them. They know you. They know the stories. They know precisely how you'd do things. What they don't know about is Tesse, or me."

"What could you possibly be good for?" Evandter growled disgustedly. "And don't say locks. I could break any lock faster than you could undo it."

"Though not quieter," said Cordwick mildly. "But I don't mean locks. I mean that we're a Fly and a Beetle, such as through the Empire's supply corps, and Tesse does a fair hand in pass papers, and we'll just turn up at their door and they'll let us in." As he spoke he let matters fall into place in his mind. "Then, when the opportunity presents itself, some time late tonight, we'll open up one of those shuttered windows, and you three can flit in like shadows. Simple as that, if you trust me."

"And if they kill you instead?" Evandter snorted.

"Then you'll be saved the bother," Cordwick told him. "And if they come out to find you, then you can kill them and even the odds a little. What do you say?" He turned away from the Mantis pointedly, appealing directly to the Prince.

Tesse opened out her calligraphy set and took a blank sheet of blue-white imperial paper. It had always amused Cordwick that such a fiercely martial people had a monopoly on the best paper in the world.

"Make the best use of this while you can," she warned him. "Now the war's over they'll be back with doing things the long way, machine-stamped passes and all sorts of other things I can't fake."

Cordwick nodded almost nostalgically. During the war, with thousands of imperial servants in constant motion, imperial writ was made out, stamped and signed by hand, which was a gift to the opportunistic rogue. Soon enough would come the time when people like Tesse and Cordwick would no longer be able to slip through the imperial net as easily. *And even then I got caught...*

"So," she said, "what's it to be? A pair of Rekef agents, yes?"

"No!" Cordwick snapped immediately. "Rekef? I don't know how you're still alive, waltzing about pretending to be the Rekef."

She shrugged. "So what? Everyone's scared of the Rekef. They'll do whatever you ask, *and* the Outlander employs lots of non-Wasps."

"Until you meet the real thing. And I reckon the Rekef reserve their worst for people who take advantage of their good name. No, no Rekef. Do me out papers for a Consortium agent, nothing too ambitious, just a lieutenant maybe. There are hundreds of imperial factors and agents on a roaming brief just now, taking census and working out what everything they fought for is really worth." He savoured the next words greatly. "And you'll be my slave."

"You jest," she said crisply, with a smile as sharp as a razor.

"Not a bit of it," he confirmed.

"You're a lieutenant, I'm a lieutenant. Or maybe a captain."

"You're my Fly-kindens clerk and slave, as evidenced by your superior handwriting."

She shook her head, trying to pretend good humour, but failing at it. "Listen, Beetle, I'm being nobody's slave, not even for an act, and especially not for *you*. Why should I?"

He told her, outlining the plan that he was still fleshing out in his mind. After that she bucked, refused, complained and threatened him, but at last her eyes were drawn to Darien, the man all of this was in aid of, and she bit her lip and nodded.

So it was that Lieutenant Cardwic Scotawl arrived at the gates of Del Halle with his Fly-kindens slave in tow. The name followed Cordwick's recent practice after one job on which he had failed to recognise the grandiose moniker he had given himself, leading to an inevitable degree of mistrust amongst those he was attempting to mislead.

The village that the fortress lorded it over had been cowed and quiet, and if there had been a warfront it would have been far from here, but the surly sentry that received them had to wait some time before the gates were unbarred and unlocked, whilst suspicious eyes watched them from arrowslits. Cordwick and Tesse exchanged glances, because there was only one cause they could see for all the security, and even then the Wasps seemed to be going a bit far. *All this just for his Lordship?* Cordwick wondered, but then he recalled just how much of a legend Darien had built about himself. His appearing over a hilltop with a thousand Commonwealer spearmen was not entirely impossible.

For an itinerant Consortium agent, however, the doors were opened, and Tesse's draftsmanship bore the weight of the gate-guards' scrutiny. With as little difficulty as that they entered Del Halle.

Once inside there were a few more hoops to flythrough, of course. There was the hoop of kicking their heels in a barren antechamber while someone was found to deal with them. There was the hoop of explaining to the duty officer the exact same business that they had given over to the gate guards. Then there was the fortress quartermaster, who was all fat-man joviality on the surface whilst being viciously suspicious about someone trying to pry into whatever rackets he had going. Cordwick had done it all before. He had the imperial speech off perfectly, not quite an accent so much as a rhythm to the words: attack and defence, now pushing his own importance, then giving way to authority: the perfect picture of an ambitious Beetle in a Wasp's world.

After that they got the governor. The man was mid-supper when they were ushered in. Cordwick had timed their arrival for the appetisers, but the quartermaster had been more suspicious than expected. The governor himself was an old soldier, as the place merited, a

battlefield major jumped up to colonel for the post. He was broad-shouldered, just starting to thicken at the waist, and he wore bracers and a gorget even eating in his own hall. His greying hair was short and neat and there was a sword slung over the back of his chair, as though he was prepared against an attack on the very heart of his power. Cordwick saw it, and saw that this was not the general readiness of the fortress but the man's personal campaign to cling to his younger days of beloved strife.

"Colonel Borden," he was named, and Cordwick, as Cardwic, saluted him.

Borden's gaze passed over him, finding nothing of interest. He continued eating, something highly spiced and with plenty of meat, from the smell and look of it, letting his visitors stew for a while before grunting, "What do you want?"

"Well, sir, I'm conducting a survey of this principality for my factor..." Cordwick started, anticipating the interruption.

"Who?" Borden snapped.

"Obden Bellowern, sir," came the prompt, prepared reply. Whether there was an Obden of that family, Cordwick had no idea, but the Bellowerns were a Big Noise in the Consortium, a name to conjure with.

Borden inclined his head, sullen but satisfied. "By survey you mean seeing what's not nailed down," he asserted.

"One man's theft is another man's conquest," Cordwick agreed, philosophically. The recently-occupied Commonweal territories were awash with agents of the various Consortium magnates wrestling for control of the new opportunities the invasion had turned up. The fact that Borden disapproved was noted and filed.

"Any special brief?" the colonel asked suspiciously.

"Agriculture, if you can believe it," Cordwick told him. "I don't know if you've heard, but the East-Empire harvests weren't so great, the last two years."

It was a sufficiently innocuous and plausible proposition that Borden just nodded along. "And you want what from me?" he demanded.

"From you, sir? Why nothing, As I'm going to be underfoot, so to speak, I thought I should take the courtesy of introducing myself."

That drew a few beats of calculating silence from the man, as Cordwick held his breath and hoped he'd got his appraisal right. Then the office nodded again, less abruptly. "That's more courtesy than most Consortium men show," he noted. "Most of your lot come and go without so much as a word, but you can imagine the fuss when two or three of them get strung up as smugglers because nobody knew."

Good. It was a story Cordwick had heard before, enough times to guess that it was probably apocryphal, a soldier's joke. That was fine because Borden was a soldier's soldier, who didn't like the presumption of the Consortium merchants. Cordwick had now presented himself as respectful and polite, and it was no surprise when the governor gestured at a chair. Cordwick sat at the colonel's table, implicitly *in*.

There were a scatter of other officers there, most of them looking as though they had been pried from their armour only reluctantly. Borden surrounded himself with like-minded men. Cordwick nodded carefully to them, measuring each until he came to the discordant note: A man as bald as a stone, sour faced as though whatever he was eating was laced with lemons. A man, more to the point, with a vacant chair to either side of him. *Not one of us*, that said, but at the same time he was there, and within two seats of the governor. To Cordwick, that said *Rekef* as clear as if it had been branded on the man's forehead. Had circumstances allowed he would have

shot an I-told-you-so at Tesse, currently fidgeting behind his chair. As it was he just gave the bald man the same polite acknowledgement as the rest, it was not returned.

"You'll want a roof over your head, while you're surveying," Borden dropped in.

"If possible, for myself and my slave," Cordwick said.

"Knew you'd want something from me." Borden nodded at Tesse. "She's all you have, no escort? So you'll be wanting guards and the like also?"

"Colonel, on my way here I saw a score of dead Slave corps men who'd run into some kind of local trouble. Travelling light and out of colours and, if you'll forgive me, with no pale Wasp faces to catch attention, is the safest thing for me."

Borden smiled at that, for the first time. "Prudent," he noted, and then ate for a while. A bowl and wooden spoon was placed before Cordwick, and he took a few mouthfuls of some kind of stew, so spicy as to be flavourless.

"You've done a fair job of turning this place into a civilised fortress," he commented at last.

"More than you know," Borden told him, chewing. "I had to defend Del Halle twice during the war." The hook was there, and Cordwick made his eyes wide with a non-combatant's earnest admiration.

"I never got to see any of the fighting," he prompted, and Borden obediently responded with, "I'll show you where we threw them back, then."

Throughout the whole meal, the bald man said nothing, was not introduced or even much looked at. His silent, brooding presence was as pointedly evident as a stone in a shoe.

Then came the grand tour, that Cordwick had been angling for. Borden, now sufficiently convinced of the credentials of his fresh audience, had a chance to tell his war stories, and as such stories relied on a knowledge of Del Halle, Cordwick and Tesse were guided through its halls and rooms, able to remark at their leisure just how the place was laid out, and how well it was secured.

Well, was the answer to that, and there were a lot of guards at their posts, far more than peacetime would normally mandate. Borden even dropped an offhand hint that they were "expecting a little bother right about now." Cordwick managed to exchange a look with Tesse. *They are ready for Darien.* Not for nothing had Philomaea led them here. Specifically there were more than sufficient guards on the two downward stairs that they passed. The cellars were for more than wine and Cordwick could only hope that the arrangements down there were less convoluted than those at Maille where Tesse had found him.

Then Borden took them to the central light-well of the castle, and Cordwick breathed an inward sigh of relief. The place had been so heavily refortified that this original Commonwealer feature might easily have been cluttered up, but here it was: a column of empty space in the centre of the castle reaching from the ground to the roof-space, with plenty of openings and doors up and down its length, the swiftest road through the building for anyone with wings. Most of these old Commonweal forts had them, and there, at the top, were what had been portals to the outside. They were shuttered and barred now, but Cordwick recalled what he had seen of the exterior, matching up window for window and door for door.

"I say, colonel," Cordwick said, as the man came to the end of one of his military anecdotes, "seeing this space here... have you ever heard of *thea rappa*?"

Borden's look suggested that he assumed it was some piece of martial artifice that he hadn't yet encountered.

"It's an entertainment, a Commonweal dance form," said Cordwick, in his best 'oh-what-silly-things-these-primitives-do' sort of voice. "My slave's a fair hand at it, in fact. I only mention it because it's a sword-dance, a fighting dance, almost. As a soldier, I thought you might enjoy it."

Borden glanced back at his officers, gauging their mood. They had been waiting for Darien for a while, Cordwick guessed, because the idea of some fresh amusement obviously appealed to them. The colonel nodded. "Proceed."

"I will need a sword," Tesse said, and then, "*Master*," with what sounded to Cordwick like undue sarcasm.

The Wasps exchanged looks, Borden's officers instantly suspicious, but Borden growled at them, "What's she going to do? This is nothing. This is nothing to do with *him*."

Cordwick kept his face carefully straight, watching as the colonel drew his own shortsword and passed it to Tesse hilt-first. She bowed gracefully and took up her station in the centre of the space, beneath that far-off roof. The original plan had been to use her *thea rappa* for a distraction, allowing Cordwick free rein to make his inspection. This would be better, though, provided the Fly had understood what he was requiring of her.

She stamped on the stone floor, and in the echo of it was airborne, wings shimmering and flickering about her shoulders. She had a red ribbon in one hand, its end weighted with a bead of lead, and the sword dragging at her other side, and she spiralled up until she was halfway to the far ceiling. Cordwick hoped that she was as good as her boast. If nothing else, *bad thea rappa* was a hazard for the spectators, and if she clipped one of Borden's general staff things would not go well.

She let go of the sword. Even as the Wasps were spreading out in alarm she had caught it up again, the ribbon trailing like blood, casting the blade up towards high shuttered windows. Instantly she was after it, spinning and gyring about it, catching the weapon and lifting it with tiny touches, making it spin in a glitter of steel that the high sconces caught. She moved in swift loops about it, making it seem that it was nearly still, that she was orbiting it as a moth about a flame. The streamer of red that followed her spelled out the corkscrew of her path in brief letters as she flew.

She was adequate, Cordwick decided. His interest in such displays was purely for their tendency to distract people from their valuables, and in this he judged her adequate. The Wasps seemed more appreciative, supporting his suspicion that decent entertainment was at a premium out here.

After she had landed, with the sword repatriated to its owner, Borden grunted his approval.

"How much for her?"

Cordwick's innards lurched but his mouth was already working. "Alas, Colonel, I can't, much as I'd like to sometimes. Not only is she my clerk as well as my dancer, her papers are in the Bellowern name and not mine to dispose of."

"Well, perhaps she can entertain us again tomorrow," Borden said, pragmatic as any field officer. "Find the lieutenant quarters," he directed one of his underlings. "Until tomorrow, Lieutenant."

Once they had been decanted to a spartanly appointed guest room, with barred boards over the windows, and once he had made an exhaustive investigation to ensure that nobody was nearby and eavesdropping, Cordwick sat on the hard-mattressed bed and said, "Well?"

"Well I'm going to kill you, some day soon," Tesse informed him.

"You sound like Evandter," the Beetle noted drily.

"You think I like performing for Wasps like some kind of trained cricket?" she demanded in a fierce whisper.

Cordwick held his hands up. "Please, please tell me that you took a look at those high windows."

She looked surly for a moment, but then nodded.

"And you can go out tonight and pop one open for Himself?"

Tesse shook her head. "Shuttered, secured. Same as that one, in fact." She indicated the bars of their own chamber. "But they're definitely the outside ones at the top, that we were talking about."

Cordwick looked at their own window. The thick wooden shutters were backed by a solid metal bar secured at each end with a lock. Darien and Evandter could have spent all night hacking at it with axes before they made any serious dent in the castle's security. "Be thankful for the Engineering Corps' love of order," he told Tesse, "because they make these locks by the hundred in Sonn, and I can spring them easy as breathing." He met her gaze, finding her small face so crammed full of determination that he almost laughed at her.

"If we let Darien and the others in, then they're going to start killing people," Cordwick noted soberly.

"Wasps," Tesse responded, three foot six inches of disdain.

"People," he corrected absently. "All I'm saying is that, once they're in, our part in this is done. We can walk away."

"Coward."

"Yes. Also, bloodshed was never really part of my way of doing things. And what about you? Darien storms in here, kills some Wasps, frees his sweetheart, kills Evandter, probably, and they live happily until the Wasps finally track them down? Where does that leave you, or the Moth for that matter?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she snapped.

"You do, but I can't be bothered to set out the proofs. Anyway, you're not my business any more than the prince is, once he's in. I'm just saying, going elbow-deep in blood so that someone else can have the story-book ending is no recipe for happiness."

For a moment he thought she would crack, that the conflicting, boiling, wretched feelings inside her would spill out and admit to fallibility, but then she just shook her head. "Let's do it," she instructed.

"Fine. You go out, as my slave, talk to some guards, ask for some food, some decent wine. Flirt a bit, if you want. Dance for them, if they ask. Word will have spread, and they seem easily pleased here." He caught her glare and spread his hands theatrically. "What? You think you're *that* good? Just be glad they're bored. You do all that, and I'll be up top, Art and shadows, springing the locks on one of the windows. All good. Then I'll go do the rounds, chat to the guards, maybe flirt a little." He looked for a smile, and didn't find it. "Meanwhile, you take a lantern or something, hang it outside the window I've cracked, so the others know we've done it. After that it's up to them. How's my plan?"

"Just be glad they're stupid here," she shot back acidly.

Cordwick's preference would be to wait in his room, to sleep even, until the shouting started, and then to take his exit by whatever window or door looked most promising. Tesse, however, was a

most unpromising partner in crime. She was going to meet Darien on his entrance, no matter what. She said it was her duty to him, and Cordwick knew that it was because she wanted a pat on the head from her idol.

"You stay here then," she told him. "You save your own hide. Probably Evandter won't care enough to come after you."

"Come after me for *what*?" Cordwick objected. "I've done my part. I've got them in."

"I'm sure he'll see it that way," she told him sweetly, and stepped out.

"House of my *father*!" Cordwick swore. It was a good oath. He saved it for special occasions. After the echo of it had returned to him he got off the bed and followed the errant Fly-kind.

There were still guards patrolling, and the entry to the cellars had its guard doubled since Cordwick had last seen it. His credentials were obviously well-known enough that he received just respectful nods and the occasional salute from the men who passed him. In the great central chamber of the castle, however, he and Tesse were alone. Patrols would come and go, he knew, but Borden had not seen fit to keep a permanent watch here in the heart of his castle. Wasps were daylight creatures and even soldiers had to sleep, and so the night sentries would be concentrated at the gates, and down below.

Down below where Darien must go. Well, that was surely Darien's problem, and anyone fool enough to follow him. No reason why it should fall on Cordwick's shoulders also, surely. *And yet here I am.*

The castle was lit mostly by wall-hung oil-lamps, which filled the place with shadows. The colonel's dining hall had been gaslit, the modern lighting fussing and spitting in its glass bowls, but such enterprise was costly and occasionally dangerous, and the imperial engineers had left most of the castle with little more than its original Commonwealer owners would have used. Sitting in the gloom, hidden from the occasional guard that passed, Cordwick and Tesse did not have to wait long.

Above them, the shutters were silently opened, and three forms slipped in, feathering down on wings of Art. Cordwick expected them to spring into action instantly, but instead the two men were watching Philomaea as the Moth woman looked about them. The grey-skinned woman held up her hand. "Wait, my lord..."

Darien frowned at her. "Philomaea? She is here, is she not? You have traced her here?"

"Yes, but..." The Moth bared her teeth. "Something is wrong. I cannot... The Wasps and their machines. It is hard for me to concentrate."

"It is a trap, I know that," Darien confirmed. "We are prepared for them."

"There are guards all over, below us," Tesse put in. "She must be there."

"Then that is where we will go," Darien said simply. Cordwick caught a glimpse of Philomaea's agonised expression and guessed suddenly that it was not just the readiness of the Wasps that had her by the throat. Some other wrongness had hold of her but she could not put it into any words, let alone words strong enough to sway Prince Lowre Darien from his purpose.

"Patrol coming," Tesse said abruptly.

"Everyone be still," the Moth snapped instantly. Cordwick, who was already back into the shadows, leant back against the wall and all but held his breath. To his eyes, the others were painfully obvious, standing in shadows but not even attempting to hide. He heard the footsteps then, and a pair of Wasp soldiers walked in, one of them laughing behind his hand at something his comrade had said. Philomaea was staring at them, her hands curled into claws. Under that blank-eyed gaze the two soldiers passed by, somehow failing to see any of them, Moth or Mantis

or Dragonfly prince. They went almost in arm's reach of Darien himself, ignoring him as though he was just some piece of long-familiar statuary, and carried on their round, oblivious.

Then Evandter was abruptly behind them, taking a dagger from the belt of one of the Wasps and ripping it, in two brutally economic passes, across their throats. There was no cry from them, just a choking gurgle that made Cordwick sick to the stomach, and then they were on the ground, kicking out their last. Bloody blade in hand, the Mantis regarded his fellows.

"Why?" Cordwick hissed at him, made bold by horror. "Why do that? They were about to go!"

"Because I willed it," Evandter told him coldly. "Now, do we have a rescue to undertake, or shall we wait here for the next two? I could kill the whole garrison pair by pair if you prefer."

"Tesse, which way to the cellars?" Darien directed, after shooting the Mantis a look of disgust.

"Follow," the Fly said. "There are guards..."

"Philomaea shall let us pass them. We shall leave them *alive*." Darien glared at Evandter. "That way, when these poor wretches are discovered, they shall not think that we have gone that way."

"Pass them? Six of them are at the very door," Cordwick objected.

"You understand nothing," the Moth told him disdainfully.

Cordwick, veteran of a hundred confidence schemes, did indeed have to confess that he understood nothing. There were ways he knew of getting past guards. They involved talking to them, or creeping riskily behind them, or causing some distraction.

Philomaea did none of these things, not quite. No words were exchanged, the guards had their backs to the door to prevent just such creeping, and there was no distraction that Cordwick could see or hear. Nonetheless, once they were in sight of the cellar door, something spooked the guards. One drew his sword, another held a hand out, palm open. Something in the shadows had their attention, and the whole pack of them hunched cautiously forwards, caught between waiting to sound an alarm, and fear of ridicule in case it was nothing. Eventually one of them forged ahead a dozen steps, the rest half of the way with them. Behind them, as they peered into the gloom, the intruders went neatly through the door.

No lock, Cordwick noted. It was still the original Dragonfly piece, secured by a hook-and-cord arrangement. *I'd have put a lock on the cellar door, if I was keeping prisoners down there*. He filed the thought for later, absently.

There were stone-flagged stairs, then. These old castles always had a complex piece of business beneath them, Maille being an extreme example. As Dragonfly-kindens were a people of air and sunlight, it had always puzzled Cordwick, but he guessed now was not the time to bring it up. Beneath them they could hear more Wasps, the sound of a few voices in idle, grumbling conversation. As they reached the stairs' end Cordwick could identify a handful of soldiers, the rattle of dice. The gaming table was set up immediately where the stairs came out, and Cordwick saw a half-dozen Wasps idling there. Philomaea held up a hand for silence and led the way. The shadows seemed to gather about her and Cordwick shuddered, feeling abruptly chilled more than the stone around him could account for. Not one of the Wasps looked round, not *one*. Instead, the Moth seemed to trail a cloak of night behind her, that each of her companions partook of.

I am involved with something I want no part of, Cordwick told himself, but that was nothing new. What was new was the gaslamps and pipes bolted to the walls. Here, where the darkness could never be relieved by the sun, the Wasps had set up a patchwork of modern

lighting, but perhaps it was still being installed, or out of service, for intruders and guards both had only the meagre oil lamps to rely on.

There was a maze of chambers down there, cellars beyond cellars, low corridors and low rooms, and stairs that went to lower cellars still. The walls had been marked, at one time, but time and crawling lichen had sufficed to obscure the markings, and they seemed meaningless little squiggles to Cordwick, wherever he could make them out. Still, Philomaea led them in fits and starts, stopping every so often with that uncertain, suspicious look, her worry returning and returning. Still each time she only had to look back at the trusting, expectant face of Lowre Darien to reassure her, and she was leading them off again.

Their progress was a series of stops and starts, shadow to shadow, and each step brought more Wasps: the cellars were crawling with them and the bulk of them in armour and ready for battle. This was the trap, then. The serrated jaws trembled on all sides and yet Philomaea led them step by step, and not a single soldier marked them.

Cordwick was reminded of certain war stories he had heard from imperial soldiers. The Commonweal lost battles, on the whole: it lost them gloriously and with colossal waste of life, so that the Monarch would have been better served executing a significant percentage of the population in the three conquered principalities, and then just signing over the devastated remains. The Commonweal lost battles, but the Empire lost officers. The stories were too circumstantial to be mere fiction. Commonweal mercenaries and assassins had walked into command tents, into colonel's quarters, into the sanctums of the Empire's finest, and left neat corpses to attest to their presence, followed shortly after by harsh discipline for the sentries and guards involved. *And is this it? Did they breeze in, invisible as air, like this?* Cordwick had no answers.

They paused at a crossroads, the Moth looking from one dark passageway to the other. The guttering oil lamps were their friends, for the Wasps clustered close to them, blind to the darkness. The intruders' impossible progress had taken them deep into the heart of the castle's underside.

"Which way?" murmured Darien, on a knife-edge of anticipation.

"I..." Cordwick could not make out the Moth's expression but her voice trembled. "This way, I think..." One hand indicated a direction indistinctly. "Something is wrong. I am unsure." All around them the clatter and chatter of three score of imperial soldiers was a constant, putting Cordwick in mind of the hum of a hive that any moment might erupt in stinging wings.

"I smell something," Tesse whispered, and the Beetle realised that he did, too, a familiar chemical scent of...

And then the lights came on. The automatic strikers wheeled sparks in the sconces, and a moment after there were tall flames leaping behind glass all throughout the cellars, banishing night with an artificial dawn.

Philomaea cried out, just a desperate denial of what had happened, but whatever veil she had carried with her was banished with the darkness and a dozen Wasps had already spotted the intruders, leaping up with exclamations of surprise and alarm.

Cordwick dropped, falling to his knees and dragging Tesse to him just as she was about to take wing. He saw a soldier's palm flash fire and Philomaea was punched off her feet, a blackened circle smoking beneath her throat. Tesse was fighting him, kicking and struggling, but then Evandter and Darien were in motion and she stopped, just watching.

Golden stingshot danced about them, but they were neither of them hit, though the stone above Cordwick's head was scorched and charred with it. Then Darien had his swords into two of his enemy, and the Mantis was butchering the other way, taking and discarding the swords of

his foes as he chose. For a few packed seconds there was no pattern to it, Cordwick's eyes could not follow the swift exchange. Then both fighters were gone. Neither had taken the way that Philomaea had indicated, each letting the tide of the fight determine their most efficient path to more of the foe.

"Oh- oh-" Tesse crawled over two dead Wasps to get to Philomaea, but the Moth was quite dead.

"They knew," Cordwick said quietly. "Whatever she was doing, they knew it. They let us get so far, and no further."

"Shut up," Tesse spat at him. "We're going to rescue her."

"What?"

"Nysse Ceann. She's this way, Philo said. Darien will be coming for her, the Mantis too. We'll go there."

"We?"

"I need you for the locks!" she hissed. "And if you run now, and if Evandter doesn't hunt you down, I swear, you craven lump, I'll kill you myself!" Her teeth were bared, her eyes flaring. She was a quarter of his size and yet he thought she would leap on him and try for his throat with her teeth.

They seemed momentarily beneath the notice of the Empire. However many soldiers Borden had stowed down here, they were all engaged in trying to contain Darien and Evandter.

"Let's go," Cordwick agreed, and the two of the scuttled off, their path brightly lit by the sear of the gaslamps.

They came to another cellar almost immediately, cluttered with barrels that were patched with mildew, some old Commonweal stash that nobody had got round to dealing with. The gaslamps were fewer here, and Cordwick was grimly certain that they had been in the very epicentre of the modern lighting when the lamps had been struck up. Two further halls led off, and for a moment they dithered, unsure which way to go. Then from their left, Evandter stalked in.

He was red to the elbows with other peoples' blood and grinning like a skull. He barely glanced at his two former comrades. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, and there was anticipation writ in every line of him. *He's going to get to her first*, Cordwick realised. *He's going to spirit her away, and leave Darien to the Empire.*

Then there were soldiers, a squad of eight or so dashing in behind him, and Evandter turned smoothly on his heel, dropping back into a fighting crouch with his spines levelled. In the centre of the newcomers was Colonel Borden himself.

There was a moment's pause, the soldiers awaiting the order, the Mantis like a drawn bow, ready to loose at any instant.

"I know you," Borden said. Distant, echoing, were the sounds of fighting, the cries of the injured, but here it was very quiet. "You are Evandter, the murderer, the brigand-king. I have seen your likeness."

The Mantis sketched a slight bow without breaking his stance.

"They put me here to kill Lowre Darien, the hero," Borden stated slowly. "Orders are orders, but I'd not want to be the man remembered for *that* deed. Ridding the world of *you*, however, is fit matter for a man of honour." The colonel drew his sword, the one he had lent Tesse for her dance.

Something had soured in Evandter's face, on the Wasp's words. Even as Borden's sword cleared its scabbard he was abruptly in motion, leaping almost onto their blades' points. He felled

two of them in his leap, jagged spines lashing left and right, stingfire flying wide, and then he had carried them backwards, dancing through their midst, and the knot of fighting men swept from the cellar and back the way they had all come.

"On!" decided Tesse, and almost dragged Cordwick the other way. The hall was shorter than they had thought, though, and the room beyond lit only with two low oil lanterns, one hung beside each of the soldiers stationed there. Tesse and Cordwick shrank back but the men had not seen them. Nor had they left their post to investigate the fighting, sounds of which had now almost entirely died away.

Between them, her hands tied before her, was a Dragonfly-kind woman in the rags of what had once been a very fine robe indeed. Her head was down, a cascade of dark hair hiding her face. Tesse's hand tightened on Cordwick's arm.

Even as they were creeping back towards the barrel-filled cellar someone passed them, unheralded and almost silent. Darien.

He did not glance at them. His eyes were for Nysse Ceann only. He barely glanced at the two Wasps as their stings flashed at him, as their swords clashed against his own. They were skilled, those two, hand-picked for the job, but he killed them nonetheless and barely noted them.

He spoke the woman's name, and her head lifted. Cordwick was struck, even in the poor light, by how plainly-writ there was the quality that had captivated Darien and Evandter both.

The prince cut her bonds, kneeling to sever the ropes and then raise her to her feet. Tesse was trembling, clutching at the Beetle's sleeve, but Cordwick made an abruptly puzzled sound despite himself. "I'd've locked her up in one of these cellars, myself," he muttered philosophically, watching the two Dragonflies together.

And she stabbed him. In a single move, perfect in its power, speed and precision, the woman had rammed a blade hilt-deep under Darien's armpit. In the moment of shock that followed, she dragged it out and plunged it, two-handed, past his collarbone. Darien's mouth was wide, head thrown back, and his hands clawed briefly at the air as though trying to out-wrestle fate. He collapsed to his knees without a sound, toppled sideways, from hero to carrion without ever understanding what had befallen him.

Tesse twitched, and Cordwick grappled her, dragging her back, pulling her away and into the room with the barrels. He could feel her trying to scream, her body racked by silent convulsions, her mouth gaping like a drowning woman's. Cordwick barely got her down behind the barrels before Nysse Ceann had walked in.

But it was not Ceann - or it was in the instant she stepped from the low, dark, hall, but then there was a man there, a Spider-kind man no less, tearing the rags of a ruined robe from himself to reveal loose-fitting clothes beneath, such as an acrobat or actor might wear. The man's hair was dark, but not the flowing mane Cordwick knew he had seen, and that face had nothing in it that recalled the prisoner-turned-murdereress, and yet it had been that woman who entered, and this man who now stood in her place.

Cordwick did his best, just then, to find a way to lie to himself about what he had seen, Later still, afterwards, he would know that he had been mistaken, that wigs and makeup and mumming and poor light had fooled him, but just then he knew it was not so: he had seen what he had seen.

The sound of boots heralded the arrival of the bald, humourless man who had haunted the colonel's table: the Rekef man.

"Captain," the Spider acknowledged, cleaning his blade on the remains of the robe.

"Scylis," the Rekef man nodded. "Where...?"

The Spider indicated the room he had just left with a jerk of his head. "I take it you did not include Colonel Borden in your plans, Captain?"

"How could I have explained matters to his satisfaction?" The Rekef man had taken one look into the further room, and was clearly satisfied. "One more enemy of the Empire done with. You'll get your pay, Scylis, and a commendation."

"So kind," the Spider, Scylis, remarked. "And Nysse Ceann? I'll find her at that place in Kalla Rae, I take it?"

"What of it?"

The Spider's smile was only affable. "It was suggested that I could kill the precious bitch, after I'd done for her lover."

The Rekef man shook his head. "She might yet be useful, as bait, or to keep some Commonweal hotheads in line. Forget her. There's call for you in Helleron, I hear."

Scylis shrugged. "You'll want her dead some day, and my rates for ridding the world of spoilt princesses are surprisingly reasonable. Now, shall we collect my fee?"

And they were gone, walking companionably off, the killer and his paymaster. Only then did Cordwick realise that he had been holding his breath.

Tesse insisted on seeing Darien's body at first, but when they reached the entrance to that room her nerve failed her and she would not look. Instead, she let Cordwick guide her away, weaving carefully through the nest of cellars. Wherever the live Wasps were gathered or searching, they changed path, went into the dark and found a way round through the interconnecting passages.

And later, as they crouched in the shadows whilst Wasp surgeons and their slaves hunted for wounded that could be saved, Cordwick stated, "We can do it."

Tesse looked at him mutely, locking eyes with him until, somehow, his meaning seeped into her.

"Nysse Ceann?" she breathed.

"Kalla Rae," Cordwick confirmed.

"And why?" she pressed him, "Why would you? Where's your profit, thief?"

Cordwick just held her gaze, and at last said, "Because I am Apt, and a Beetle, and make free with the goods of others, do not think I know nothing of doing what is right. If it can be done, without great risk, without loss. Besides, there might be profit in it. Some Commonweal family would pay well, to have her. No reason why a man can't be mercenary and still do right."

She gave him a sharp look. By that time they had been left alone some time, and she crept out from their hiding place, forcing him to follow. They chose their path almost at random, avoiding any hint of movement, until they found the bodies.

Not the first bodies they had seen, of course: Darien's assault had wreaked a costly ruin on so many of the Wasps that the Rekef man had set up in his path. Cordwick recognized a face, though, in the flaring gaslight. Colonel Borden stared up at the ceiling, his face slack and his stomach opened. His dead men lay around him in a clutter of limbs and blades and riven armour. Looking down at them, Cordwick felt a sudden spur of anger at Lowre Darien.

"Bloody Dragonflies," he said through his teeth, and at Tesse's angry look he added, "Had to do things the old fashioned way, didn't he? You and me, we could have got the woman out, if she'd even been here. We'd have got her out without spilling a drop of anyone's blood."

And a hoarse, faint voice answered him, "And where would be the fun in that?"

The two of them started, only then seeing the man who sat at a shadowed corner of the room, leaning back against the stones, his clothes gored and blood-streaked, his face wealed with burn-scar. Evandter.

Borden had done his best, Cordwick could see, to make an end to the infamous killer. The Mantis had been stabbed three times, not one of them mortal, but enough to bring him down. Too late for Borden, though. Too late for his followers.

The eyes of Evandter glittered in the light. "So," he asked them, the pain telling just a little in his conversational tone, "What now, eh?"

The garrison of Del Halle had been torn apart, and the reason for its existence was gone, too, though none of the Wasps seemed to know just what had happened to their vaunted prisoner. Still, in licking their wounds, and with nobody to give them orders, they kept no special watch for any that might wish to further break in to the fortress, still less for those who only wished to get out.

And in the morning three set out for Kalla Rae.