

Fallen Heroes

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

The glass was so smudged and dusty that it was a poor kind of light that came through it, but the fly thought it was enough. It buzzed and battered, skating first one way and then back along the filthy pane. The greater world was out there, as the wan light told it, so it made its mindless bid for freedom over and over and over.

That's our totem, thought Bello hollowly. *My people, my race. That's our totem:* as he sat by the window, waiting for the call with a score of other skinny little youths. The machines in the factory next door thundered and crashed in a rhythm he knew by heart now.

The fly had stopped, walking up the glass bemusedly. It cleaned its face and Bello could almost read its tiny mind as it thought, *Well if I got in, I can get out.* That was why flies were better than wasps or beetles. Wasps would just batter at the window until they fell and died. Flies would get the point, eventually. They would go and find another way out.

So why can't we? The Fly-kindens, Bello's diminutive people, and here they were behind glass, battering away, toil without end.

He thought about his father, coming back from the factory, jostled in a crowd of bigger men and women. His father, with his shoulders bowed, his balding head down, parcelled in his long coat. He trudged the four hundred yards back home every evening and never thought to fly. The Ancestor's Art that gave his people shimmering wings, and the sky, had shrivelled in him. His feet never left the ground.

Trapped behind the glass, in Helleron. Helleron, city of opportunity. The Beetle-kindens that owned Helleron, each stone and soul of it, never turned anybody away. The factories were hungry mouths. They chewed up labour, ground it down to grit. There was a place for every newcomer in Helleron, and it was at the bottom. The magnates who owned the factories and the tenements and the big houses on the hill were all locals, but the grist of their mills came from all the people of the Lowlands. The little Fly-kindens were everywhere, running errands, serving food, crawling beneath machines to free them, adding a little blood to make the engines of commerce run smoothly.

The fat, brown-skinned Beetle man who was Bello's employer stomped in, staring at his charges. "Bello! Jons Prater, Lock House in Porter Square, quick as you like." Bello jumped up automatically as his name was called, almost ripped the letter from the big man's hand and was off out of the door. The Ancestor Art swelled in him, and he felt the twitch of his shoulderblades as his wings formed, shimmering and half-seen, and then he was airborne. Below him Helleron spread on all sides like a great stain, smogging the air with the smoke of its factories. There were some parts of the industrial district so thick with it that the air was impassable, poisonous. Bello had lived here all his life, and been running messages since his wings came at six. Outside of the city the Messengers' Guild still held sway with its guarantees of quality and service. Inside there were plenty who did not want to pay their prices. Men like Bello's employer were swift to spot a market.

Bello raced at rooftop height, unravelling his mind's map of the city for the short road to Porter Square. It would be easy, winging across the sky's wide bowl, to take this for freedom. The rush of his wings spoke to him of his people's own warrens far south of

here, and all the glorious clear air in between. He was still behind the glass, though. He would give Jons Prater the message and take his money, and then he would be back, waiting with the other youths for the next job. His speed was not dedication, but knowing he would get no pay if he was late. He was thirteen years old and he had a reputation to keep up.

There were raised voices when he got home. It was an hour after dark and he was wretchedly tired, but he made the effort anyway, flitting from landing to landing without touching the steps in between. All around him the tenement creaked and grumbled with the lives of all the cursed people who had no place better to live. He heard a dozen arguments and a fight through the thin walls. On the fourth floor he heard his father's voice: raised, but not shouting. His father never shouted any more. He could manage only a whining complaint that held the seeds of its own defeat. Bello stopped, not wanting to go in. He felt a hand on his shoulders, pushing him down, keeping him down. Beyond the day's long, tired haul he recognised it as despair. *Battering against the glass*. He sat on the top step and rubbed at his eyes. He would do what he always did. He would wait out here until it was done.

The stairs creaked on the flight above and he looked up quickly. There was only one person who lived over Bello's family. The man was a local celebrity, of sorts. He, of them all, lived here because he chose, not because he must. He said it kept him closer to his clients. Holden, the pugilist. If he had ever had a first name, nobody remembered it. He was just Holden, Holden with the scarred face and the leather coat that didn't-quite-hide his shortswords. He was Beetle-kinden, with their squat, solid build, but he was lean with it, balanced. For all he towered over Bello's three-foot height he had a cocky grace unusual for his people.

As he passed the landing he ruffled Bello's hair. The Fly youth mustered a smile for him. "You off to work, Master Holden?"

"Always, son." The fighter paused, rolled his shoulders to loosen them. "Some fellow in the Gladhander fief's getting too big for himself, needs a taking down."

Bello followed the news of the fiefs, Heleron's criminal gangs, as avidly as all his fellows. Men like Holden were the heroes, the free spirits, who passed through their lives. The simple news that Holden was off to pull the Gladhanders' noses sent a vicarious thrill through Bello. He would surely lie awake tonight, imagining the man in chases down alleys, fights on the rooftops, stealthy stalking through the halls of his enemies.

"Good luck, Master Holden!" Bello said.

"Ain't no such thing as luck, son. Skill's all," Holden told him, setting off down the stairs. "Remember that, boy, and you can't go far wrong." As he went Bello heard the door open, realised his father's voice had ceased its sad tirade.

The long-faced old Beetle-kinden man who came past on the stairs was the landlord's agent, who Bello had known and disliked all his life. He had become a symbol of the family's hopelessness, its lack of prospects. He turned up every month for his money, and Bello's father would scrape together what they had, and sometimes it was enough, and sometimes it was short. If it was short then the man would be back the next week: slow, mournful, patient, three times the size of Bello's father, insistent. He always

got his due eventually. By some grotesque chance he was called Joyless Bidewell. He carried the weight of the name like a sack of coal.

Bello went in before the door closed. His nose told him it was the remains of yesterday's thin vegetable stew his mother would be serving. His father was at his customary place already, cross-legged on the floor before the low table. He looked at Bello without expression until the boy had handed over the half-dozen bits he had made that day. It was not any threat of retribution that made him part with the money, but the crippling knowledge that there would be none. His father would not even rise to a confrontation with his own son.

"Saw Bidewell on the landing," he said, sitting opposite his father. "What's he want now? Rent day was last week."

Bello's father's haunted eyes flicked up to his wife, kneeling at the fireplace and spooning out the stew. He said nothing. He never did. He locked his troubles up, always, where they could be neither goaded nor charmed from him.

They preferred Bello to stay indoors after dark but lately he could not bear to. Tonight, with the unspoken *something* hanging in the air between his parents, he was out of the door the moment he had finished his meal. There were a dozen Fly-kindens families in the tenement, more next door. They did not mix with other races but they formed a little community of their own. Bello would go and find his peers, and scrap and gossip and boast about imagined connections with the fiefs and the street-fighters. His nodding acquaintance with Holden was hard currency far more than the ceramic chips he was paid in, that were good no further than Helleron's outlying buildings.

He almost ran into the man sitting on the stairs before he could stop, his wings flaring awkwardly at short notice, carrying him in a great leap over the man's head. He landed in a stumble, catching himself with another ghostly flash of his Art. At first he thought it was some tramp off the streets who had come in from the weather. Then he saw it was Joyless Bidewell himself. The Beetle-kindens man was staring at him with that lined face of his. His creased lips moved. Bello hesitated, torn between rushing off and the prodigy of this man, the Big Man of their tenement for all he was some bigger man's agent, sitting on the steps like a drunk.

"Master Bidewell?" he said eventually. Politeness to the Beetle-kindens, to their faces, had been slapped into him.

Joyless Bidewell frowned, obviously not placing him, then: "You're Frenno's boy, no?" When Bello nodded the big man sighed, gathered his coat closer about him. "Well, I'm sorry, boy," he said. He sounded as tired as Bello's father, as tired as Bello himself had been when he came home.

"Sorry what? What's going on?" Bello demanded. "Tell me," and then, "Please."

Bidewell glanced up, up towards Bello's apartment. He shrugged. "Rent's going up, boy. Quite a step up."

"What?"

"Not my fault. Not my doing. Been all day telling people like your folks that they can't afford to live here anymore." He shrugged. "Nothing I can do." There must have been something in Bello's face that showed more fire than his father's, for the old Beetle levered himself to his feet. "Two day ago, boy, this street changed hands. The Firecaller fief's here now, kicked the House of Maynard out. Firecallers want more cut than old

Maynard ever did. Nobody going to pay that 'cept for all you folks who live here. My boss sure ain't."

"Then... don't pay," said Bello, knowing as he did that it was stupid.

"Don't call'em Firecallers for nothing," Bidewell mumbled. He pushed past Bello, shaking his head.

Bello had not gone to his friends. They would have to brag the night through without him. He had sat on the steps where Bidewell had sat, and thought. In his mind the image of a fly battering at the glass came again and again. *So go around. Find another way.* Bidewell was nobody. Take him away and another servant would fill his shoes. Bidewell's faceless master, some factor of a city magnate, was so far away that to beg of him would be like pleading with the sun. Bello's parents, like most of the people in the tenement, would be moved on, kicked out. There would be some worse place awaiting them, and then some worse place again. Perhaps they would share a room with another family. Two other families. Already the room they had was only half of one, split down the middle to fit more families in. Everyone knew the Fly-kindens, the little people, needed hardly any space to live in.

But we were born to have the sky. The Beetles, clumsy and industrious and bound to the earth, did not see it that way.

There was only one way to push, and he had only one means of putting the pressure on.

There was a taverna seven streets away in the big Gold Boys fief where the fighters met. The Gold Boys had been around forever. They were comfortable, pally with the guard and the magnates, paying all the right people. They ran entertainments: brothels, gambling houses, illegal fights. It was the high end of the fief culture and it gave them an oft-pawned respectability. The Taverna Marlus had become the fashionable place for the well-to-do to gawp at the lowly-but-brutal. Thrills for the one, money for the other. Marlus and the Gold Boys did well out of it.

There were always a gaggle of youths hanging about the doorway. They were a mixture of Fly-kindens and Beetles, half-breeds and a few others. Bello was not one of them and, if he gave them the chance, they would have knocked him down a few times. His wings flung him straight past them, through the open door and skidding on the rugs of the floor.

"Out, you!" bellowed Marlus. The proprietor, a pitch-skinned Ant-kindens man, was playing dice with some of his richer patrons. He stood, scowling. The sword at his belt, no less than the crossbow above the bar, reminded everyone of his boast to be a renegade soldier from a distant city-state.

"Here to see Holden!" Bello gasped out, looking frantically around to find the man. For a swooping moment he could not see him, anticipating a hasty ejection and a kicking from the locals. Then he saw the Beetle-kindens fighter at one of the tables, nodding at Marlus. The Ant narrowed his eyes but sat back down.

"You got a message for me, Bello?" Holden asked. The Fly youth looked at him seriously. This was the part that he had not rehearsed.

"I- need to talk to you," he said. Holden was sharing a table with two other Beetle-kindens brawlers, and they were already smirking. Bello pressed on. "It's really important. Please, Master Holden."

"*Master* Holden," one of the others snickered.

Holden grimaced and stood up, stretching. "Ignore them, boy. They're just jealous because they haven't pissed off the Gladhanders like I just did." Holden's drinking fellows looked a step more threadbare than he was.

"Right, be quick," the fighter said, when he got Bello out of obvious earshot. "I'm looking to pick up another job this evening." He did not say it, but he might as well have done: being seen talking to a ragged Fly-kindens youth would not help his image.

"I- want to hire you," Bello got out, before his nerve could fail him.

"Yeah?" Holden grinned at him, delighted. "With what, Bello?"

Bello reached into his pockets and brought out a handful. Most of it was ceramic bits, but there were a few silver Standards in there. It was all the money that Bello had ever kept back from his parents, all the money he had kept secret and hidden for the right moment. This had to be the moment, and the money had to be enough. "They're going to throw us out. They're putting the rent up," he blurted out. "You must have heard."

"So put this towards the rent," Holden said reasonably.

"But what about next month? And what if they put it up again?" Bello asked. "I need to hire you to fight the Firecallers, Master Holden. Because then it'll be done, and we can go back to the way things were."

Holden's face had soured when the Firecallers were mentioned. He closed Bello's hands over the money. "Listen, boy," he said. "Two things." Sympathy twisted at his scars. "One: the Firecallers are on the up. They're doing well these days. I'd charge a lot to start spiking their engines. Two: what you've just showed me is less than what I charge to meet with people, let alone actually draw a sword for them."

He let that sink in, giving Bello time to consider it. In Bello's head the fly was walking up the pane, trying to work out why it could not get out this way.

"Anyone around here's going to be the same," Holden said. "Marlus' place is for the doing-wells." He grimaced. "Course, there are other places. Someone might be desperate enough for rep to take on the Firecallers."

Bello stared at him desperately. Holden scowled. "The world isn't fair. Know it and move on. You don't want to get mixed in this."

"What am I supposed to do?" Bello asked him. "Please, Master Holden. I have to find *someone*. At least tell me where to look."

"Listen boy, you want to go to these kind of places, it's on your head. They ain't safe, not any way." The fighter sighed. "But I can tell you, if you want it."

Holden's first recommendation was a gambling house on the riverfront. Helleron's river trade was halfway to nothing since they put the railroad in. What had been rich men's warehouses and offices were fallen into rot and ruin, and all kinds of vermin had moved in. The place had no name but there was a picture of a scorpion painted crude and yellow above the door, just like Holden had said. Nobody stopped Bello going in.

The first two bravos he tried to speak to, a Beetle and some kind of halfbreed, just cuffed him away. The second one had struck hard enough to knock him to the floor. He righted himself with a flick of his wings. He found a third. She was a lean, elegant Spider-kind woman, slumming it or down on her luck. There had been gems in her rapier hilt but the sockets were empty now. When he told her what he wanted she nodded to one of the house staff and took Bello aside into a little room.

“Let’s see your money,” she said, and he showed it to her, all two handfuls of it.

She laughed. She laughed for a long time, having seen that, and something went out of her. “You little idiot,” she said, when she could. “I was going to rob you, you fool. Kill you, most likely.” She said it quite merrily. “Not for that, though. I don’t soil my blades for potsherds and tin-tacky. *Hire* me? You couldn’t hire a man to drink with you for that.”

Bello found, in the face of her laughter, that he was shaking. She was two feet taller than him, armed and a professional, but he had to hold himself back from doing something rash.

“But,” he said through clenched teeth, “I need-“

She shook her head. “You’re mad,” she told him. “Mind you, I value that. Look, I’ve a man you can go to. Don’t tell him I sent you. It won’t help your case. I just happen to know he’s down at Scaggle’s tonight after a job.”

There were lower dives than the scorpion-fronted gambling den. Scaggle’s was one of them. It was further down the river, built under a bridge so that there were water-marks halfway up the stone steps. Scaggle was a Beetle-kind crone, burly and round-shouldered. She was all the staff she needed, all the guards too. Even as Bello came up the steps he had to flit aside as she hurled a drunk down onto them, careless of whether he hit rock or water. She squinted at Bello, then hulked back inside.

It was very dark in there. The place was little more than a cave. Fly-kind eyes were good, though. Bello could pick out a dozen men sitting about five tables, lit only by wan candlelight. They were Beetles and halfbreeds, save for one. That one was the man Bello had come here to find.

He was as outlandish as anyone Bello had seen: tall and straight and fair, with sharply-pointed features and skin that was very pale. He wore an arming jacket secured with an elaborate pin. He looked as though he had stepped out of another world, a story.

He eyed Bello narrowly as the boy approached him, saying nothing. When he raised his earthenware mug to drink Bello saw flexing spines jutting from his forearm.

He said nothing, not invitation nor dismissal. It was left to Bello to say, “Excuse me, you are Master Tisamon?”

A nod, only. Bello forced himself on before he dried. “I need to hire you, Master.”

The man Tisamon’s mouth quirked at that and he put his mug down. “Do you know why I come here?” he asked. His voice was dry and sharp as the rest of him. Bello shook his head.

“I come here because people hiring men like me do not,” Tisamon finished.

“I need to hire you,” Bello repeated.

“Go away.”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

Abruptly Tisamon was standing, and Bello felt as though he'd swallowed his heart. There had been no transition between ease and edge. The edge had always been there, just out of sight. There was a metal gauntlet on the man's right hand, that ended in a two-foot blade jutting from the fingers.

"Please..." Bello said, through a throat gone dry.

"Can I help you?" Tisamon asked, and he was looking over Bello's head. Not wanting to take his eyes off the man, Bello forced himself to crane back. There were three newcomers there, burly Beetle men squinting in the gloom.

"Don't want to disturb you, chief," said one of them. "Just need a word with the little fellow here."

Bello choked, flinched back from them. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"We're the fellows you're walking out of here with," said their leader. "You'll excuse us, chief, won't you?"

"Certainly," Tisamon said, relaxing back, only it was not relaxing. Bello saw the edge still there, though the Beetles missed it. "When I've finished speaking with my client, that is."

There was a moment with the Beetles exchanging glances, and Tisamon smiling urbanely at them.

"Now listen chief—" their leader started, and one of the others snapped out, "Look, this ain't nothing to do with you. We're taking the Fly-boy."

He grabbed Bello by the shoulder, surprisingly swift.

Tisamon *moved*. Bello saw nothing of it. As soon as he could he dived beneath the table, and the fact that the hand came with him and the man stayed where he was only made sense later on.

There was a lot of noise, tables being kicked over, surprised shouts from the other patrons. Then there was surprisingly little noise. Bello put his head over the tabletop. Tisamon was standing, a dark, narrow shape. The three thugs were down and still. There was remarkably little blood and already old Mother Scaggle was hunching forward, gnarled hands reaching for rings and purses. Tisamon nodded at her and, a swift moment later when she was done, he hauled the bodies out, one by one, turfing them into the river. Bello saw then another reason he chose his drinking haunts.

When he came back there was no blood on him, and the metal gauntlet had gone away. He resumed his seat, resumed his drink. "Come out, boy," he said.

When Bello did he found himself being scrutinised, as of doubtful goods. "You're no rich man's brat," Tisamon said. "So why do the Firecallers want you?"

"Firecallers?" Bello looked back at the river, that had borne the dead men away without complaint. "I... was going to hire you to fight them..."

"Is that so? I'm not your first choice though. Who else have you tried?" Tisamon asked. Seeing Bello's expression he nodded. "Someone worked out that there was money in letting the Firecallers know about you." He was smiling now, although it was not a pleasant smile. "What have you got against the Firecallers?"

"They want to throw my parents onto the street," Bello said. It was not quite true, but true enough.

Tisamon shrugged, the spines flexing on his arms. "You're the second man to try to hire me against the Firecallers. I turned him down as well." As Bello sagged his smile

became sharper. "However I appear to be involved now. So let's go visit my other patron, shall we?"

Bello sat in a small cellar, watching Tisamon talk with a huge, fat Beetle. The fat man was robed in straining white like a scholar, sitting back in a big, stuffed chair. There was a man on either side. One had a crossbow and the other something Bello thought was a Waster, broad barrelled and gaping. From what he'd heard from others about the new firepowder weapons, the blast of metal scrap would be quite enough to rip both him and Tisamon apart.

Tisamon was quite unconcerned, despite the fact that both weapons were levelled at him. All he said was, "Is this what passes for your welcome?"

"When a hired killer who's turned you down suddenly wants to talk, you get suspicious," the fat man said. "Now what the deal, Mantis?"

"I've changed my mind," Tisamon said easily, and the negotiations started. Bello sat in the corner, watching the light of the single lantern above gutter on their features. The fat man played lordly unconcern but there was a tremor behind it. Bello had no idea who he was. Only when they had left did he realise that he had been Maynard, of the House of Maynard, the fief whose borders the Firecallers were eroding.

"What happens now?" Bello asked.

"Time passes," Tisamon told him. Outside, in the House of Maynard fief, there was a dawn-edge to the eastern sky. He found it impossible to believe that it had all been one night, that it had all happened at all.

"Go home," Tisamon said. Bello goggled at him.

"But, Master Tisamon- they are looking for me-"

Tisamon shrugged. "We cannot change that."

The fly battered against the glass, unable to believe it was not free. Bello thought, grasped for an idea, and caught it.

It was an awkward breakfast. Little was said. Had there been an alternative, or had Bello's father been the man for it, he would have refused. Instead he shuffled aside, slope-shouldered, a curdled look on him, when Bello brought his new friend home.

"Been people looking for you," he muttered. His stare at Tisamon lumped the man in with those 'people'. "Been causing trouble?"

"Some," Bello said, torn between showing Tisamon a happy family and showing off. The fighter stooped in, giving each parent a brisk nod. Bello thought his mother would protest. The Fly-kinde had their rules of hospitality, though, like everyone else. She went reluctantly to their forced guest, staring straight ahead at his belt, not up at his face.

"Will you sit down, Master?" she said. "Please, take your place."

It would be a comic scene to any of the larger kinde: Tisamon crouched at one edge of that low table, all elbows and knees and lowered head, filling far too much of the room. For a Fly-kinde it was an intrusion, a threat. Even a lean man like Tisamon, even had he not been what he was, could have broken them, taken what he wanted. He did not acknowledge it, nor did he find any humour in it. He took the meagre bread and cheese

that Bello's mother offered with quiet thanks, not refusing out of charity nor demanding more. It took Bello all the meal to work out what was so strange about him.

"Master Tisamon," he said, afterwards. "Where are you from?"

"Far, far away," Tisamon said. He was sitting with his back against one wall, beside the window and looking at the door. "Far away and long ago," he murmured.

"I've never met a... Mantis-kinden before."

"If you're lucky you'll never meet one again. We're a cursed breed," Tisamon said.

"How long have you been in Helleron, Master?" Bello finally got to his point.

"Ten years, more. You stop counting." The narrow eyes were watching him, waiting, but Bello did not say it. *You do not fit here*, he thought. *Not here in this room, but all the same, not anywhere else near here.* Tisamon's alienation was so great that he seemed to leave no tracks, to not touch the grime of Helleron at all. He was no more out of place dining with Fly-kinden than he was drinking at Scaggles.

"Why... did you come here, Master?" Bello asked, wondering if he was being too bold.

"A mistake, a long time ago," Tisamon said softly.

And you have stayed here ever since, Bello thought. *Another fly under glass.*

A messenger met them on the stairs, just as Bello was hurrying off to work. His father was a floor below them, clumping and clumping. He did not stop or turn round when the Fly-kinden girl hailed Tisamon.

She passed him a folded note, hanging in the air all the while with her wings a blur. Tisamon glanced at it once.

"Agreed," he said, and she took that as her answer and flew off. She had been a cleaner and more respectable specimen of Bello's profession than he ever usually saw.

"What is agreed, Master?" he asked.

"You must know how the fiefs of Helleron resolve their differences," Tisamon said. "Or the chief and most formal way."

"A challenge?"

"The House of Maynard have laid a challenge," Tisamon confirmed. "The Firecallers are more than happy to accept. They have more coin than the Maynards and they can find a better champion. So the logic goes." His earlier melancholy was evaporating and Bello saw it was the thought of the fight that did it.

"Who will be their champion?"

"We shall find out tonight. The Golden Square shall host the fight, so that there might be a little money won and lost outside the main dispute." Tisamon's smile became sharper. "I would imagine that some fighter you tried to hire may have won himself the Firecaller's patronage with a story of your misdemeanours, child."

Bello had given that some thought. "It will be the Spider," he said.

Tisamon went very still, and Bello saw with a start that his bladed gauntlet was on his hand. "Spider-kindens?" he asked softly.

"A woman," the boy stammered. "She-" She had said not to say it. "She put me-"

“She pointed you in my direction, did she?” Tisamon was very still. “If it was some jest of hers, she shall not be laughing hereafter. Not if she is champion for the Firecallers.”

“Master, what-?”

“Oh we hate them, and it is an old blood hate,” Tisamon whispered. He was like another man, in that moment, a man with the weight of centuries dragging at him. “We kill them when we can. Though they laugh at us and call us savages, yet they do not think of us without a chill. I shall be glad, tonight, if it is a Spider-kind they have chosen.”

His face was a stranger’s face, a face not to be met with on a dark street.

Bello could not concentrate, at work. He only flew two errands, let the others pick up the slack. There was no shortage of volunteers. Everyone had a family trying to make ends meet. The broad, squat Beetle did not care who got paid, so long as the job was done. What he did mind was his boys distracting one another and chattering too much while they waited. Bello felt the weight of his hand at least twice when telling his fellows that he would be watching a real challenge fight tonight, that he was specially invited. It beat being on talking terms with Holden. It made him a celebrity.

He did not think about the Firecallers, about what they would do with him if they caught him. They would not move before the fight, Tisamon had told him. It was bad etiquette.

And if he loses?

He did not think about it.

The Golden Square had once lived up to the name, but not in living memory. It had been a theatre once, hosting bawdy comedies for the artisan classes. Now it was a makeshift arena. The management let it out to any local gangs who had a score, and didn’t charge. The bookmaker’s takings more than covered costs and it kept the place independent of the fiefs, more or less. It had been on House of Maynard turf until recently but the tide had carried the Firecallers’ borders past it. Some half-dozen of the Maynard men turned up, led by a grim-looking Ant-kind woman with a shaved head. It was no secret that if the challenge match went against them, so would a great deal else. They dressed drab, keeping under sleeves the white-patterned bracers that told of their allegiance. In contrast, the score and a half of Firecallers were rowdy and boisterous and wore their red silk scarves with fierce pride. Maynard himself had not shown but the leader of the Firecallers, a broad-shouldered halfbreed, was holding court at one end of the sand.

Bello’s nerve nearly failed him three times before he managed to approach the place. There were all manner of toughs knocking shoulders outside it, from fief soldiers to the local labour and tradesmen here for a flutter. In the end he waited for his moment and just darted in, pitching over their heads and dropping into the doorway with, for once, the poise of an acrobat.

“Very adept,” said a familiar voice from behind the door. He looked round, but it was a moment before he found Tisamon standing there. “You’re a good flyer. Perhaps you should try the Guild. You’re of an age to train.”

Bello blinked at him. It was strange to face this travelled, seasoned man and know something, as second nature, that he had no idea of. “The Guildhouse here’s a closed shop, Master. Unless you’re sponsored, you don’t get in. Nobody’s going to sponsor me.”

“The Messengers keep other houses in other cities,” Tisamon said, but then looked away as the bald Ant-kindens woman came over.

“With you standing by the door, Mantis, it looks like you’re going to run,” she said. Tisamon stared at her coldly but she faced up to him without a blink. “What? We’re all bug-food if you take your leave, man. Anyway, they’re asking for you. We’re about to settle this.”

Tisamon nodded. “Clavia, you keep an eye on this boy here. Don’t keep him with you, but I want him unharmed when this is done.”

The Ant-kindens, Clavia, frowned, but Tisamon waved her objections away. “Call it a condition of my employment.”

“Rack you, Mantis-man,” she spat, but she was nodding. “Whatever you want. I swear, if you foul the works here, I’ll kill you myself.”

She stalked off to her fellows, who had a good view of the sand. Bello wanted to go with them but then saw why not. *So I am not caught, if this goes badly.* He glanced up at Tisamon. *Does he fear he’ll lose, or that the Firecallers won’t accept his win?*

The fighter was making his way after Clavia, and Bello was about to find a place when someone said, “Oy,” softly behind him. With a sudden stab of fear he turned, but then grinned to see a familiar face.

“Master Holden!”

“You’re up late, boy.” Holden’s smile was barely there. “I see you got involved in all of this. I tried to warn you about it. It’s hard to make an honest living in this town, but you should at least give it a try.”

“I’ve not joined a fief yet, Master,” Bello said. “I just...”

Holden shook his head. “We all have to pay the rent,” he said sadly.

“Even you?” Somehow Bello had never thought of old Joyless Bidewell making the extra climb to Holden’s rooms above. “But you’re doing-well. You said so.”

“It’s a close neighbour to doing-badly. They live on the same street.” Holden tousled Bello’s hair. “Now you’ve got this far, now you see all these men, these criminals, making more money in a night than you see in a month, you’ll see things in a different way. You’ll be a fief-soldier soon enough, working from the ground up. It’s a shame, but you’re not the first.”

“Master Holden-“ He wanted to say that he wanted to be a freelancer, a duellist, like Tisamon or Holden himself. It was not a job for a Fly-kindens, though, not the biggest and hardest Fly-kindens there ever was.

“Go find yourself a seat,” the Beetle said to him, and passed on through the crowd.

Bello looked around, and saw that there were at least a dozen Fly-kindens already in the rafters, finding niches where they could enjoy a unique viewpoint. Some were wearing Firecaller scarves but he found just then he wanted to watch the fight more than he feared them. He let his wings take him up to a beam and sat there, his legs dangling. He felt the eyes of Clavia on him as he flew.

The sand, where the fighters would square off, was nothing much. It was just a strip about twenty feet long, no more than five feet wide. In the fiefs they liked their

fights close and bloody. At one end the Firecaller leadership sat enthroned. At the other end were Clavia and her few minions. Along each side, close enough that a missed stroke could clip them, were the gamblers, the drinkers and the fight-enthusiasts who had come to make a night of it.

Tisamon stepped down before the Maynard men. He cut an odd, stark figure in green arming jacket and gold broach, his folding-blade gauntlet on his hand and his arm-spines jutting. The crowd quieted. It was poor form to shout at the fighters.

A Beetle-kinde man stepped down before the Firecallers and it was a moment before Bello cried out in protest, voice high above the mumble of the crowd. They looked, they all looked up to see him: skinny little Fly-kinde child with his mouth open and his face pasty. He had eyes only for one, though: Holden, with a Firecaller scarf about his neck. Holden, looking up at him briefly, face resigned.

We all have to pay the rent. It's a shame, but you're not the first. Bello felt numb. The crowd had already forgotten him, laughed him off. Only Holden spared him another glance. He was dressed in armour of hard leather: cuirass, pauldrons, kilt, bracers and greaves. The crowd went quiet again as he took his swords from their scabbards in a long practiced motion, holding them almost crossed before him.

Tisamon had dropped into his stance the moment the steel was drawn, his claw hooked back, one open hand thrust forward. He was quite still, waiting for Holden to come to him. For a long time neither man moved. The crowd, instead of restless, became more and more involved, feeling the tension between the two pull taut.

Holden let out a shout and was at the other man, cutting at his ready hand, thrusting past at his chest. Tisamon shrugged aside from the lunge, beat the cut away with his palm, was past Holden in a moment. They were left at opposite ends of the sand, no blood drawn. There had not even been the sound of steel on steel.

Holden, with the burning gaze of the House of Maynard on his back, approached again. This time he changed his stance, one blade high and one low. He thrust with both, then cut out and wide to stop Tisamon getting past him again. Tisamon's offhand passed before his face and then cut down, slamming the spines through Holden's shoulder armour but not biting deep. Bello heard the Beetle-kinde hiss. The shortswords drove in whilst Tisamon was close, trying to catch him. Again the other man was gone when they arrived. Holden was strong, and he was quick for a big man, but he could not pin his enemy down. Tisamon danced him from one end of the sand to the other, in a space designed to be too small for it, meant to force a bloody confrontation.

They paused, the length of the sand between them. Holden had been doing most of the work but his people were an enduring lot. Neither man was breathing hard. There was something about his stance, though, that Bello saw: something about Tisamon's too. It was as though the two of them were party to a secret that nobody else watching had understood. In seeing it, Bello saw the secret too, became an initiate into that tiny mystery.

They closed again and this time Holden held nothing back. His swords slammed at Tisamon from all angles, drove him before them like a leaf in a storm. There was a rapid patter of metal as Tisamon's claw came in at last, moving like a living thing, gathering Holden's blades and casting them like chaff. Tisamon struck with his off hand, the spines scoring across the other man's face, and as Holden cried out, he died. The claw

made its first strike, a swift dart of silver between Holden's neck and shoulder, and he died. Bello felt the stab of it, even though his champion had won.

There was a lot of quiet, as the spectators passed back over those last moments, reconstructing them. Then the crowd, the idle punters, began to clap and cheer, and the lucky ones started to call in their creditors. Tisamon remained quite still, though, the dead man's blood on his blade, and his eyes on the Firecallers. All the Maynard men had drawn knives or swords.

Tisamon had made sure he was at the far end of the sand, closest to the Firecaller chief. There was a lot said in his stare about the cost of forcing the issue. Every man in a red scarf was waiting for the word.

The Firecallers left. Their leader stood up, face like thunder, and walked out without a backward glance, and the scarves followed him, as swiftly as they could. The turf war with the House of Maynard was not done, but they had lost face, lost the challenge. The streets they had wagered had gone back to the Maynard, who would be able to muster a few more allies with this victory. Things had changed between them.

There was another duel on tonight. People were getting drinks and food in for it. Tisamon went to Clavia and her people and Bello saw money change hands. He dropped from the rafters down to the sand, ignoring the looks he got at this breach of etiquette. He knelt by Holden's body, feeling cold. The man had sold him out, it seemed certain. He had taken the part of the Firecallers. He had betrayed all the people he shared the tenement with. He had been the brightest part of Bello's life.

Tisamon was leaving, pausing in the doorway to look back. Bello approached him hesitantly.

"Do you... want your money?" he asked.

"Hold it for me," Tisamon told him. He was swift and deadly, but he was not Holden, who had lived on the floor above and died on the sand below.

But Holden was gone, and Tisamon was going. "Please, Master Tisamon- Can't I..."

The fighter stopped. "Find other heroes than men like us, Fly-child. We do not last."

"But what can I do now?"

Tisamon weighed him with the same stare that had quelled the Firecallers, and gave his judgment, spoke the death sentence.

"Go home, boy. It's over. Go home and be thankful you still have one."