

## The Last Ironclad

By Adrian Tchaikovsky (c) 2011

Varmen awoke to the burnt-sugar smell that was Tallius taking his Medicine. He lay in bed for as long as he could force himself to, trying to recapture sleep. The world could only be staved off for so long, though. The coarse, lumpy straw mattress beneath him, the sour rotting reek that was the constant tenant of every room in the tenement, the thunder of the factory machines from the thrown-open window. All of it ganged up on him, hauling him unwillingly into the bitter present.

“Bit early, isn’t it?” he croaked.

“Says you.”

Varmen opened his eyes to see his roommate drop a flaming sugar crystal into the bowl before him, which promptly caught fire. There was a comical moment of fumbling before Tallius dumped in a tumbler of water to put it out, and then downed the bowl in three gagging gulps. Medicine, they called it: some sort of honey spirits with anise and wormwood, and an acquired taste that, once acquired, tended to persist.

Tallius, who only a moment before had been pale and sweating with the sheer rigour of being awake, sober and in Helleron, shuddered and then sighed greatly. Tranquillity took up a brief lease of his face, to be evicted shortly once the man’s cravings began to gnaw at him again.

*Speaking of which.* Varmen’s mouth felt like it was lined with wood-dust, and there was a steady beat in his head that could have been set to music. *Going to need some medicine of my own to get going this morning.* He was aware that, when he had come here two months ago, he had promised to himself that he would have sorted himself out by now – the past securely behind him and the present come to terms with. Certainly he would not end up like most of the other denizens of Huron Albrake’s tenement – men and women like Tallius whose lives moved in smaller and smaller circles about the focus of their individual despairs: drink, women, gambling, violence in various combinations. No, no, Varmen would never descend to that level. After all, he had *been* someone. He remembered self-respect and pride.

*Pride of the Sixth.*

And he could not blame Helleron. He had heard from many quarters just how the city ground you down, chewed you up – how there was never enough work for all the bodies that crammed its streets. There had been work for Varmen – even good work at first – but the worm in the apple had been one he had brought himself. His despair, which he was circling ever more closely these days, was memory. The harsh grain spirits he favoured – still a step up from Tallius’s Medicine – barely took the edge off.

Wedge between the folded, stained tunic he was using as a pillow and the big chest that he kept at the head of his bed he kept a jar for just such emergencies. Clutching for it, he pulled out the cork with his teeth and upended it.

“Bit early, isn’t it,” drawled Tallius, because a bowl of Medicine gave him pretensions to wit.

Varmen would have riposted, but he was blinded by the disappointment of discovering that the jar was empty.

“Piss,” he remarked.

“You shouldn’t drink it then,” Tallius smirked.

“Piss on you, too.”

“I’m shocked.” The death-pale colour of Tallius’s skin made him look unwell, on the point of vomiting at any given moment, but it was normal for a Tarkesh Ant. His was a simple enough story: whatever explosive moment of exile had catapulted him here from his city down the Silk Road had broken something within in – all those years of seamless, mind-linked *belonging* abruptly brought to an end – and now he was busy finding out what parts of an Ant-kinde mind were best soluble in alcohol.

*Speaking of which...*

Varmen sat up, which caused all manner of upset in both head and stomach. A certain number of the nagging pains suggested bruises rather than the direct gifts of the bottle. It seemed likely that he had been fighting last night. He could only hope that it had all been in good spirits. Surely, even within Helleron’s infinite variety, there was nobody stupid enough to get a drunk Wasp good and mad.

*One of these days I’m going to push it too far. One day soon. Fight the wrong man. Kill the wrong man. Or just piss someone off enough that a bunch of them jump me as I stagger back here. Fine way for a fighting man to go.*

He had retained – or acquired – just enough self-knowledge to know that such a death would surely still be better than rotting in a stew of brawling and drinking and degradation, night after night – and that he had probably already started hunting out opportunities to bring it about.

*Pride of the Sixth.* The thought, the words, that had once meant so much, felt like being stabbed now, when they lanced into his head. What would they think, his comrades in arms of yesteryear?

*Nothing. Dead, the lot of them.*

He lurched from his bed. His mouth tasted like a latrine, and he suspected that the rest of him smelled like one, but there was no water. Time for a trek across three reeking streets to the public pump, if it was working. After that he would probably need a drink to steady his nerves, just a small one. Helleron was a harsh mistress, and a man could come to harm, facing her sober.

The cramped room he shared with Tallius was on the third floor of Albrake’s tenement building – just below the little attic rooms reserved for Fly-kinde because anyone heavier would have come through Varmen’s ceiling. There were whole districts of Helleron crammed with just such buildings, leaning out on either side of the narrow streets until the view out of one window became the view into someone else’s, and daylight just a dream, even at noontime. Helleron was renowned across the world as a city of artifice and machines and money, but really it was a city of people, hundreds of thousands all living elbow to elbow and one above another like some horrifying wood-cut puzzle. Surrounding Varmen’s malodorous little jigsaw piece were the intersecting lives of factory workers, artificers, artisans, sweepers, cleaners, clerks and hoodlums whose sweat and blood greased the wheels of Helleron.

Of course, for those sunk as low as Varmen and Tallius, the only relationship they had with those wheels was to avoid being crushed by them, day in, day out. So it was that

Varmen was descending the narrow, groaning stairs of the tenement, already aware that his pockets seemed to have become magically denuded of money, when he ran straight into Huron Albrake himself.

Varmen had known Rekef torturers and Imperial army generals, Consortium magnates and Dragonfly-kindens nobles. Never had he met another human being with the sheer intimidating presence of Huron Albrake. The Beetle man was twenty years Varmen's senior and about eighteen inches shorter, but he seemed to be made of something other than frail flesh and bone, something dense and perhaps indestructible. When he was in a room, even sitting quietly by himself, he was impossible to ignore, dragging attention to himself by dint of personal gravity. Unarmed, untrained and of an unwarlike kinden, he stood before Varmen with the self-assurance of an Emperor. For his part, Varmen would rather have crossed the real Emperor than Huron Albrake.

"Rent," the old man grunted. He was broad and stocky, going to fat a little about the waist, dark of skin and mostly bald, but with a shock of a grey moustache which was, Varmen sometimes theorised, the source of his power.

Varmen tried to pretend that he thought Huron was talking to someone else, and thus breeze out of the door unhindered, but a slight adjustment in the set of Huron's eyebrows stopped him cold.

"It's not rent day already, is it?" he managed weakly.

"No," the landlord told him. "Was rent day last tenday. Now you're two behind." Huron's secret weapon was not anything as trivial as anger or threats. No, he was *disappointed*, and that cut like a knife. The killing Art in Varmen's hands was nothing to it.

"I'll get the money," Varmen promised.

"Give you another three days," Huron Albrake stated, each word heavy with the implication that he was displaying unprecedented magnanimity. "Then you're out."

"I'll get the money, sir," repeated Varmen, almost out of the door.

"Wasp." A single word meaning, *Stop there, Wasp-kindens, remembrance of whose name is beneath me, for I am not finished with you*. Sure enough Varmen stopped.

Huron took a deep breath, contemplating him. "Don't think I don't know what you've got up there, in that box of yours. I remember, from when you came in. Used to polish it then. No more, hm?"

Varmen, still caught mid-exit, stared at him.

"I know people," Huron continued implacably. "What you've got'd earn you a few months tenure, with the right buyer." His expression suggested that he was being very good to Varmen, to bring such an opportunity to his attention.

But: "No," said the Wasp-kindens. There were limits, and even the indomitable tide of Huron Albrake would break against those rocks. "Sorry, sir, but it's not for sale."

Albrake nodded philosophically, plainly believing that Varmen would come to his senses in three days.

"I'll get the money!" Varmen insisted, diving out of the door before he could be prevented by a further edict.

Money, however, was not to be easily gotten. Holding onto it in Helleron was like carrying water in a sieve at the best of times, with so many expenses and temptations at every corner, but Varmen had just about exhausted his means of acquiring it. When he had come to

this city, after that final bitter parting of the ways with the Imperial army, he had done well for himself. He had skills, and his kinden had a reputation, and Helleron had until recently been under the Imperial colours. There were plenty of Beetle-kindens magnates willing to pay good money for a Wasp bodyguard.

He had started working for a rich merchant, hired to watch the man's back, fend off unwanted advances and generally use his muscle and Art to emphasise his patron's wealth and power.

A few tendays later Varmen was a few rungs down the ladder, standing security for an artificer with a workshop in one of the better parts of the city – watching for thieves and ensuring that nobody took the haggling that little bit too far. Varmen's employer was well-to-do and the job paid well, and demanded little of him.

After that it was chucking out at a decent taverna, and after that it was chucking out at a brothel, and then a seedy chop house, and then another taverna of a decidedly poorer vintage. That finished with, he ended up strong-arming for one or other of the fiefs – Helleron's fiercely territorial gangs who were quickly repartitioning the more wretched areas of the city now that the Empire had gone.

Even in that, he had failed. In the end, not even criminals would employ him – or not for long and not twice.

It was his pride, he knew, but that was the one part of him *not* soluble in alcohol. Varmen had known triumph, and he had known adulation. He had been part of something the memory of which still caught in his throat. He had lived a life of meaning, the best of the best.

The pattern had been the same, each time: a short period of good service before his vices got the better of him. The boredom and sheer pettiness of the work would drive him to start fights where no fights were needed, or distract him so that he failed to stop trouble that could easily have been warned off. Later on there was the drink as well, exaggerating both ends of his scale of failure. In the end criminals and honest men looked for the same virtues in their followers, and Varmen could simply not lower himself to that menial level. His life had been too rich and full, and he was all too aware of the man he had once been.

Whatever he had been, the man he now was needed money, both for rent and for drink. As he trudged through Helleron's dirty, jostling streets he tried to think who might be desperate enough to need his services. Was there some fief on the brink of extinction, for whom a renegade Wasp with a reputation for erratic violence could not possibly make matters worse? His grasp of local politics was fumbling, but he did not think so. The Empire had destroyed a lot of fiefs during its time of occupation. The survivors had been given plenty of space to expand into, and they were mostly staying out of each others' way.

In that case, was there some menial, dismal piece of labouring that could use an extra pair of hands? Surely someone wanted something heavy taking from one place to another, loading or unloading, work that even Varmen might be trusted with, at least by someone who did not know him very well. It would be hard, and he would be paid a pittance, but it would get a little coin into his purse.

It turned out that a taverna he had once worked for as enforcer was taking in a big shipment of barrels, and he arrived just when even a one-handed Fly-kindens might make himself useful. The place was a nameless, woodwormed dive, cellar on cellar chewing into

the ground beneath the city, the lowest ones half-drowned, and only the highest one accessible by hoist. The proprietor was a bloated Beetle man named something like Mthl – Varmen had missed the name the first time, and everyone slurred over it so effortlessly he had never been able to work out what it really was – and he obviously retained some awkward sympathy for Varmen, a man who had lasted two tendays in his service. In any event, he kept the Wasp and a dozen other lowlifes slaving away until past noon, stowing the shipment in one of the deeper cellars, and he paid them all a decent handful of coin for their time, and stood them a drink as well.

“Got any more work?” Varmen asked him, sipping at the sour wine in his bowl and trying to make it last. His muscles were cramped and painful, stretched and tortured beyond what they had become used to.

“Rent day, is it?” Mthl asked, with grim humour.

“Something like that.” Varmen did not say just how many rent days had gone by unpaid. “Well?”

“Not me. Nothing more here.” Mthl shrugged. He stared at Varmen for a while, plainly a man already regretting what he was about to say. “Still, a man like you could do well. Better money than shoving boxes. Better money than minding the door, too.”

Varmen looked at him suspiciously. “What’s that then?” The wine was almost gone and he felt that Mthl’s generosity would quickly follow it.

“Alester Tasky on the lookout again.” Now Mthl wouldn’t look at him.

Varmen put the bowl down, not hard, but the click of it made Mthl flinch. He said nothing.

“Well, you know,” the taverner continued awkwardly. “Your kinden, you brought the business in. Seems like you’d be the man for it, if anyone was. There’s other takers. Fief soldiers, mercenaries, people who want the money.” Although Varmen had said nothing, the taverner threw up his hands defensively. “What? Your people do it. Can you deny it? It’s a Wasp thing, that your lot left us with. What’s wrong with that?”

“In the Empire it’s for *slaves*,” Varmen spat. “Slaves and prisoners.”

“Right, well,” Mthl turned his back, “you know what else is for them types? Getting food and board for free. The rest of us have to pay. You remember that.”

Before the Empire took Helleron, Alester Tasky had run a theatre with rooms at the back where discerning members of the audience could get to meet the pretty young actors and actresses, with the meaning of “meet” scaling with the amount the patrons were willing to pay. The Three Figs fief had its hand in that business, and they had gone the way of so many gangs when the Empire had cleared out the city’s underworld almost by rote, after it stepped in. The theatre had burned down, and it had seemed that Tasky would go the way of all the detritus that the black and gold broom was sweeping out.

He was a true entrepreneur, however, a dandyish little Beetle man who wore Spider silks better than most, could talk with the wealthy or the wretched equally, and had an eye for the main chance. If the Wasps were not fond of bawdy theatre, he had decided to give them what they did want.

There had always been a few underground blood-fighting pits in Helleron – illegal, and yet a few of the great and good always did find that only real violence could reach their

jaded hearts. Alester Tasky was the first Hellenen native to set up such an enterprise openly, touting for Wasp custom, and paying Wasp slavers to instruct him on how it was done. Even though the Empire would only be in the city a relatively short time, Imperial officers had sufficient gold in their purses – and favours to grant – that Tasky did very well out of it, and a dozen imitators had set up pits of their own, desperate to grab some piece of his success.

The Empire was gone, of course, but some of the pits remained, Tasky's included. Death matches were frowned on, of course, as they had been under Hellenen law before the occupation, but the city had a taste for the sport now. Open contests might be to first blood or just billed as trials of skill, but behind closed doors a great deal went on with the tacit knowledge of the city's magnates, who were often to be found in the best seats. Something in that explosive release of violence had found its mark in the souls of Hellenen's merchant lords, as though the city's constant rote of consuming and wearing down its inhabitants had found a new metaphor.

When Varmen approached the man, it was with the unhappy knowledge that it was not a need for rent that had driven him to it, but the knowledge that Mthl's wine had done nothing but awaken a thirst he did not have the coin to satisfy. After an hour of putting it off and wracking his parched brain for alternatives, he had gone to seek out Alester Tasky.

Tasky was sitting at his private table in the taproom that fronted his fighting pit, armies of coin arrayed in rank and file before him as he made complex entries in a ledger. He wore a long padded tunic of pale blue silk over an under-robe of patterned red, all Spider-made and garish, but he had a Spider's own self-possessed confidence that most of his kinden lacked. Whatever he chose to wear was the fashion, as long as he wore it.

He had a twinkle in his eye as he glanced up at Varmen. He was no young man, not any more, but he seemed to have rented a youth's expressions, all cheek and cheer set into age-worn features that cosmetics had smoothed over and rejuvenated. Everything seemed to amuse him, but Varmen most of all. This was not their first meeting.

Varmen loathed the very idea of pit-fighting – as a participant, anyway. What he had said to Mthl was the truth: it was a profession for slaves, prisoners and criminals, back home. Although there were professional free gladiators, they were almost always men to whom life had no better cards to deal, from backgrounds crippled by debt or dubious loyalties. Their hard-won celebrity lasted only until the moment they missed a parry. For a soldier of the Imperial armies, it was a demeaning life. For a man who had been the pride and joy of the black and gold, it was unthinkable.

Varmen had fought in Alester Tasky's pit three times before. He had stopped because he had better prospects, and because Tasky had started making demands that Varmen did not want to stoop to.

“Well, hello there, soldier,” Tasky said, sending a startlingly white grin Varmen's way. One of his girls glided past and left a bowl of wine in front of him, and he squeezed her thigh, a stockman checking the quality of the meat. He must have seen Varmen's eyes drawn more by the drink than the girl, because his grin broadened, and he pushed the bowl around the table's edge, skirting the formations of profit. “What chance seeing you here, eh? You're looking for work, I'd guess.”

Varmen's pride held for the moment, although the bowl was calling softly to him. "I'll fight for you. I hear you've some matches need filling."

"A spectacle," Tasky announced, waving a hand expansively. "Something special. I've a private party who don't just want the usual dross."

"I'll fight for you," the Wasp repeated. "For the right price." His hands' patience had been exhausted and they got the wine bowl to his mouth without consent. He acquiesced to their demands with good grace seeing, reflected in Tasky's eyes, all the many steps he had descended to come this far. The man kept himself informed, and no doubt he knew Varmen's recent dismal history like he knew his own ledgers, to the last decimal point.

"I can use you," Tasky confirmed. His eyes found Varmen's gaze and held it. "One night only, and I can find you twenty centrals. Settle your rent and more, eh? But you've got to *wear* it."

Varmen's stare was bleak. "No."

"It won't work without. You think you're anything, just standing there in a loincloth? You think there aren't other Wasps in the city, men in better shape who'd fight for a quarter of the price. You know what makes you special. I pay for that, nothing else. And I'll have it, too."

"No."

Tasky shrugged, sublimely unconcerned. "You can fool yourself as long as you want. We both know how deep a hole you're in, and still digging. Come back when you're ready to stop wasting my time."

Varmen's fingers flexed, and for a moment he felt the killing Art warming his palms. *I am a soldier. No Beetle pimp talks to me like that. I should... I should...*

And perhaps when he had first come to Helleron, self-respect still clinging to him despite all he had lost, he would have killed Tasky for that disrespect. He had fallen far since then, though, and Tasky knew it.

Varmen managed to get back to his lodgings without being collared by Huron Albrake again, choosing his moment to dodge up the stairs whilst the landlord was berating another tenant. The room upstairs was empty, Tallius having lurched off to whatever part of town had such a surfeit of charity that the inhabitants might spare him a few coins.

For a long while Varmen sat on his straw-stuffed mattress, listening to the low rhythms of Albrake's disappointed voice, and thinking about Alester Tasky and his offer. A lot of money, more than Varmen was ever likely to see by any other means, but he knew he would never take the man up. A step too far, was what Tasky was asking. There were some things that remained too pure to be sullied by his petty games.

Having reassured himself that he retained sufficient self-respect to turn the man down, Varmen knelt before the big chest he kept at the head of his bed. A ridiculous luxury, this: the second most expensive thing he owned, it would have paid the rent or bought several nights' worth of drinks if he had sold it. Locked inside, however, was his most expensive possession, his one remaining link to the man he had once been.

He opened the lock with the little bronze key he kept about his neck. No lock was thief-proof, in Helleron, but Varmen had paid enough that nobody in this run-down neighbourhood would be likely to have the skills to overcome it. Full, the chest weighed so

much that even a pair of diligent thieves would be unable to spirit it away without considerable noise and effort.

He lifted the lid.

His eyes were met by the glorious black and gold lustre of his breastplate, the enamel still holding a shine. He lifted it out, feasting his eyes on the articulated metal pieces beneath, like a miser gloating over his wealth. The armour was heavy, far more than any regular soldier ever had to bear, made for Varmen alone. He reached in and took out the closed helm, staring into the eyeslit as if he could see his younger self still in there.

*Pride of the Sixth.* The Sixth Army, that was, and truly he had been its pride. During the Twelve-year War against the Commonweal he and his compatriots had been the anchor of the Imperial lines, facing off the inconceivable hordes of the Dragonfly-kind and their subjects, secure in their carapace of interlocking metal. Sentinels, they were called, a noble and an honourable tradition that long-predated the Empire, but that the Wasps had seized on and made their own. Whilst the chaos of battle whirled on both flanks and overhead, the Light Airborne trading blows with the Dragonfly nobility and the vast Commonweal levy pressing forward in undisciplined, spear-studded blocks, the Sentinels were the calm centre, unmoveable and untouchable.

All through the war, Varmen had stood in the front rank and fought for the Empire, and the cry of “*Pride of the Sixth!*” had struck terror into the hearts of his enemies. Even when the Sixth itself had suffered a crushing defeat, the worst reversal of the war, Varmen had survived it, and lived to see the army reformed, victory against the Commonweal, and a new war start against the Lowlands.

He had been sent with the new Sixth to reinforce General Malkan’s Seventh Army for the great push towards the Ant city of Sarn.

He had learned in one day that the world had moved on, that the grand and ancient tradition of the Sentinel, stretching back to the very Days of Lore, had come to an end, and nobody had told him.

He took up the breastplate, and his fingers traced the small, rough-edged hole to the lower right. Such a tiny imperfection in the beautiful, gleaming metal, to bring down a way of life.

He remembered: standing front and centre in the hastily-formed lines as the Sarnesh army rushed out of the pre-dawn grey. There had been soldiers still buckling his armour to him even as he hefted his sword and shield and waited for the clash. On either side the Imperial regular infantry – too heavily armoured to fly, and yet wearing less than half the weight of Varmen’s metal skin – had strung out, levelling spears and crossbows and snapbows, and overhead the Airborne were taking to the sky. The air rang with relayed orders as General Malkan of the Seventh’s glorious Winged Furies formed up his forces with creditable speed and clear-headedness.

To the Wasps, the battle was known as Malkan’s Stand, but Varmen had heard what the Lowlanders called it. For all that he still resented the general of the Seventh for usurping command over the Sixth Army that had always been Varmen’s home, the man deserved better than the legacy of “Malkan’s Folly.”

The Sarnesh had come in *en mass*, their heavy infantry to the front, supported by strung-out wings of snapbowmen – Sarnesh and Collegiate, Tseni and Tarkesh – and then a

screening force of Mantis and Moth skirmishers to keep the Airborne off their flanks. The Wasps had greater numbers, but they were still forming up when the first shots were exchanged. More, the Ants were renowned close fighters, unmatched in discipline and coordination.

That was where Varmen's Sentinels would come in. Regular infantry seldom stood against Ants without support, but the Sentinels would provide that immovable object that even the Ant-kinde would break against, a rock and an inspiration, holding and holding until the Empire's superior numbers and mobility would tip the scales. It had worked before, and a half-dozen Ant cities flew the black and gold because of it.

Malkan's Stand had changed all that.

It was the snapbows. They had been an Imperial invention first, and had given Malkan victory over the Sarnesh at the Battle of the Rails the year before, but over winter the weapons had proliferated like mushrooms. Suddenly every Apt pair of hands had a snapbow pressed into them, and the Lowlanders had adapted to the new device's possibilities much faster than the Empire. The Airborne died in droves, clipped from the sky by the weapon's range and accuracy. The infantry, though they gave a good accounting of themselves, had been scythed down in their ranks.

And the Sentinels, who had clashed blade to blade with the Ant-kinde and held them without giving an inch, as good as their promise, as they always were... the Sentinels had died, reaped like corn.

Varmen fingered that single mute hole in his armour. He had not seen the man who had brought him low – some distant Ant or Beetle charging and loosing with automatic motions, already seeking a new target as the bolt left his bow. The missile had struck through the enamelled steel of the beastplate, through the riveted chain beneath, then the padded jack under that, and then all the way through Varmen. Barely daunted, it had cut on through the padding and the mail again, to knuckle a solid dent into his backplate. The miracle of it was that Varmen had survived.

That was always the last sworn duty of the Sentinels: *if all else goes awry, we will hold*. Many battles had been won because the Sentinels had delayed the enemy long enough for the Imperial forces to reform, even though it cost them their lives. No longer. A lifetime of training and practice, so as to make the heaviest armour like a second skin, so as to develop senses that could tell where the enemy was even through a helm that offered only the smallest slit on the world, and all of it wasted. What was the point of such a colossal investment, when any Beetle shopkeeper with a snapbow could kill Sentinels for sport from a hundred yards.

He had known then, had he only realized, what the Mantis-kinde had felt centuries before, when the Apt revolution had met their hard-won blade skills with massed crossbows and torn the world from their masters' grasp.

Of course, that had not been the utter annihilation of the Sixth and Seventh Armies. A camp of survivors had formed up, near Helleron as it happened, and the wounded Varmen had been brought there, last survivor of the Sentinels.

The Empire was in turmoil by then – the Emperor was dead, assassinated by a slave, and across the Wasps' domain ambitious city governors were flaying for independence. It had seemed the end of everything was just over the next hill. Lying on his sickbed, listening

to the increasing taut reports of the Sarnesh advance, beaten soldiers' talking of last stands or furtive flight, Varmen had retained his confidence in the Imperial war machine. After all, even his own Sixth had taken a beating during the war with the Commonwealth, but the Empire had survived, and thrived.

And then someone, some clerk from the Quartermasters' Corps, had finally found a moment for Varmen in his busy schedule. This had been as the Wasps were pulling out of Helleron – as peaceably as they had been invited in, the camp packing itself up around them with a weary attempt at discipline.

“You'll have to report to one of the infantry captains, sergeant,” the man had told him. “We're not sure who...” stretching out a scroll in a vain attempt to bring order from the chaos of the insufficiently annotated. “Just find an infantry captain. They'll have to sort your assignment when we get to Asta.” The man had looked harassed and worn, and he had come into the infirmary tent with a wincing limp that spoke of doing his part in the fighting. “You can walk?”

“Not sure I could do it in my armour, but yes.”

“Ah, yes. You should return the mail to stores, of course.”

Varmen's first thought had been, ridiculously, *It's not 'mail', it's plate. A quartermaster should know that*, but then his mind had caught up, and he had said, “Stores?”

For a moment the quartermaster had stared at him, then the man's lips had twitched – one more irritation for his overburdened life. “You were told your unit has been disbanded?”

“We'll I'm the last Sentinel the Sixth has to offer, so –”

“No, no.” As though Varmen was being deliberately aggravating. “The Sentinels, as a class. Imperial decree.”

“Says who?” Varmen had sat up sharply, and damn the pain.

“the Empress.” Spoken as to a slow child. “Who else? You see why, of course. I mean, what's the point of them now, hm?”

*Me*, Varmen had thought. *You mean, what's the point of me.*

Once the quartermaster had hurried off to his next task, Varmen had tried thinking slowly and pragmatically about the news that his life, and the lives of all his fallen friends, had been declared post facto obsolete. A life in the regular infantry might not be so bad, after all. He was a sergeant, he had prospects. The Empire would go on, even if there was now inexplicably an *Empress* giving the orders.

*Pride of the Sixth*. All those lost faces, all those battles standing front and centre, the years of training in armour that would bring a strong man to his knees. His life. His whole life.

That night he had discovered that he could indeed walk, although his armour had come with him on the back of a pack beetle that had no idea that it was about to become firstly a deserter from the Imperial army, and secondly part-trade for a very well-made chest.

And this was what he was reduced to, now: Alester Tasky wanted him to don his mail again, but not for war, not for honour. For a show, a demeaning prostitution of what he had once been.

*I might have no coin for rent, I might have no coin for drink, but not that. Not pissing on the memories of my comrades. I will not be a clown in Tasky's circus.*

He blinked furiously at the mist of tears that crowded his vision, and his thirst laid a hand on his shoulder and suggested he should raise a bowl to lost friends. It seemed a solid argument, although his stock of coin seemed much diminished from when Mthl had paid him, despite the free drinks he had cadged already that day. *The rent will have to wait. Drinking to the Pride of the Sixth is a solemn duty. Surely I can scare up some more coin after.*

Huron Albrake had retreated into one of the ground floor rooms where Varmen happened to know his landlord exacted a very particular sort of rent from a young widow each tenday. The coast was clear for a quick getaway.

He almost walked on when someone whispered his name as he stepped out of the tenement. There were so few people in Helleron who both knew his name and meant him any good. When he glanced down an alley and saw Tallius crouching there, he came close to walking away all over again. The Ant was in a wretched state, though, and some misplaced pity dragged Varmen over to see what he wanted.

“Is Albrake... is he there? Is he waiting for me?” Tallius hissed.

“Why would he be waiting for you?” Varmen looked the man over critically. As an inveterate panhandler in the Lowlands’ least charitable city, Tallius ran into the fists and boots of locals on a semi-regular basis, but it looked as though his most recent failed patron had been particularly irked, or Tallius had been particularly persistent. One eye was squeezed almost shut by swollen bruises and there was a crust of blood where a blow had split the skin over his cheekbone.

“Rent, got no rent,” the Ant murmured, head swinging. “No bits for rent, no bits for drink. Varmen, Varmen, lend me-“

“Get lost.” Spoken without acrimony but firmly. “You know I’m the same.” Looking at the degenerate Tallius, though, Varmen knew that he was still a few rungs of the ladder up from where the Ant had gone. Bile squirmed in his stomach and tried to fight the words back, before spitting out, “look at you! Your people are soldiers, warriors. Is there nothing left to you but this?”

Tallius actually snarled up at him, a grimace missing at least one tooth. “You don’t know,” he got out. “You don’t. You can’t know what it’s like, how quiet it is.”

For a moment, the constant yammering and bustling of Helleron all around them, Varmen could not understand what he meant, but then he realised: for an Ant-kinde, any city not his own would be deathly silent, stripped of the constant inner voices of his kin.

There was a three-street fief named the Blackeners currently passing through that brief period between becoming aware of Varmen and losing patience with him, and he was able hire himself out for them as extra muscle as they made to add a fourth street to their empire. What had promised to be a reasonably mindless scrap turned into a great deal of posturing and taunting, and nobody wanting to draw the first blood. If Varmen had been more sober then he would probably have touched off the fire himself, just through sheer irritable boredom, but in the end he acquitted himself well enough simply by hanging about at the back and looking big and Wasp-like. He then had to haggle with the Blackeners’ paymaster, which very nearly delivered all the violence that the actual stand-off had failed to. In the end that special magic that the Wasp-kinde reputation brought to every place that had once been under their boot paid off, and Varmen got a decent fistful of change out of the day.

Enough for the rent? Probably not. Enough to keep Albrake off his back for another tenday. Probably. Or he could start drinking it away and pissing it against a wall, in that order. He felt his desires teetering on the brink, now leaning towards responsibility, now towards oblivion. Treading a narrow line between them, he made his way back towards the tenement, interested in an almost academic way in how much of his hard-earned cash would remain in his possession by the time he arrived.

He had stopped counting coin by the time he finally made the tenement again, because a few bowls suggested to him that if he stopped looking into his purse he could pretend that the money was all there still. This left him feeling sufficiently buoyant that he forgot to look out for Huron Albrake and the landlord collared him as he was going up the stairs.

“Rent, Wasp,” the Beetle stated, moustache bristling. “Come, now.”

“Five days, you said,” Varmen protested.

“I *said* three, and now I think I was too generous.” Something in his stare made Varmen see himself like a stranger: some dirty, stinking hulk of a man, bloodshot-eyed, his tunic stained with spilt wine and old sweat. Viewing himself through Albrake’s eyes, Varmen felt physically repulsed to be sharing a body with such a dissipated ruin.

“Even your friend the Ant can pay his rent,” Albrake told him, “and he’s nothing more than a cadaver the surgeons don’t want yet. “You...” The one word and its unspoken fellows encompassed all Varmen had been, and could have been.

Having lost all the borrowed wellbeing that a little wine had given him, Varmen stomped up the stairs, pieces of ill-made plan battering at each other inside his head, failing to make a whole.

He stopped. Something had happened to the room.

He had come to Helleron with a keen respect for the avarice of the mechanically-minded Beetle folk, and so he had invested all he could into that very fine chest. He had staked his pride that the lock would beat thieves, that the weight of the whole would break their backs before they could move it down the stairs. Any criminal with the resources to take from him what he had would, he had believed, have more lucrative nuts to shell elsewhere in the city.

The chest had been of sturdy wood, and iron-bound, but someone had literally torn it apart, wrenching at its strong substance until its various component pieces had simply parted company, the metal strips tailing off into jagged edges, the wood splintering. In the centre of the carnage lay the lock, its two sections still resolutely holding to one another.

The armour, all that weight of metal, was gone.

It took Varmen all of twenty seconds to reconstruct what must have happened, the only part of the mess that could be reconstructed. He wondered, then, if Albrake had intentionally been dropping a hint, back there on the stairs. What had he seen, that he had agreed to overlook in exchange for Tallius’s rent money?

Ants were strong, of course, and their Art made them stronger, but Varmen had not even considered that sheer desperation would drive the dissolute and broken man to such a feat. The broken chest mutely proved him wrong.

Varmen knew all of Tallius’s regular dives, each seedier than the last – the wretched, windowless haunts of the Medicine-eaters that had grown up to service the self-destructive

trade. Most of them were run by men and women who styled themselves “doctor”, because the Heleron vice trade always prided itself on its sense of humour.

He was relying on the Tallius he knew. Any reasonable man in possession of such a treasure would have made himself scarce – got out of town or at least changed district, lying low until Varmen had burnt out and fallen away. Tallius’s life revolved around his single appetite, circling so close to the flame of his inevitable disintegration that he had only one thing on his mind. Actually planning ahead would be as alien to him as magic.

In Doctor Misa’s, the third such dive he tried, he spotted Tallius’ face floating in the gloom, lit by the uncertain glare of a burning sugar cube the man was about to drop into his Medicine.

Varmen had meant to shout the man’s name, a civilized opener to the argument they were about to have, but what came out was a furious howl belonging to no man nor any beast man knew. Tallius stared up, the expression on his face everything Varmen could have wanted. The burning sugar dropped, and then a thin cloth of flames rushed across the tabletop as he dropped his precious Medicine, causing his fellow drinkers to swear and kick away.

“Where is my armour?” Varmen demanded, marching down on Tallius like a war automotive. Someone – probably the local chucker-out – tried to get in his way, and Varmen punched him hard enough to crack his jaw without even breaking stride. Spending a lifetime in so much steel gave a man a brutal all-purpose strength in every part of him.

Tallius, who by Art and heritage had already proved himself the stronger man, was gabbling and backing away, but Doctor Misa’s was small and he had nowhere to go. He was saying something, over and over, but Varmen was too angry to decipher the words until he had the Ant lifted up by his tunic and rammed against a wall.

“I don’t have it,” was what he had been saying.

“You took it!” *Bang!* against the wall again.

“I didn’t -! I never -!” Because Tallius’ failure to think things through had not even covered the fact that Varmen might actually *suspect* him. “I don’t have it!”

And Varmen stopped, because he himself had not gone beyond this moment, in his head: find Tallius, recover armour. But of *course* Tallius did not have it, because he had paid his rent to Huron Albrake, and where else had that money come from.

“Where,” Varmen growled, “is my armour?” But already he could feel his control of the situation – always tenuous – slipping from him.

Tallius’s gaze slipped sideways, as helpless as a man sliding from a ledge, and Varmen followed it, seeing the one person present who did not belong in Doctor Misa’s, the man in Spider silks who sat at a table on his own, enjoying a bottle of wine that surely had not been sold to him there. Alester Tasky raised his bowl, his face creasing in that young man’s congenial smile.

“You pissmongering *bastard*,” Varmen hissed, and he could have meant Tallius or Tasky or both. He put the Ant down, though, setting him gently on his feet, and turned to the Beetle-kindens. “You put him up to this.”

Tasky’s expression radiated amused innocence. “My goodness, what a suspicious world you must live in.”

“Give me my armour.” Two steps more towards Tasky and looming, but the man was blithely unconcerned still.

“Of course. You know my price.” Another sip of wine, but Varmen found that the drink had no hook in him just then.

And then Tallius came blundering back into that special proximity all Sentinels knew – just out of eyeshot and yet within sword-reach, leaping into Varmen’s awareness as a potential threat. “I’m sorry,” he was blubbering. “I had to – I needed – I’m sorry.”

Varmen’s hand splayed at him, his Art leaping eagerly to his will like a beast off the leash. The flash of gold fire illuminated the entire interior of Doctor Misa’s, searing across all those dark-adapted eyes, and Tallius leapt backwards as though throwing himself into the wall once more for good measure. There was a charred hole under his ribs, crenelated with the burnt-hard edges of his innards.

Everyone there was frozen – staff and customers both. For just one moment the Black and Gold was over their city again, and they remembered the curfews and the harsh justice and the soldiers on the streets.

Only Tasky was undismayed. The fight promoter leant back in his chair and he had an appreciative, even pleased expression on his face. “That’s my boy,” he said softly. “That’s the man I want.” As though the room was not still resounding to the echoes of murder. “Now come get your armour. You can walk away with it, and the money too, but you’ll have to fight. I’ve a special little spectacle just waiting for your participation, Varmen. Come earn back your heritage.” The smile deepened. “Before today I thought you might have forgotten it.”

Tasky’s regular fighting pit, where Varmen visited him previously, was for the public matches – those where death was a regrettable accident rather than the main attraction. Varmen knew the other place, though. He had fought there twice, killed both times. Before Tallius that was all the killing he had done, in Helleron. People thought of Wasps as always on the point of murderous rampage, but anyone who grew up with harsh Imperial discipline learned to keep even a Wasp temper in check.

This part of the city was all factories – not the thunderous, machine-heavy haunts of the artificers, but cavernous buildings where hundreds of men and women were crammed shoulder to shoulder assembling pieces, stitching, carving, hammering, each one of them repeating forever one meaninglessly small part of a grander plan. The people who worked here earned just enough to pay for the privilege of living in their mean tenements, enough to keep their families just short of starving. They would never have enough to break free of Helleron’s hungry jaws.

Some of the factories had a night shift, picking up each stitch and cog where the day workers left off, but others lived a curious double life. There were drinking and gambling dens that took from the workforce the money they made in daylight. There were fief headquarters where the criminals would meet and flaunt their ill-gotten gains. And there was Tasky’s clandestine blood-fighting pit, in the extensive cellars of a place that by day paid the impoverished a pittance to make fine gloves for the wealthy.

Varmen turned up at a side-door, as he had in the past. Tasky, being a man of the theatre trade, did not approve of his patrons seeing the performers arrive. The neatly-dressed Fly-kind woman who let him in was new – looking like a middle-aged shopkeeper’s clerk save for the level and challenging way she met Varmen’s eyes.

“I m-“ he started.

“I know who you are. Follow me, if you would.”

She marched back inside, precise as a clock, leaving Varmen to shamble in her wake, like a great, decaying ship being pulled by an energetic little tug.

She headed downstairs immediately – the fighting trade did not touch on the daylight parts of the factory. The backstage quarters were just as cramped and dank as Varmen remembered, a warren of cellars subdivided into smaller rooms and tunnels, all lit by sullen gaslight. There were a handful of other staff on hand, none of whom spared Varmen more than a glance.

“I want my armour,” he threw at the Fly woman’s back.

“It’s waiting for you,” came her reply, almost contemptuously. “We all are.”

He was expecting more games. He was not expecting the next thing to grace his eye to be the armour itself, still less that it should be half-tenanted.

They had left the chainmail off to spare the man some weight, an understandable mistake but a mistake nonetheless. The man suffering under that steel had about three-quarters of the outer shell on – and most of it cross-buckled or not buckled at all, so that entire plates just flapped and hung like washing.

“Get it off,” the Fly snapped. “He’s here.”

“What?” came a voice from within the helm, hollow and exasperated. “Stenne-!”

“Just get it off him, you oafs,” she ordered. Two Beetle men stepped forward to obey, but Varmen barrelled up and shouldered them aside, setting to the abused armour himself.

“Didn’t think I’d show, is it?” he growled as he worked.

“My money was on you drinking yourself into a stupor for a tenday,” the Fly woman, Stenne, agreed, not in the least penitent. “From what I hear that’s your life in a nutshell.”

“Is that so.” And Varmen realised, to his great surprise, that since killing Tallius he had not so much as thought about drink. The need to recover the armour had focused him like nothing had since leaving the army.

He dragged the helm roughly from its wearer’s head and was surprised to see another Wasp-kind, albeit a red-faced and sweating one. The man had close-cropped hair, and a scar on one cheek balanced the sting-burn on the other. Everything about him said ‘failed soldier’, an immediate kinship that made Varmen uncomfortable.

“You’re the Sentinel, then?”

Varmen nodded, still working at reclaiming his armour, piece by piece.

“Glad you showed. Don’t reckon I could have fought like this.”

“Stupid to even try. They’d have killed you and danced on your corpse before you could take three steps,” Varmen told him disgustedly. “What were you thinking?”

“That it’s a better chance than being hung for theft, which is what Tasky bought me out of,” the other Wasp explained. “And just ‘cos you’re here doesn’t mean I’m not fighting, just that I can fight without all *that*.”

“Tell them how to put it on you,” Stenne instructed, as soon as the other Wasp was suitably denuded. Varmen glowered at the two Beetles, but even if they were as hamfisted as they looked, the business would be easier with their help. “Deserter, are you?” he asked the other Wasp, as he donned his padded jack.

“And you’re not?”

“The army deserted from me.” Now Varmen was shrugging into his mail hauberk.  
“Varmen, former sergeant.”

“Atric, soldier.”

“And you’re, what, the warm-up act? It’s Wasp night at Tasky’s arena?”

Atric’s eyes flicked off in Stenne’s direction.

“It’s not all about you, Sentinel,” she said caustically. “It’s a special fight tonight – not just one-on-ones, but a nice group skirmish, something different for the punters. You get a team. Your own army, how about that?”

“That makes me one of your team,” Atric added helpfully. The Beetles were crowding forwards with pieces of steel, and the Wasp took charge of fitting Varmen with them, one at a time. He was no Sentinel but at least he had worn armour in his time.

Varmen said nothing now, save to instruct his impromptu helpers, but Stenne’s words had started wheels turning in his mind, and they were grinding out no conclusions that he was happy with.

When they had him fully clad to his liking, Stenne let her wings carry her over to another door, low enough that Varmen and Atric would have to stoop through it.

“Come on,” she told them flatly. “Come meet the rest of your team. The punters are already taking their seats.”

“So what’s the deal?” Varmen prompted, as he followed her.

“Live and get paid,” she said unsympathetically.

There were another half-dozen Wasps awaiting them, all men, and all surely ex-army. Varmen had never seem a more wretched showing of his own kinden. Many were skinny and half-starved, and most bore old wounds. One man’s right arm was a stump at the elbow. They were pale enough that he guessed they had been locked up for some time – *waiting for me, or at least my armour?* – and there was a flinching, cringing look about most of them: men from whom the fight had been whipped, by either circumstance or the hand of man. They were a miserable, beaten lot, but no surprises there. If Tasky wanted a tame Wasp army for his pit, then what else would he find? There were a fair few deserters hale and hearty and doing well for themselves in Helleron, but they would not have lowered themselves to dance to Tasky’s tune. The only participants for this spectacle were those who had no choice in the matter.

*Like me.* But Varmen was more than these men. Even Atric the condemned was something better. He wondered what miserable stories had dragged them to this turn, whether the war itself had brought them low or whether they were just further along his own road.

And they were all in uniform, that was the real tell-tale. It was a grotesque mish-mash of whatever surplus Tasky had been able to get his hands on, but Varmen saw Light Airborne cuirasses, and bits and pieces of infantry plate, an artificer’s helm, a pilot’s leather’s. All of it black and gold, and the colours touched up from the dull and dented condition that Tasky must have acquired them in.

Varmen glanced at Atric. “What d’you reckon?”

The condemned Wasp was already shrugging into banded Airborne mail that was a little too large for him. “We’re dead men.”

It was a hard conclusion to argue with, informed not by the condition of their fellows but Varmen’s whole sense of the story that Tasky was trying to tell with them. They were not

just here as Wasps. They were here as the *Empire*, its conquering army that had only recently withdrawn from Heleron. Certainly this city had not suffered under the Black and Gold in the same way as the Empire's actual conquests had. The fighting in the streets had been against the criminal fiefs, penalties for breaking curfew had been non-fatal, and the great and good, at least, had retained the bulk of their property and privileges. The strange thing about the great and good, though, in Varmen's experience, was that the mightier they were, the more acutely they felt the loss of even a mote of their power.

No prizes for guessing what sort of a show Alester Tasky had arranged tonight then.

"Fine, right," he stated flatly. "Whoever they throw at us, we sting the bastards down and piss on fair fights."

Atric jabbed an open hand out at him – it was such an unexpectedly aggressive gesture that Varmen had his shield up instantly, other hand reaching for his sword hilt. The man was not attacking him, though, he was displaying something.

"What's that?" Varmen demanded.

"I was a prisoner. We all were," Atric said simply. "They don't mess about, with our kinden. They know how dangerous we are. So they take steps." There was an ugly, lopsided brand across his palm, that some wit had decided to fashion to look like a big Heleron Central, the mostly-gold coins that were the Lowlands' favourite currency. A hand injury could stopper up a man's Art, Varmen knew. The idea of simply searing that characteristically Wasp-kindens ability out of someone, and still keeping them alive, was shocking to him.

"What about the rest of you?" he asked. Hands were lifted, presented to him in a manner that would have been taboo in any civilised Wasp place, unless real harm was intended. Each one of them had received the same treatment.

But Varmen had thought about it now. "Right, now tell me the truth. How many of you *can* still sting. I'll bet it doesn't always take, and I'll bet you've been hiding it up and biding your time, eh? Come on, some of you must have a little spark left in you." Into the cautious silence that followed he dropped, "Look, they're not going to be messing around. This is a death-match and we're set up to lose. Whatever you've got, we need it."

At the last, three of them kept their hands raised, fingers closed into a fist now. Varmen nodded, satisfied.

"Anyone from the Sixth here?" he asked them, and received shaken heads in response. "Typical, useless bastards. Seventh then, must be? Right. Well from now on, you're all Sixth Army, and I'm your sergeant, got that? Pride of the Sixth!"

There was precious little pride left in any of them, it was plain to see. Even his best parade-ground bellow did little to stir the warrior in them. Still, he stared into each set of eyes, willing them to challenge him, to show some soldier spirit.

"You know what I am," he told them all. "You know this armour. You know what it makes me, and I'm the real thing. I'm your centre. I'm the solid heart of your line." For a moment, seeing those thin, pallid wretches, his own heart nearly broke. They were nothing but shadows of the men he had fought alongside. "I will stand. You know that. If they force you back, fall back on me. If I press forwards, follow into the gap I make. They will not stop me. They will not slow me. They will not make me retreat. I am the Sentinels, you understand." And it was true. He was all the Sentinels there would ever be. "You men with

stings, you're on the wings. The rest of you, just keep a line between you, so you can guard each other's flanks when they attack. A line with me at its centre, you see? And use your wings on the attack, if you can – quick in and out. You see?"

They saw. None of them was happy about it, but they saw.

Then the door was opened, and Stenne was there again, with a handful of Tasky's men – not exactly guards, but they all had swords and a couple had crossbows - and Varmen understood that his doomed compatriots had been transformed, since the Fly woman left, from prisoners into fighters, therefore to be handled with caution. It was more of an accolade than he reckoned they had earned, but he fully intended to make up the difference himself.

"It's all ready for you," she said, to Varmen in particular. When he met her gaze he saw a brief sliver of utter loathing, and was surprised by it. Helleron was such a cosmopolitan city, whose factories and vice dens devoured all comers, irrespective of their kinden. He had grown out of the habit of being hated by most of the world for what he was. It was almost refreshing to be reminded.

"Let's go," he snapped, and shouldered past the men she had brought. They got out of his way quickly, too, and the other Wasps, the beaten and the lame, followed in his wake. The fighting pit was ahead, and he had his helm on before he reached it, but he sensed the opening out of the walls even though his vision was cut down to a slit, all the old skills coming back to him.

Tasky's pit was nothing the factory above ever laid claim to: he'd had it dug especially during the occupation, to give the Empire what it wanted. It was intended for select audiences, and there were only two rows of seats up past the lip. In times past no doubt there had been army majors and Consortium captains rubbing shoulders with the Helleron magnates as men died for their sport. Now most of the seats were vacant, and a single knot of guests, perhaps twenty in all, sat and watched as the band of deserters stepped out onto the dirt below them. They were mostly men, just a couple of women, and they were all Beetle-kindens, and extremely well dressed. Tasky, normally the master of all he surveyed, hovered on the sidelines, eager to please. These were all Big Noises in the city then, Varmen understood, patrons worthy of this investment, perhaps some of them from Helleron's little ruling clique of merchant lords.

His eyes met Tasky's, as the promoter took a moment from bowing and scraping to regard his prize. The shock of contact was fiercer than it had been with Stenne. Tasky had always come across with such a suave charm, so utterly unconcerned about anything Varmen might have the power to do to him. The sheer confidence had armoured him in the world of Helleron society as much as Varmen's own steel had on his many battlefields. There had never been a sense of any passion below.

In just that one moment, Varmen saw it – the thing that Stenne's look was merely the reflected radiance of. Possibly Tasky himself did not realise that his face could be read through that narrow visor. There had been real hate in that look, though, that Varmen had never suspected before. Tasky loathed him, and wanted him dead, and in that moment the Wasp wondered whether that was not the point of this entire charade, with the wealthy patrons thrown in as an afterthought.

*Why?* But even though Helleron had barely suffered under its occupation, by Imperial standards, still the soldiers of the Empire were seldom polite house-guests. They had burned

Tasky's theatre, after all, and perhaps this life of blood sports had not been a grand opportunity, as he made out, but an exigency forced on him by bitter chance. Perhaps there had been someone he had lost, some friend or relative, someone luckless enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, some girl who caught a soldier's eye, some boy who spilled the wrong man's drink.

*Guess I'll never know.*

Over the top of the pit, just below the feet of the spectators, they had strung a net. With so many kinden who could fly or climb or even just jump, containing the gladiators was always a worry for the discerning promoter. This left barely eight feet of clear space over the Wasps' heads. Nobody would be doing much flying, then – no more than a few short hops.

"My gracious friends!" Tasky called out. "You see before you the mighty forces of the Wasp Empire. Picture, if you will, the dry and rocky ground east of Sarn, where have come the invincible forces of General Malkan of the Seventh Army. Never has the Lowlands seen such a grand army. The future of our world hangs in the very balance as the Black and Gold marches on!" He had a fine voice, truly theatrical, and it boomed about the enclosed space. "Behind them, their conquests," he went on, "heavy with their chains, and our own sweet Helleron amongst them. I take you back to the very fulcrum of history! On the one side, slavery, on the other, liberty."

Knowing how easily Helleron had capitulated, and how well its people had been treated – better than they treated each other, for the most part – Varmen was almost moved to add his own commentary, but instead he waited, watching the far doors as they swung open.

"But from the west another army is marching!" Tasky called out, almost shrill now. "Hear the sound of freedom in their tread! For here are the Sarnesh and their allies. Gracious guests, I give you Malkan's Folly!"

Varmen had already guessed it by then, but the name, the cruelty that history's winners had dealt to that one loser, stung him anyway. Then the Ants were entering the arena.

They were all professional fighting men, Varmen guessed – mercenaries probably – but Tasky had stage-managed their appearance as much as he had his Wasps. Varmen had keen memories of the Ants at Malkan's Stand, and they had not looked like this – oh, the same general picture, but a hundred little errant details. The mail of these soldiers was heavier, reinforced at the chest with a square panel. Their rectangular shields were bronze-faced rather than being all-steel, and their helms seemed both more restricting and less robust. With a start of intuition Varmen realised that these men and women were dressed according to some Beetle tradition. This was how Ants looked, in their picture books and their imaginations, and so Tasky had given them what they expected.

Varmen chalked up one small advantage – the enemy were in unfamiliar gear, just as his Wasps were.

There was one other major difference between these Ants and those at Malkan's Stand. Only a third of these were actually Sarnesh. Varmen wondered if most of the real veterans of that battle would think Tasky's display to be in bad taste, or whether the Sarnesh just didn't come to Helleron much these days, given the place's weathervane loyalties. He saw various skins across from him – fishbelly white like Tallius of Tark, the bronze of Kes, ruddy exiles from Maynes eager to give some Wasps a bloody nose, even a single coal-black Vekken a long way from home.

*Oh Master Tasky, your reach might just have exceeded your grasp.*

They were better equipped, and in better shape than Varmen's vermin, but there was an insuperable gap separating them from the Ant military ideal,

"Remember your orders," he told his men, still wondering just when they had become *his men*. "Form up."

Something of the soldiers they had once been had leached back into them, just as it had with Varmen himself, and they The enemy would see weakness, Varmen hoped, but then the Empire had always favoured a more mobile battle than its foes.

There was a comment from one of the patrons that might have been, "Get on with it then," and Tasky shouted, "Fight! No quarter!"

The Ants began advancing immediately but, although they had made a battle-line, Varmen could sense the joins in it, all the weak places where Ants of one city rubbed against those of another. True, all of them came from cities that had reasons to hate the Empire, but their enmity for each other was centuries old, and more, the mind-linking Art that they relied on would only work with their kin.

The tiny few who still had their stings began loosing, maimed palms spitting golden fire at the Ants, who took the brunt on their shields, not a man of them going down. They had no way to fight back at range, though, and so they hesitated for a moment, and then lumbered into the charge that Varmen knew they would have to make.

He wanted to say, "Remember your orders!" again, because this next move could go very badly for him if his men didn't, but instead what came out was, "Pride of the Sixth!"

Sentinels stood and held the line, everyone knew that, the Ants included. Those who had never trained under that weight of steel believed it was because they *could* not move with any useful speed.

Varmen moved. He *ran*.

He was slow for the first few steps, then his body remembered how to do it and he was bearing down on the Ant line faster than they were bringing it to him. On either side, his rabble of Wasp deserters were trying to follow him up – *if I press forwards, follow* – making Varmen the weighted point of an impromptu phalanx.

He aimed himself like a ballista bolt, and when he struck it was between the Sarnesh and the Kessen elements of the enemy. His sheer momentum, and their instant response of falling back on those they considered their *own*, burst their line asunder.

Then it was blade-work. Varmen himself just braced against his shield, letting their blows rain on it or bounce from his armour. A sword struck his helm hard enough to rattle his teeth. Another tried to ram at the seam between back- and breastplate on his open right side, but skittered off the steel without biting. One of Varmen's followers lunged forwards and bloodied the Ant that tried it, driving his sword over the man's shield and severing a handful of mail links.

Varmen's own blade lashed out. It was not the heavy piece he had favoured in the army, just a standard soldier's short blade, but he got it in the faces of the enemy, first to one side, then the other, keeping each little clique of Ants busy and getting himself in the middle of them, stopping them uniting.

*If they'd been Sarnesh all, we'd be dead by now.* Had the Ants been able to share their thoughts then they could never have been thrown off like this, but Tasky... Varmen suddenly

wondered whether Tasky had gone for this mishmash for that very reason – a thirty second fight would hardly be entertaining for his guests.

Even so, the Ants were starting to turn the scales against him. The Vekken was dead – stung in the back with nobody to watch for him – and the Tarkesh had pulled back out of the fight to regroup. The Wasps were keeping themselves on the move, hopping in with brief flurries of their wings to strike a blow, then out again before the Ants could pin them down. To Varmen’s left, half a dozen Sarnesh had already killed their share of Wasps and won themselves a clear space, shield linked with shield, and Varmen knew that the Tarkesh would come in to support them any moment, after which they could sweep the Wasps to the wall.

Atric and the bulk of the others were trying to bait the little knot of Kessen and Maynesh, keeping on the move, darting in and out, into the air for brief hops to keep out of reach, and Varmen hoped that they would be able to hold just a little longer.

He gathered himself, and struck the Sarnesh shields like a hammer.

The Ants were strong by Art and training, but Varmen was as powerful as a lifetime in heavy steel could make him, and he weighed almost as much as two of them. His only concession to his own survival was that he came in shield first.

He felt the thunderous impact of metal on metal, and for a moment he thought that they would stave him off. Then there was abruptly a chaos of fallen men in front of him, and he went down to one knee in a jarring clatter, hard enough that he felt an Ant’s ribs cave beneath him. A blow came in on his shoulder, glancing from the pauldron and showing that at least one enemy was still on his feet. He swung out, all the old senses informing him, and felt the tip of his blade connect with mail.

Another Wasp dropped beside him, the one-armed man, with bloody scalp, driving his blade like a dagger down at the fallen. Varmen lurched to his feet, and one of the enemy leapt on him, trying to bear him down. For a moment he felt himself going, but he rebounded from a Sarnesh trying to stand, and then Varmen had dropped his sword and taken hold of the man that had jumped him, getting a blow into the man’s chin with a mailed fist, then catching the collar of his hauberk and hurling the Ant from him.

The one-armed man pressed a new sword into his hand immediately. Varmen took stock.

There were two Sarnesh retreating from him. The Kessen and Maynesh seemed to be down. There were a couple of Tarkesh hanging back as well.

Varmen had the one-armed man, and a single one of his stingers left in the fight. Atric and the rest had been cut down. Before they had fallen, though, they had fought like soldiers of the Empire once more. Tasky had thought he was getting tired, sad fugitives – he had bought in men who, in turning their backs on the army, had found that they had left the best part of themselves behind. It had taken this little fake war to bring them back to whom they had once been, and it had killed most of them too.

“Pride of the Sixth,” he said, in the hollow quiet of his helm, and then, “Pride of the Sixth!” a battle cry to make even Ant-kindens flinch. So what if there was no Sixth now? While he stood, it still had its pride.

The Ants were almost to the wall, waiting, three men and a woman behind four big shields. They had eyes only for Varmen now, trying to read the future in that dark slot that was all they could see of his face.

The stingshot came in at a sharp angle, the Wasp choosing his moment and his target, so that the man in the middle went down with a scream and his head crackling into flame. Varmen had not so much as glanced at his ally, but he had been ready for the moment. At moments such as that, who needed a mindlink?

And he was in motion again, seeing the sole living Tarkesh spring aside from the other two Ants, abruptly wanting nothing to do with the fight. The one-armed Wasp's wings flared and cast him in a shallow arc that brought him and the Tarkesh Ant tumbling down together,

The two Sarnesh braced, and this time they were ready, skidding so that their back heels touched the wall but holding him off. A sword point missed his eyeslit by an inch and jarred his head back. Another cut beneath his shield and buckled the articulated tassets over his hip.

Stingshot exploded from one Ant's shield, and then the last Wasp had come to Varmen's aid, hooking a hand over the enemy's shield-rim and dragging it down. The Ant's sword struck home, opening the Wasp's throat, but Varmen's own blade was in motion, taking advantage of the opening, and he rammed it through the thin mail beneath the Ant's armpit and dragged it out before it could stick.

The other Sarnesh hacked at him, sword striking at the juncture between shoulder and neck, but Varmen's pauldrons had ridges to prevent just that, and the man's sword snapped off at the quillons.

*Shame on you, Tasky, for buying cheap,* and Varmen killed him.

In the wake of that he expected more fighting, but the pit around him was very still. He swept his narrow slot of a view across the scene, finding not one other fighter standing, on either side. Here and there the wounded whimpered or cursed, or dragged themselves away from him, and he saw that, most likely, half the Ants would live, and perhaps two of his own.

He drew his helm off, starting to feel all the new bruises and aches he had just earned, and looked up at Tasky and his audience. The promoter himself looked as though he had died, all his debonair elegance drained from him, leaving only a Beetle wearing bad clothes badly, a clown capering before his betters. Varmen expected him to curse, to rage and bombast, like a true man of the theatre, but something had happened to Alester Tasky during the course of the fight. Some memory, some old wound that Varmen would never know of, had aged him into a brittle, fragile thing. Stenne, beside him with her hand on his arm, seemed more a nurse than an employee.

Of the audience itself, the great and the good of Helleron looked as though they had seen better. A couple were discussing the merits of the fight, but the rest just looked on Varmen as though they were waiting for him to do something more entertaining than part lives from bodies. Some looked bored.

Varmen shook his head, feeling as though he wanted to fly up there, hack open the net, run amok amongst those captains of industry to show them the true meaning of what they had just witnessed. In the end, though, the weight of his mail kept his feet on the ground.

"It's Malkan's *Stand*, not Malkan's *Folly*," he told them, hearing his own voice rough and cracked. "And you better bloody remember than when we come *back*."

It had been an empty threat, for him. There was no *we*. The Empire would retake HELLERON with ease – and probably consent – when the time came, but Varmen would not be with them. There was no place for a man in that armour under the Black and Gold any more.

He had paid off Huron Albrake, to the man's surprise, but only because he needed somewhere to sit and think. He could see the path he had been treading, during his days in HELLERON, and it was a downwards spiral that led where Tallius had gone. If he stayed here, he would be lost to the drink and the drudgery, and sooner or later he would pawn his prized armour for a bowl of wine, and that would be the end of him. Without his mail he was not the same man. Tallius had done him a service, forcing the knowledge on him while he was still able to act on it.

So he took the balance of Tasky's money and he purchased a little pack-beetle that could carry his armour, even though the creature seemed almost lost beneath it. He stood there, on the streets of HELLERON, knowing that the Lowlands did not want him and the Empire was denied to him.

It did not matter. He only had one destination in mind, and it was easily realised. Varmen was getting out.