

## Ironclads

**By Adrian Tchaikovsky**

“Tell me again.” Varmen could feel himself getting angry, which was never a good thing.

“No sign.” The little Fly-kinde kept his distance, for all the good that would do against a Wasp. “Not a single soldier of them. Nothing, Sergeant.”

“They said –” Varmen bit the words off. He was keeping his hands clenched very deliberately because, if he opened them, the fire within would turn this small man into ash.

“They said they’d be right behind us,” said Pellric from behind him, sounding as amused as always. “Didn’t say how far, though.”

“Right behind us,” Varmen growled. He stomped back to the downed flying machine. The helicopter had been a great big boxy piece of ironmongery when it was whole. When it struck the ground the wood and metal had split on two sides. What roof was left, shorn of its rotors, would barely keep the rain off. A rubble of crates and boxes had spilled out of it, some of them impacting hard enough to cause little ruins of their own.

The pilot had not lived through the crash, and nor had two of the passengers. Lieutenant Landren was, in Varmen’s opinion, now wishing that he was in the same position. The bones of his shattered leg were pushing five different ways, and there was precious little anyone could do with them.

“Oh, we love the Imperial scouts, we do,” Varmen muttered. “Bonny boys the lot of them.”

“You should have seen what hit him,” the Fly said. The tiny man, barely up to Varmen’s waist, was supposedly a sergeant as well, but he was happy to hand the whole mess back to the Wasp-kinde. “Cursed thing came right down on the props, like it was in love.” The corpse of the dragonfly was in smashed pieces around them, along with what was left of the rider. *Did he know? Varmen wondered. Did he bring them down deliberately? Probably the stupid bastard thought he could fly straight through, ’cos the rotors were going so fast he couldn’t see ’em.*

The ground around here was as up-and-down as anyone could wish not to get holed up in. The Dragonfly-kinde could be anywhere, and probably were. The red tint to everything told Varmen that the sun was going down. The unwelcoming hill country around them was about to get more unwelcoming in spades.

“Where are they?”

“I said –”

“Not our lot, *them.*”

“Oh, right.” The Fly’s face took on a haggard look. “Oh, they’re right all around us, sergeant. They cleared out when you got here, but for sure they’re still watching us. You can bet, if we know the Sixth Army isn’t coming, then so do they.”

“Get fires going,” Varmen heard Pellrec saying. Pellrec wasn’t a sergeant, but Varmen wasn’t a planner. They had an arrangement. “The Commonwealers see cursed well in the dark. Tserro, your little maggots are therefore on watch.”

The Fly sergeant’s face went even sourer but he nodded. *Tserro, that was his name.* Remembering names was not a strong point for Varmen.’

*Stupid place to end up, frankly.* For the cream of the Imperial military, the spearhead of the Sixth Army, the very striking hammer of the Wasp invasion of the Commonweal, he had hoped for better. And it had all seemed such a good idea. Varmen was a professional soldier, after all: he was used to sniffing out dung-smelling errands and dodging them. This had carried all the marks of little risk and high praise. *I'm such a sucker for the praise...* Scouts have got into trouble again – *like they always do* – leaving a squad of Fly-kindens irregulars and a helicopter suddenly stranded. Go hold their hands until the army picks up the pieces. Sixth is heading that way anyway, won't be a day even. *So off we trot with a little iron to give the scouts some backbone. Five sentinels and a dozen medium infantry slogging ahead of the advance in all our armour. Because we knew the rest were right behind us. They told us they were coming, after all. How can a whole army be lying to you?*

“Get all the luggage into some kind of front wall,” Pellrec snapped, to get the infantry moving. “One man in three with a shield at the front, while the rest keep under cover and be ready to shoot out. Tserro-?”

“Here.” The little sergeant was obviously still weighing who was supposed to be giving orders, and where the chain of command ran. He clearly accepted the fact that Varmen had not countermanded anything as his casting vote. “Where do you want us?”

“Space your men so they can keep watch over every approach,” Pellrec told him. “Bows and crossbows, whatever you have. When they appear, get in under the helicopter's hull.”

Wings bloomed from the Fly's shoulders and he skipped off to instruct his men. Pellrec leant close to Varmen. He was a proper Wasp-kindens beauty, was Pellrec: fair-haired and handsome, and a favourite with any ladies they met that the army hadn't already slapped chains on. Compared to him, Varmen was a thug, dark-haired and heavy-jawed and five-inches taller. The two of them had come through a lot in the vanguard of the Sixth Army. Seeing Varmen's expression Pellrec laughed and said, “So, still glad you signed up?”

“Enough of that,” Varmen snarled. “We're the Pride of the Sixth. Who are we?”

The one sentinel close enough to hear said, instinctively, “The Pride!” and even Pellrec mouthed the words, grinning.

“Sentinels, boys,” Varmen said, louder, in his battle voice. The words carried across and on past the wreck of the downed helicopter. “The pit-cursed best there is.” He hoped that the Commonweal soldiers out there could hear him.

He stalked into the shelter of the downed flying machine to check on the man who was nominally in charge. Lieutenant Landren was conscious again, just now. The Fly-kindens quack the scouts had brought was crouching beside him, changing the dressings on his mangled leg.

“What's it look like, Sergeant?” Landren's voice was ragged enough for Varmen to know there would be no help from him.

“Seen worse, sir,” he said dutifully. “We'll get through. Sixth is on its way, sure as eggs.”

“We've made contact?”

*A little sharper than I reckoned, after all.* “Not so much, sir, but when we set out, they were right behind us. What's going to have happened to them?” *And what in the pit has happened to them?*

“Good, good. Carry on, Sergeant.”

“Will do, sir.” Varmen grimaced as soon as he had turned away from him. His eyes met those of Tserro, the scouts’ own sergeant. The man was perched up under the helicopter’s fractured ceiling, stringing a bow with automatic motions, not even looking at it properly. His stare was made of accusation. Varmen scowled at him.

“Three of my men I sent to the Sixth,” the Fly hissed as the sentinel passed him. “One got far enough to know the Sixth ain’t coming. Two didn’t come back. Why’d the first man live to get through, Sergeant Varmen? You think perhaps they want us to know we’re stuffed?”

“Shut it, you,” Varmen growled at him. “Pell, how’s it coming?”

“Oh, it’s arrived, Varmo,” Pellrec told him. “Or at least, as much of it as we’re likely to get.” He had made the best job of turning the crashed machine into a defensible position, with the broken sides of the helicopter to fend against airborne assault, and a jumble of crates and sacks to turn aside arrows.

“Arken!” Varmen snapped. The man he’d put in charge of the medium infantry clattered up instantly. From his privileged position at the front, Varmen had always regarded the medium infantry as a bit of a botched compromise: armour too heavy to fly in, and yet not heavy enough to hurl into the breach without losing more than you kept. Varmen’s chief memory of men like Arken was as a froth of shields and spears on either side of the sentinel wedge as the thrust of the Imperial assault went home. He never seemed to see the same men in charge of the medium infantry twice.

“All right, here’s the plan,” Varmen told him, and loud enough for everyone nearby to hear. “What them out there don’t realise is that we’re exactly the right men for this job. Screw flying about like racking moths and Fly-kindens. We’re the armour-boys, so we don’t need to go dancing all over the sky. We just need to stand and hold. Me and the lads will take the front. I want your lot in a line behind us. Sting-shot at anything that tries to come in above us. Anything that gets past us, or that attacks the scouts, take them on – sword and spear.”

“Right you are, Sarge,” Arken said.

*I always remember the names, with the medium infantry, Varmen thought. Odd that. A dozen men in a dozen fights and I always know which name to yell, yet I can have a commanding officer for two years and still get it wrong.*

“Sentinels!” he roared. “Get your racking kit on!”

They had hauled it all the way here, each man’s mail spread between three of the sweating medium infantry as well as the man himself. This was the pride of the sixth, the elite of the Imperial army, the honour so many soldiers aimed at, and fell short of. The sentinels: the mailed fist. Let the light airborne rule the skies. Let the engineers hurl forth their machines and their artillery. When it came to where the metal met, you sent in the sentinels. Worst job, best kit, best training. None of Arken’s men could have endured wearing Varmen’s armour.

He helped Pellrec on with his, first: the long chainmail hauberk, shrugged over the head in a moment of oil-and-metal claustrophobia; breast and back-plates strapped at the side, as the anchor for everything that came later; double-leaved pauldrons for the shoulders; articulated tassets that covered him from waist to knee. Armoured boots and greaves from knee to foot; bracers and gauntlets from elbow to hand. Each piece was spotless, the black and gold paint lovingly restored after each fight until not a chip

remained. Each curve of metal slid over its neighbours until what was left was not a man but more a great insect, a carapace of armour over armour.

Moving swiftly and surely in his mail, Pellrec returned the favour, putting in place by practised motions the barrier that kept Varmen and the world decently separate. The other three sentinels were similarly clad now, hulking ironclads in Imperial livery, their heads looking too small for their bodies. *Easy to fix that.* Varmen slung his arming cap on, tied it beneath his chin. The coif then slid over that, lopsided at first until he tugged it into place. Last came the helm, cutting down the world into a manageable slot, to be dealt with a slice at a time. The senses he had built up in training were already starting to speak to him, to tell him where the others were, where was a wall, where was open space -- without having to look around like some backwoods farmer come to the capital for the first time.

He held his hands out. His shield was buckled on to one, and the other hand received the weight of his broadsword. There was no standard weapon for a sentinel. The man who could wear this armour was fit to make that decision for himself. Varmen's sword was a cavalry piece, weighted towards the tip for a crushing downward blow. Pellrec fought with a Bee-kindens axe, short-hafted and massive-headed. He made a habit of breaking down doors with it, or sometimes flimsy walls. The others had their favourites: a halberd, a broad-headed spear, a pair of brutal maces. Varmen let his narrowed gaze pass over them, seeing metal and more metal, his faceless soldiers. Beyond them, the men of the medium infantry were looking slightly awed.

"Pride of the Sixth!" he shouted, his voice hollow and metallic in his own ears, drowning out their answering cry.

*Getting dark out there.* And they would come when it was dark. Dragonfly-kindens eyes were good. The fires that Pellrec had ordered to be lit barely held back the darkness more than a spear's length. Beyond that he had to trust to Tserra's scouts. *Craven little bastards, the lot of them, but they know they'll die right alongside us.* No doubt the Fly-kindens were itching to take wing and abandon the armoured Wasps to their fate, but this war had taught them that the Commonwealers were just as swift in the air as these scouts were. Any Fly that tried the air would end up on the point of an arrow in no time.

"Movement," one of Tserra's men spat out. Varmen's heart picked up, that old feeling that had been fear, when he was a raw recruit, but was now no more than anticipation. He and his fellow sentinels readied themselves, waiting for the onslaught. The darkness was thick with unseen spears and bows. Behind their metal-clad line, Arken's men waited. They had their short-bladed swords drawn, but their free hands out, fingers spread. In their palms waited the golden fire that was the Wasp sting, that searing piece of Art that made their kindens so deadly as warriors. Tserra's scouts nocked arrows, shuffling uneasily on their perches.

"Coming in now," one of them announced.

"How many?" Varmen braced himself.

"Just... Two, just two."

"*What?*" But the guttering firelight touched on movement now. "Hold your shot," he snapped out, and even as he spoke one of the Flies let loose an arrow. "I *said*-" he started, but then he saw what happened to the lone missile, and he swore, "Bloody guts and knives..." One of the approaching Dragonflies had caught it, snatched it out of mid-

air. It was a neat party-trick, he had to acknowledge. *Like to see them do it with sting-shot, though. That'd burn their pretty hands a treat.*

"What's going on," he rumbled.

"Maybe they want to surrender?" Pellrec murmured from beside him. Varmen chuckled despite himself.

"Close enough," he called out, clanging the flat of his blade against his shield to make his point. "Here to surrender, are you?" It was always easier using Pellrec's words. Pellrec was so much better at speaking than he was. A rattle of sour laughter came from the Wasps at his back.

The two Dragonflies were lightly armoured in leather and chitin scales. They were slight of build compared to a Wasp, but they moved with a careful grace. On the left was a man who looked younger than Varmen's five-and-twenty years, wearing a crested helm. An unstrung bow and quiver of arrows jutted over his shoulder. The shaft the Fly-Kinden had sent at him dangled in one hand like a toy.

Varmen's eyes turned to the other one and he grunted in surprise. A woman! Of course, the Dragonfly women fought alongside their men, but when there was actual fighting to be done he tended to blank that out, seeing them all as just more faceless enemies. The firelight turned her skin to red, but he knew it would really be golden. Her head was bare, dark hair worn short in a soldier's cut. She held a sword lightly in one hand. It was a good four feet long, most of her own height, but half that as her eyes met his. The only women he had seen recently had already been claimed by the Slave Corps, or by some officer or other. This one might want to kill him, but she was still a sight for the eyes.

"Who speaks for you?" the man asked, to Varmen's disappointment. *Don't we get to hear her voice then?* He could imagine it, light and graceful as she was, sly and dancing. He swallowed abruptly.

"Lieutenant awake?" he called back.

"Not just now, Sergeant," Arken reported.

"Then I reckon I do," he stated. *Is it a trick? Is this to get us off guard before they storm us?* He looked at Pellrec, saw the man's pauldrons shrug up and down.

*To the pit with it...* He took a couple of steps forward and thrust his sword down into the earth for easy retrieval. "You want something, do you?" he asked them.

"We offer you the chance to surrender," said the woman. Varmen stared, Her voice was exactly as he had imagined. He had always had a thing for women with good voices. After a moment he realised that the awkward pause in this conversation was him.

"Go on," he stated, mostly to get her to keep talking.

"You think that-" the Dragonfly man started but Varmen cut him off with an angry motion of his gauntlet. "Not you, her. Don't interrupt the lady."

The angry, injured-pride expression on the man's face made it almost worth being stuck out here about to fight off the hordes. *Shame he can't see me grinning right now,* the Wasp thought. *Oh, I'd make him look sour, all right.*

"You believe your army is coming to save you," the woman said. Varmen tilted his head up a little, listening. *Music, like music.* He'd not had a Dragonfly woman yet, was probably one of the few men of the Sixth who hadn't. It wasn't as though the Slave Corps hadn't been touting a sorry collection of Commonwealer whores about the camps,

but Varmen had no taste for women who wept, or cursed him, or tried to kill him. *Well-made man like me shouldn't need to rent it from the Slavers.*

She had stopped speaking, and he realised he had been nodding along without actually absorbing any of the words. "I suppose you think that scares me," he hazarded.

"You have your once-only chance to cast your weapons down," the Dragonfly man snapped, icy-voiced. "I suggest you take it."

*Yeah, I thought it was something like that.* "Nothing doing," Varmen said, talking to her and not to him. "Sorry, girl, but the first thing they teach you when you put on his armour is not to go knock-kneed with fear, 'cos of how everyone can hear you." *Was that a bit of a smile? I think it was. Shame we all have to kill each other now, really. We were getting along famously.*

"Bring your worst," he finished.

"Oh, we shall," the Dragonfly man promised. Varmen could see him raging inside, desperate to bring the fight to the Wasps. *And you with a bow on your shoulder. Angry men make rotten archers, I know that much.*

"Bring your worst!" Varmen repeated, "'Cos we're the best -- Pride of the Sixth!"

The words rose up from behind him in a chorus of Imperial solidarity.

The man stalked away, and Varmen was mildly surprised that one of the Fly-kindens didn't put an arrow in his oh-so-inviting back. The woman regarded him for a moment more, that very-nearly-almost-amused look still on her face, and then followed after. Varmen carefully stepped backwards until he could see Pellrec from the very corner of his visor.

"How'd I do?" he muttered.

"Oh, I'm amazed the Emperor didn't come round and hand out medals," the other sentinel told him. "What now?"

"We fight."

"And when the Sixth doesn't come, like she said?"

"Feh." Varmen shrugged. "And why won't they come?"

"Well..." There was a pained pause, but Varmen wouldn't look at him, so Pellrec went on, "There was the little thing about the whole Grand Army of three principalities currently beating on the Sixth like a man with a sick slave."

*There was, was there? "And you believed it?"* Varmen raised his voice to carry to the men around them. "Of course they're going to tell us that. Why would they even come here to ask for surrender, unless they were scared of us, eh?"

He heard a subdued rustle of laughter as his tone rescued a little morale. Pellrec wasn't fooled. Pellrec never was. Still, Pellrec would stand and fight alongside him whether he believed it or not. Sentinels didn't break. "Pride of the Sixth," Varmen murmured to himself.

"And here they come," Tserro said, and to his credit his voice was steady.

Varmen dropped into his fighting stance, keeping his shield up, and the arrows began to arc into the firelight. He felt an impact on his shoulder, two or three on his shield. A sharp rap knocked his head to one side but he brought it back, waiting. The gash in the crashed helicopter was mostly filled with Varmen and his sentinels, and it would be a fine archer who could spin an arrow into a narrow eyeslit or up under an armpit at the range they were shooting at. Varmen heard a shout of pain from behind him, an errant missile

catching one of the Fly-kindens in the leg after clipping Pellrec's pauldron. Another splintered on a sentinel's halberd blade.

"Spears now," Tserra said. He must have been crouching high aloft, just behind and beside Varmen's head.

"Brace!" Varmen shouted. Arrows began to dance the other way, the short shafts that the scouts used. Fly-kindens weren't good for much, in Varmen's estimation, but they were decent shots when their nerve held.

The firelight caught movement, and then the Commonwealer soldiers were on them. They came running: lithe spearmen with thin leather cuirasses, archers in amongst them with arrows to the string, a rushing rabble of golden-skinned faces. Even as they hit the firelight, half of them were airborne, the wings of their Art flaring from their backs and shoulders, launching them up and forwards. Their arrows kept coming, loosed on the run or on the wing. One struck Pellrec's breastplate and bounded up into the mail under his chin, sticking and hanging there like a beard. Varmen heard several cries behind him as the missiles punched through the banded armour of Arken's medium infantry. The Wasps were returning shot for shot. The light arrows of the scouts were cut through with crackling bolts of gold fire. Varmen saw a half-dozen of the Commonwealers go straight down. *No decent armour and not a shield amongst them*, he thought. The Dragonflies did have a few decent military traditions, but most of their army was merely levy like this.

"*Pride of the Sixth!*" he called out and stepped forward just as the first spearman got to him. The Commonwealer's wings flashed as he charged and the spear slammed into Varmen's shield hard enough to stop both of them in their tracks. Varmen's sword flashed down, knowing where the spear-shaft would be through the surface of the shield, hacking the head clean off it. The Dragonfly reached for a dagger but one of the Fly-kindens arrows lanced him through the throat and he dropped. Another two spears were coming in but Varmen's shield was dancing on its own, his reflexes keeping it moving, covering throat and groin. An arrow clipped his helm and a spearhead was briefly lodged between the plates of his tassets. He swung his sword, tireless as an automaton, breaking spears and keeping them back while their friends tried to push forwards, and the Wasps behind him launched their sting-shot over his shoulders. It was an archer's war. The sentinels stood as firm as a wall, and everyone else died at range, not even seeing the face of their killers. If Varmen and his fellows had fallen back, it would all have been over, the mob of Dragonfly levy swirling forwards to run each Wasp and Fly onto a pike. They held against the ground forces, though, and those that tried to force through between the sentinels' flashing weapons and the jagged edge of the helioper's top wall were picked off by the men behind.

Abruptly as they had come, the Dragonflies broke off the attack, disappearing into the darkness, chased by a few hopeful arrows. Varmen made a quick count and saw a score of bodies. *No counting how many dead and wounded they took away with them.*

"What's our losses?" he called back.

"Two scouts, one infantry," came Arken's dutiful voice. "Two others wounded."

"They'll be back," Pellrec said.

"Oh, surely." Varmen shrugged his shoulders, settling the plates back into place. Pellrec murmured to him and he added, "They'll take a few shots at us now ... hope we've forgotten about them. Stay sharp."

"Sergeant..." Something in Arken's tone promised complications.

Varmen sighed. "Watch the front," he told Pellrec and ducked into the wrecked helicopter. "What? What now?"

Arken said nothing, but he was stepping back from the prone form of Lieutenant Landren.

"Don't suppose we're lucky enough that he died in his sleep?" Varmen said. There was an awkward pause, several seconds' worth, before he noticed the arrow.

"Ah, right." He knelt by the body: dead, all right, no mistaking that. It was dim, back there, too dim to get a look at the wound, not that it would have told him much. But he could feel a tension behind him. *Sounds like he was alive and well when Arken did his count the first time round.* "You must have missed him in the dark," Varmen said absently.

There was a distinct pause before the "Yes, sergeant."

"Go get some of your men to back up my sentinels," Varmen told him. "Sergeant Tserro, a word."

The Fly approached doing a fine impression of nothing-wrong-here. Varmen nodded amiably and then lunged for him. He had been going for the throat, but the fly's reflexes were good enough to foul his aim. The helicopter was a cramped cage, though, and Varmen got a fistful of tunic and hauled the man in. He was aware that several of the other Fly scouts had arrows abruptly nocked to the bow. "Go on," he growled softly, "see if your little sticks're any better than the Commonwealers'."

Tserro waved a hand frantically at them, still trying for a calm face. "Something ... something wrong, Sergeant?"

"You stabbed him," Varmen said quietly. He was aware that all this was taking people's attention off the real fight, but then a scatter of arrows came in to rattle from the sentinels' plate, and that took up most people's minds. "And then you stuck an arrow in," he added. "Or maybe you stuck him with an arrow first. What's going on?"

Tserro's face twisted, and for a moment he was going to keep up the act, but Varmen shook him hard enough to loosen his teeth, and finally the truth broke loose.

"Who d'you think was going to get the blame for this?" the Fly hissed.

"Him," Varmen pointed out. "Or were you saving him the long walk to the captain's tent to explain himself?"

"Fool, nothing would have landed on his shoulders," Tserro snapped. "Landren was Rekef. We all knew it."

The mere mention of the name made Varmen feel uncomfortable, feel *watched*. The Imperial secret police, the Rekef, the thing that men of the Empire feared more than any external enemy. "And killing him helps, does it?"

"A dead man's got no reputation to maintain," Tserro stated. "You're Wasp-kindens, what could you know? It's easy to blame us, and nobody cares if we end up hanging on crossed pikes to protect some Rekef man's career."

Varmen threw him down, seeing the flash of wings as Tserro caught himself. "This isn't over," he promised. "But, in case you hadn't noticed, they're trying to kill us. If we get out of this, we're going to have words."

"Oh, for sure," said Tserro, half-mocking, but with fear still underneath it.

"And, in case you get any daft ideas, you just remember who's standing between you and the Commonweal."



The rest of the night passed under light showers of arrows: long, elegant shafts that broke off the sentinels' armour or rattled against the ruined coping of the heliopter. One of Varmen's men took a hit to the elbow, the arrowhead lodging through the delicate articulation of his mail and digging three inches into the joint. He let Tserro's field surgeon remove the missile, the Fly doctor's hands tiny as they investigated the wound, and got his arm strapped up. In just over an hour he was back in place, wielding a single mace in his left hand. Another arrow, arcing overhead, resulted in one of Arken's men officially dying of bad luck, as it came from nowhere to spit him through the eye. There were no other casualties. By mid-afternoon the next day it had become plain to all sides that this occasional sniping was getting nowhere. The Dragonfly-kindeen mounted another sally.

That they had been reinforced since was unwelcome and immediately obvious news. After a fierce volley of more arrows, one of which came in hard enough to put its point through the inside of Varmen's shield, the first wave out of the trees were not Dragonflies but a rabble of Grasshopper-kindeen. They were lean, sallow men and women without armour, wielding spears and long knives, clearly a levy sent to the front from some wretched peasant farmland somewhere. They were very quick, rushing and bounding towards the heliopter in no kind of order, but nimble on their feet. Several had slings that they were able to loose whilst running. A stone dented Pellrec's helm over his forehead, staggering him, and for a moment Varmen was bracing himself for a real fight to hold them, but then Arken's voice was shouting to aim and loose, and a concentrated lash of short arrows and the golden fire of sting-shot ripped through them. Varmen reckoned that almost a score of them went over in that first moment, and the others scattered instinctively, no trained soldiers they. Arken called to shoot at will and another score of the Grasshoppers were picked off as they tried to get away. There was precious little left of them but a crowd of frightened farmhands by the time they lost themselves in the trees.

"Good work," Varmen called back. "Now let's have some proper fighting."

The Dragonflies themselves had massed. Varmen guessed they had expected to ride the wave of their Grasshopper levy and break up an Imperial line already engaged. There was a pause now while they re-evaluated their tactics. Varmen tried to see if he could make out either of the envoys, the woman especially, but when they stood shoulder to shoulder they were all too alike.

"Here they come," muttered Pellrec, and they came. Again there was a mass of spearmen in the vanguard, and the individual archers, the Dragonfly nobles and their retainers, vaulted up into the air, Art-spawned wings glittering, to slice down shafts at the Wasps. The sentinel line braced, arrows and sting-fire lancing past and between them from behind. Although they were no more professional soldiers than the Grasshopper-kindeen had been, the Dragonflies weathered the volley without breaking and smashed against the thin line of black-and-gold armour that held the entryway to the crashed heliopter.

The fighting was more fierce this time. Varmen took a dozen strikes to his mail in the first few moments, each one sliding off to the armourer's design. There were a lot of them, jabbing and stabbing furiously at him and his men. He had the uncomfortable realisation that if they had been Ant-kindeen or even Bees, used to fighting in solid shoulder-to-shoulder blocks, then the fight would be halfway over by then. The

Dragonflies were accustomed to mobile, skirmishing wars and, although the Wasps could match them in that, the locals had nothing suitable to meet the hard core of an Imperial battle formation, the core that Varmen had drawn up in miniature here. The Commonweal spearheads were long and narrow, but narrowing only very close to the tip, not the needle-point lances that Varmen would use against heavy armour. These Dragonflies were summer soldiers, their first love and training in some peaceful trade, mostly farming. They had neither the mindset, training or gear for this war. Every Wasp-kind man of the Empire was foremost a soldier. It was the slaves and the subject races that did the tedious business of actually making the Empire run.

He saw it only in retrospect. One of the Commonweal archers had been scorched out of the sky even as he dived in for a shot. He came skidding into the mass of spears, bowling a couple of peasants over, still trying to regain his feet with feebly flickering wings even as he ended up at the very feet of the sentinel line. His chest and side was a crisped mass of failed leather and chitin armour, with boiled flesh beneath. His arrow was still to the string.

Varmen raised his sword, point-downwards, to spit him, and the man's fingers twitched, the arrow spearing upwards. From the limited window of his eyeslit Varmen did not actually see Pellrec struck, nor did he hear him cry out. Even as his broadsword chopped solidly into the archer's chest, his honed senses were telling him of a gap to his right, the abrupt absence.

The worst was that he could not turn, could not look to see what had happened to his friend, whether the man was even alive. He stood his ground. He kept his shield high, and redoubled his sword-work to make up for the gap, the man on his right doing the same. For Varmen-the-man it was loss and horror, but for Sergeant Varmen it meant a change to the tactical situation.

The Commonwealers kept up the assault for another twenty savage minutes before the back of their offensive was broken and they made a messy retreat under the fire of Arken's stings. Varmen forced himself to watch them go, to be sure that they would not suddenly rally and return. The very moment he was assured of that, he turned, barking the name, "Pellrec!"

The man lay prostrate, but the field surgeon had taken his helm off. The sight made Varmen's innards squirm. The arrow had pierced the mail under Pellrec's chin, lancing up into his jaw. One corner of the arrowhead glinted out of his left cheek.

"Report," Varmen got out.

The surgeon looked up resentfully, and Varmen spared a brief moment, only a brief one, to acknowledge that a good eight more men were wounded or dead around them, victims to the Commonwealer arrows.

"He lives," the surgeon said. "But whether he'll live much longer--"

"Make him live," Varmen snapped, further endearing himself by spitting out, "He's worth ten of the others." *And I need Pellrec around to stop me saying things like that.*

"No guarantees." The little Fly-kind man seemed to be watching the steam-dial of Varmen's temper, knowing how essential his skills were. "I need to find how deep it's gone. Then I need to take it out." Pellrec's eyes were staring, unfocused. Varmen guessed the surgeon had already forced something on him to strip the pain away. The wounded man's breathing was skipping, ragged. There was a scream there, waiting for its moment.

“Do it.”

“No guarantees.”

“*Do it!* If he—“ *dies I’ll kill every last one of you midget bastards ...* but he managed to bite down on that comment. “What can be done, to help?”

The surgeon shook his head disgustedly, glanced sidelong at Tserro, beside him. The sergeant of scouts had a clumsily-tied bandage about his forehead, a narrow line of blood seeping through it.

Varmen stalked over to them. “If he lives, then nobody cares how Landren died,” he promised.

The surgeon’s eyes were haunted. “Listen, sergeant, I will do all I can, but men die easy from wounds like this. Ain’t nothing you could do, unless you reckon you could talk the Commonwealers into pissing off just to give me some quiet.”

“Right,” Varmen said, and walked back to the other sentinels. They were awaiting him patiently, looking only outwards towards the hidden enemy.

“What’s going on, sergeant?” The worried tones were Arken’s, the infantryman now stepping up behind him.

“Ah, well,” said Varmen. He glanced out at the trees, at the waiting Commonwealers watching their every move. “Sometimes I do some pretty stupid things, soldier,” he explained. “Only normally, see, there’s Pellrec telling me not to, to keep me in line. You’d think it’d be the other way, what with me a sergeant and him not, but that’s just the way it turned out.”

Arken looked back to where the surgeon was stripping off Pellrec’s breastplate. “Sergeant...?”

“I’m going to do a stupid thing now,” Varmen announced, loud enough for the sentinels to hear as well. “You’ve got a good enough head on you. If this goes arse-upwards you’re in charge. Do what you can with what I’ve left you, and just hope the Sixth pulls its finger out before it’s too late.”

Arken’s look was bleak, but he said nothing. Varmen shouldered past the sentinel line, now only three men and one of them wounded. *Nothing’s going to change anything, at this point*, he knew, but at the same time a voice was hammering inside his head: *Pellrec can’t die, not now, not ever!* Too many years together, under the mail. There was a sick, horrified feeling inside him, waiting for him to indulge it, but a soldier’s habits meant he could leave it down there unrequited.

“Sergeant,” one of the other sentinels murmured, and Varmen strode out into the open and waited, drawing his sword.

He expected a few arrows on the instant, just Dragonfly-kind reflexes at work, but none came. Perhaps he had startled them as much as he had alarmed his own men. He waited, letting the weight of his armour settle comfortably about him.

They should kill him, he knew. He was a perfect target. One of their archers could be sighting carefully on his eyeslit, the fine mail at his throat. He just kept on standing there, as though daring them to do it.

There was movement, now, amongst the trees. Suddenly seeing the part of the plan he had missed, Varmen snapped out, “Hold your shot! Nobody so much as sneezes!” That was to stop his own followers killing his idea stone dead.

One of the Commonwealers was coming out to him, just one. It was the woman, of course. She had her long, recurved bow strung, an arrow nocked and half drawn back,

picking her way towards him uncertainly. It must take courage, he decided, but he already knew she had that. To him she looked very young, but he assumed she must be one of their nobility, or some prince's by-blow.

"Are you surrendering?" She had stopped well out of sword-reach.

"No," he called back.

"Are you...?" She slackened tension on the bowstring, just a bit. "What *are* you doing? Are you asking for permission to relieve yourself? It must be hard, in all that metal."

The soldier's joke, coming from her, surprised a laugh out of him. "You have no idea," he told her. He had forgotten just how pleasant her voice sounded. "I'm challenging you."

"You're *what*?" She was staring at him with a faint smile, as though he was quite mad, but in a mildly entertaining way.

"I heard," he said, trying to dredge up precisely what he had heard, and from whom, "that your lot do duels and single combats and that."

"We're at war," she said flatly. "It's a little late for that."

"Come on, now." Trying to gently cajole her into it, with Pellrec being cut open somewhere behind him, felt unreal. "Me against your champion. If we win, you go home."

"We *are* home," she said, and left the words hanging there for a moment before adding, "You may have noticed a large movement of soldiers from your lands onto ours. We call that an invasion."

*And she's probably lost family, and she's certainly lost followers, even today, and she's still out here talking to me, despite that, and she's interested and...*

"And what would we get, if we won?" she threw in. "Your men will throw down their weapons and bare their throats? I don't think so."

"You get me dead," Varmen said. "You've seen me fight. Take me out of the line, you'll win that much sooner. Don't think the Sixth's going to be forever finding us."

She looked at him for a long time, and eventually he thought he saw something like sympathy in her dark eyes. "I have more recent news than you, Wasp, whatever your name is." He could see that the rudeness of her forthcoming comment bothered her, even here between enemies. *Such a delicate lot, these...*

"Varmen, Sergeant of Sentinels, Imperial Sixth Army, known as 'The Cutters'," he said, automatically. "And you, soldier?"

"Princess-Minor Felipe Daless," she told him. He did not know enough about the Commonwealth hierarchy to say whether 'princess-minor' was a great deal, or just fine words. "Sergeant Varmen, word has come back that our Grand Army has scattered your people, killed a great many. They are hunting the survivors even now. Our little conflict here is being repeated a dozen times, just a few miles away. So the army that will find us here will not be flying the black-and-yellow."

"Sounds like you've got nothing to lose, then," he said. She was caught unawares by it, staring.

"Doesn't that bother you?" she pressed.

*Pellrec is dying. Even now he may be dying.* "Not my command, Princess Daless. *This* is my command. Your man going to fight me or not?"

“We can’t let you go,” she said. He sieved for genuine regret and found it there. “I’m sorry. We are at war.”

“What can you give me?” he asked, using honesty as a weapon, taking advantage of a better nature he knew was in there. *And if this were reversed? No Imperial officer would think twice before killing anyone pulling this kind of trick.*

“A day’s grace,” she said. “After all, our numbers will only increase. I shall take your challenge, Sergeant Varmen. You are an extraordinary man of your kinden.”

It tasted like victory, even if it was nothing of the sort. The fact that Pellrec, that all of them, would die in any event, win or lose, did not impact on him. Instead he just knew that the surgeon would still have time.

“Bring it on,” he said.

“You have called out a formal challenge, have you not?” she asked him. “Do you not wish to prepare yourself before the duel?”

He almost said no, before realising that she was allowing him time for free. “Of course,” he said. “How long?”

“An hour would be fitting.” She was still trying to work him out, no doubt seeing wheels within wheels, when all that faced her was a simple soldier with an injured friend. At last she put a hand out to him, open and empty. He dropped halfway into his fighting stance, bringing his shield up, before he overrode the instinct. *Clasping hands, that’s right. Forgot they did that.* He levered his helmet off, feeling the cold air on his face.

“Human after all,” she said. “How easy it is to forget.” Her hand was still out, and he clasped, wrist to wrist, awkwardly.

“Amongst my people, an open hand means you’re about to kill someone,” he explained, meaning the energy of the Wasp sting that could sear out from the palm. Her hand, on the wrist of the gauntlet, was unfelt, weighing nothing.

“How sad,” she said, and stepped back. “One hour, Sergeant Varmen.”

*Just Varmen, Princess.* He felt a lot of things, just then: his anguish for Pellrec; his knowledge that he was extorting a grace from the Commonwealers that he was in no way entitled to; and his utter, earthy admiration of Felipe Daless.

He returned to his men, and Arken’s questioning look. “Going to be about an hour,” Varmen told him. “Then you and the lads will get some entertainment.”

“You know what you’re doing, sergeant,” Arken said, not quite making it a question.

*An hour.* He had not considered what he would do with himself for that hour. A glance told him the surgeon was still at work. He could not watch that because, in a small but keen way, he was a squeamish man. He could not watch butchers at their trade, even had it not been a friend under the knife. He took some scant comfort from the fact the surgeon *was* still working.

There was a sound, a choking gurgle. *Herbs are wearing off.* Varmen turned away, his stomach twitching. His gaze passed across the mutinous Fly-kindens, Arken’s dispirited medium infantry, the remaining sentinels still at their post.

“Stand down, lads,” he told the armoured men. “Take a rest.” He found he trusted Felipe Daless instinctively, which he really should not do. “Be easy,”

“Hold him! More sedative!” the surgeon snapped, and Pellrec groaned, with a raw edge to the sound. Varmen shuddered and stepped out into the open again.

*Nothing to do but wait.* How was the princess-minor spending her time? Some mindless ritual, no doubt. They were a superstitious lot, these Commonwealers. They believed in all sorts of nonsense and magic, but it had proved no answer for good battle order, automotives and artillery. He wondered now if it helped them in some other way. Just now he would subscribe to anything that simply helped calm the mind.

He carefully lowered himself to his knees. He could not sit in the armour, but it was padded out to let him kneel indefinitely. He thrust his sword into the earth. He would wait for her like that, and try not to hear the increasingly agonised sounds from behind him. He took up his helm, looking at the curve of his reflection in it. *Ugly-looking bastard. Wouldn't lend him a tin bar piece.*

A succession of bitter thoughts occupied his mind then: the argument with his father the last time he had returned to the family farm; a girl he had left in Volena; the time he had been in a rage, and killed an elderly slave with one blow – not something a Wasp should regret, but he had always felt it ignoble.

What time had gone by he could not have said, but when he looked up she was standing before him: Felipe Daless. She had an open-faced helm on now, and a breastplate, moulded in three bands that could slide over one another: breasts, ribs, navel. She had bracers and greaves. Little of it was metal: these Commonwealers were good with it, but sparing. Their armour was lacquered and shaped chitin, mostly, over horse-leather. They had a knack, though, to shine it up until the best pieces glowed with colour like mother-of-pearl. Her armour was like that, brilliant and shimmering. Varmen had seen such armour throw back the fire of a Wasp's sting without the wearer even feeling the warmth of it.

Against swords, however, it could not compare to Imperial steel.

"Time, is it?" he asked. She nodded.

"Go send for your champion then," he said, with faint hope.

"She stands before you," Daless told him.

"Thought she might." Varmen levered himself to his feet. *I knew it would be -- surely I did. Not my fault that we're the only kinden sane enough to keep our women for war. How're you going to get next year's soldiers, with this year's women all dead, sword in hand?* It was a strength of the Empire, of course, and a weakness shared by almost all its enemies, but he had never regretted it more than when Felipe Daless stood before him now in her gleaming mail.

To his eyes, a veteran's eyes, she looked small and young and brave.

"You are not like the rest of your kinden," she observed.

"Nothing special, me," he countered.

Pellrec screamed, a full-throated shriek of agony, erupting from nothing. Varmen did not flinch, just raised his helm to don it. In the moment before his world shrank to a slot, he saw her expression. She knew. In that instant she understood everything about him, why he was doing what he did, what he sought to gain.

She had only sympathy and understanding for him, as she drew her blade. It was one of the good old Commonwealer swords, that their best people carried: four feet long, slender and arrow-straight, but half of the length was hilt, making it almost something like a spear. She gripped it with both hands, but he knew it would be light enough to swing with one, if she needed.

He shrugged, settling his pauldrons properly, took up shield and sword, and nodded.

She was at him, and Pellrec screamed again at the same time, so that it seemed the sound came from her mouth as she leapt. Her wings flashed and flared from her back, feet leaving the ground even as her blade came for him. He swayed slightly, letting the tip draw a line in the paint of his breastplate. His mind followed the arc of her flight even if his eyes could not. His shield took the next blow, raised sightlessly to shadow her, and the third struck his shoulder as he turned, glancing off the metal. His sword was already lunging for where he guessed she'd be, but he had misjudged that. She was a flicker of movement off to his left, getting under his guard. He heard her real voice then, a triumphant yell as her blade scythed at his head.

It struck. There was no way he could have ducked it. All he had time for was to hunch his shoulders and cant his head away from the blow. He felt the impact like a punch in the head, but the cutting edge of her blade slid from the curve of his helmet, clipped the top and was clear.

He took two steps back and found her again. She was staring, wide-eyed. *She has never fought a sentinel before.* He felt sorry for her, then, as though he was cheating somehow. *Not just armour, girl, not the waste-of-time tinpot stuff the light airborne wear; not even the plate and chain that Arken's people slog about in. This is padding under leather under fine-link four-way chain under double-thickness plate that the best Beetle-kindens smiths forged to my every measurement, and nobody who's not trained for it could even walk in it.*

He went for her. He had to, cutting in under his own shield to gut her. It helped her get over her surprise. Her wings flashed her back, ten feet out of reach. He could wait. It wasn't as though she was going anywhere.

She should have started running rings just then, making him turn, taking advantage of his narrow view, but she could not see the world as he saw it. She attacked head on. Her wings opened again, a brief sheen in the air that launched her at him. Her sword was a blur in both hands. He braced behind his shield.

He did not see the blows, just felt the impact. The shield, moved to his best guess, took two. One slammed him in the side, denting breast and back where they came together. A fourth struck the plates of his upper arm, barely hard enough to make a mark. The strikes told him where she was as well as eyes could have done. His sword was swifter than she thought, not quite as swift as she was. Dragonfly-kindens were fast like that. He felt the faintest scrape where he had nicked some part of her own mail and, even as she fell back her blade scored a fifth strike on him, bounding back from one of his greaves. He stepped back again and let his eye-slit find her.

Her face was very set. She had appreciated the rules of the game now. *Not first hit, Princess, not first blood even. You have to hit me until this skin of steel gives way.*

Varmen was a strong man made stronger by the weight of metal he had lived with these ten years. He would only have to hit her once.

Her wings fluttered, shimmers of light and motion, there for a moment, now gone. She had not moved. She kept her sword between them but would not come to him. *Fair enough. My turn, I reckon.*

He set himself to motion. There was an art to fighting in full mail that was every bit as hard-learned as all her duelling fancy. It was a study in momentum and inertia, and

Varmen had spent years mastering it. He was slow when he started moving, and her wings fluttered again, sword held out towards him, but then he was hitting his speed, and she saw that he would slam straight through any parry she put up. He drove in with sword and shield, always leading with the blade, great cleaving strokes that never stopped, just curved on into more and more blows at her. Oh, it was no difficulty for her to step or fly out of the way, but he made her move. He drove her back and forth like a wind playing with a leaf. Each small move of his birthed a greater move of hers. He was a miracle of economy. She attacked back, sometimes, saw where his strike was going and laid her sword on him, on the shoulder, on the side, on his shield as it met her ripostes even as she made them. He could see it in her face, though. He did not need to dance. She could not cut through his steel. He would run her, and run her, until she had no more run left in her. Already she was backing against the trees. He was driving her like an animal.

She shrieked at him and exploded in a blurred flurry of blows. He took a solid whack across the helm, three on the shield again, one into the mail where his neck met his shoulder. If that had been her strongest, she might have set him back with that, but her strength was leaching from her, step by step, as he forced her ahead of him. There would be a bruise, of course, but there and then he did not even slow for her.

She was over his head, wings a blue and green blur. He turned with her, felt his sword clip something. She was within the view of his eye-slit once more, sword drawn back.

She stabbed. With all that length of sword she stabbed for his eyes. It was a good move, but he tilted his head as the lunge came in and the blade grated along the side of his helm, and accomplished nothing. She was within his sword's reach, was close enough almost, to embrace. The edge of his shield smashed across her face, shattering part of her helm and dropping her to the floor.

Her sword had spun from her hands, she crouched before him, bloody-mouthed and defiant, and he held his blade point-down over her.

There had been a sound, these last minutes, and only he had not noted it. Her head snapped up to look at something, and he saw that she, too, had been so taken with the fight she had missed it.

The ugly box-shape of the Imperial helicopter thundered overhead a moment later, impossible to ignore now. As it passed over the trees, he saw the glint of what they threw from its belly, and the fire a moment later, grenades shivering tree-trunks and shrapnelling through the forest. Then there were men in the air, not the nimble Commonwealers but the good old familiar sight of the light airborne: Wasp-kind men in their stripped-down armour, landing all around with sting-fire and the sword.

Felipe Daless was still crouching before him, her face a mask of battered bitterness. Varmen lowered his sword. She could not see his expression, but she saw his helm nod, once. She took flight, not up but straight away, into the trees. *I am too soft*, he knew, but *It would not have sat well, silencing that voice*.

He turned back to the crashed flying machine. There were already a couple of the airborne there, one of them with lieutenant's insignia. Varmen trudged over, feeling abruptly exhausted, as he always did when the fighting spirit bled away from him.

He saw Tserro there, and Arken. They had sour looks on them, and he asked, "What's the stone in your shoe? They came, didn't they? We're rescued."



“If you can call it that,” Arken said sullenly, and then, when Varmen did not see, “It’s not our people, sergeant, not the Sixth. These bastards are the Gears, the pissing *Second*.”

The main body of the Imperial Sixth had been caught unawares by the Grand Army of the Commonweal and almost completely wiped out, save for such detachments as had been sent away for other duties. It was the Commonweal’s only significant victory of the war, and the Sixth’s remnants, dug in and stubborn, held the Dragonflies long enough for Imperial relief forces to put the Commonwealers to flight.

Pellrec survived his wound, and of matters such as a dead Rekef lieutenant and the perfidy of Fly-kinde scouts nothing was every said. If the Rekef took any interest in the matter, Varmen never found out. He recommended Arken for sergeant, but nothing came of that, either. His superiors knew too well how much his recommendations were worth.

Pellrec would die later, outside Mian Lae, in what would turn out to be practically the last large engagement of the Twelve Year War. Varmen would survive to march on the Lowlands with the newly reconstituted Sixth, under General Praetor. All that was to come, though.

After the Second Army’s intervention, and after the subsequent brutal assault on every Commonweal village and position within ten miles of the helicopter crash, Varmen toured the slave markets. He had the time, while the Sixth was in shreds. He saw every female Dragonfly the Slave Corps had taken, every prisoner of war awaiting disposal or execution.

He never did find Felipe Daless.