

## Loyalties

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

It happened when Balkus was playing cards: just a touch, a murmur in his head, but he jerked to his feet by instinct - to attention, nearly - upsetting the table with a heedless knee to the complaints of his fellows. Artice, the little Fly-kinden woman, was in the air on the instant with a speed that belied her age.

"What? What is it?" she demanded. The other two players, a couple of trail-dusty Beetle artificers, scowled at the pair of them, but as Balkus was the biggest man there by some margin they set to picking up the cards and the coins without calling him on it.

"...Nothing...," Balkus said at last, but only after a minute of silence with his head cocked to one side, like a man listening for a far-off horn to call him to battle. "I'm tired of this game. You hold my stake."

The taverna was a temporary little affair, part of a seasonal tradertown that piled itself together like driftwood each summer within sight of the walls of Tark. The Ants of Tark had plenty money, and their city was a good place to acquire or be rid of any kind of human merchandise. Between the limitless appetites of the Spiderlands to the south, the factories of Helleron to the north, and the Empire's hungers to the north-east, the Tarkesh did well enough out of other peoples' misery.

Balkus stalked away from the gaming table. Artice was a little old thing, but she had a stern haughtiness to her, as befitted the major domo of a Spider-kindens Arista. The Fly woman would be able to look after herself, and if not there were a dozen bronze-skinned Kessen Ants sitting in shouting distance who had pledged their swords to Artice's mistress, just as Balkus had. He passed them on the way out: they ignored him and he ignored them. Even though they were all renegades, exiles from the city-states that had birthed them, there was no love lost between Ants of disparate heritages.

Balkus had been a man of Sarn once. He had that city's light brown skin and straight black hair, quite different from the worn-bronze hues of the Kessen men, or the fishbelly paleness of Tark. His chief distinguishing feature was his height. Ant-kindens were seldom much over five foot eight, but Balkus was a big, broad-shouldered man, an inch over six foot and brawny with it.

It had been a good eight years since he had turned his back on his home, choosing a life of solitude and silence over the constant mental buzz of a bustling Ant-kindens community. He had heard others say how quiet his home was: how the natives went about their errands without words, without greetings or farewells or excuses. Even in Sarn, which was more open to outsiders than most, foreigners had an uneasy time of it, surrounded by all that quietly busy silence.

*A lot they know*, Balkus told himself. Of course, if you were born to it, the city was full of noise, only the noise was all in your head. That mindlink, that universal Art of the Ant, meant that everyone was talking to everyone *all the time*, constantly passing on knowledge, orders, gossip and speculation, constantly reaffirming the boundaries between *us* and *them*.

It had been a long time since Balkus' head had played host to any thoughts but his own. But just then, just as he looked over his cards, there had come a touch of it, a whisper. His own people were near. There was no other possibility.

*They've come for me.* He was, he realised, keeping his own thoughts close, lest the least whiff of them end up letting his former compatriots know his whereabouts. He cast about, inside his head, hunting for that elusive trace.

*There.* Just a twitch of them, but he had the sense of at least two, probably three. It had been a long time since Balkus packed his bags, shouldered his army-issue nailbow, and turned his back on his ancestry, and since that day he had taken care to ply his mercenary trade up and down the Silk Road, far from the haunts of his people. In his imagination he had made a deal with them: *I won't rub your nose in the fact of my desertion, and you'll forget I was ever born.* Now it seemed that their memories were better than that.

The tradertown was a ragged, jumbled affair of shacks and tents congregating about a Tarkesh customs post and a spring of fresh water. Tark itself had a foreigners' quarter, but the Ant-kinde were not welcoming hosts and most merchant visitors preferred to spend as little time within their walls as possible. One never knew when the militia would suddenly decide to make an example of some luckless outsider, just to keep the rest in line. Balkus passed down the narrow, cluttered alleys of the place, surprisingly quiet for such a big man despite the hauberk of good Heleron mail he wore. His nailbow, a bulky, gleaming monster of a weapon loaded with a magazine of ten firepowder-charged bolts, hung from its strap, a comforting weight, but it would be sword work tonight, if they had come for him. This was private business and no sense alerting all the camp.

*Well, almost private.* The tradertown was crammed full of visitors and their wares: Scorpions from the deserts to the east, Beetles from Heleron to the north, Spiders and Fly-kinde from the south. Everywhere men and women were making deals, playing games, selling each other drink, singing and brawling in ways that would have horrified the Tarkesh, or Balkus' own people for that matter. He stalked between them, eyes skipping from face to face, looking for people who looked just like him.

And close. If their mind-speech was bleeding into his head then they couldn't be far.

*...Tarkesh will...*

He stopped. There it was. A voice in his mind as though the speaker was whispering in his ear. His hand was at his sword-hilt. He edged along the wall of a lop-sided hut, listening to the raucous babble from within, merchants betting and boasting and toasting their rivals' downfall. Someone had stoked up a fire out front, and amongst the huddle of figures warming themselves Balkus saw *them*.

Up to that point it could have been other renegades, just a pack of sell-swords that had cut their way loose from the familial ties. When he saw them he knew, though, recalling his first difficult year away from the all-pervasive company of his fellows. There were three of them, and they stood close together, angled away from each other to be ready for attack from all sides. *Straight out of the city gates to here,* Balkus thought, watching one of them talk to a tall Scorpion-kinde. They were all stocky, brown, their faces as similar to one another's, and to Balkus's own, as siblings'.

*Straight here,* he thought again, and considered his own recent career. Before hiring on with the Spider Arista, Giselle of the Artkaetien, he had been a month in Heleron, settling disputes in the fief wars. Before that he had been bodyguarding a slaver out in the Dryclaw, at one of the Scorpions' great trading and fighting assemblies. Hunters from home would have been led a merry chase, perhaps a fatal one. *There's not a chance that they could have made a line straight for me. Even I don't know where I'm going to be, half the time.*

He felt something leach from him, at the thought that he might not have to turn kinslayer just yet. Whether the feeling was disappointment or relief he did not bother to analyse.

He watched and waited, whilst the other Sarnesh concluded their business. Instead of following them off he gave it a count of twenty and sat down at the fire beside the Scorpion. The man - no, now he looked closer, the woman - was even taller than he was, and as broad across, but that was normal for their kind. She had curved blades of bone arcing over thumb and forefinger, and her jaw was a nightmare of jutting teeth. In the firelight her waxy, pale skin was faintly luminous.

"Drink?" Balkus held out a jar to her and she took it without question, first sniffing and then swigging. She was wearing a motley of Spider silks badly tailored to fit, but he saw she had chainmail beneath it. A merchant adventurer, then, no doubt peddling the loot from wherever her roving people had raided most recently.

"You've lost your little friends?" she asked him. Her eyes were small and suspicious, but they glinted with humour.

"I don't do clever or subtle," Balkus said frankly. "I'll give you money if you tell me what they want, and more money if you make sure word of me doesn't reach them. Fair?"

"Show me 'money'."

He held out a hand that mingled Heleron and Imperial coin.

She nodded happily. "The innocents want to attack Tark."

It was not what he had expected, and his face must have communicated this, because she laughed at him.

"There is one of their own - one of your own, no? Or perhaps not. One of their own, then. The Tarkesh have him. The children want to see if he can come out to play. I think their captured friend will have company soon."

Balkus smiled. "None of my business then," he said. "Not my problem."

"It's good that a man knows his business," said the Scorpion woman, accepting his bounty with a clink of coin. "May yours be sweet, friend."

"And yours."

Balkus set off back for Artice, finding that she had inexplicably lost his stake, but on her own account had fleeced the other players unmercifully. It was turning out to be an expensive night.

"I thought there was trouble, but it was nothing," he reported the next day.

Giselle, youngest daughter of the Aristoi family Arkaetien, nodded. "Well that's good. I do find trouble so bothersome." From her stance as the spoiled child she let him see the twinkle in her eye, letting him into her mockery of herself. "Artice thinks that matters amongst the Tarkesh will be sufficiently advanced that we should try a sally at their gates."

"An attack, lady," said Aulus, the leader of her Kessen bodyguards, "only defenders make sallies." He instantly wished that he hadn't spoken.

"What a shame," Giselle mused. "A perfectly lovely word shackled by military convention." She smiled at Balkus again. "But we have business in Tark, O cadre of mine. There's a caravan of these merchant types heading off there at midday. Artice will make sure everything is ready for us to take our place with it."

Which meant that Artice would be giving the orders, and the old Fly woman had a tongue like a rapier. Balkus decided this militated his giving his news now, so that the Kessen contingent could do the heavy work.

"Lady," he said, and immediately had Giselle's wide-eyed attention again.

"See to it, Artice," the Spider said, dismissing the Fly and the rest of her retinue with a wave of one slim hand. They shuffled out of her tent, a gorgeous thing of red and gold silk, leaving Giselle sitting cross-legged on her cushions and looking up at Balkus as though he was an entertaining private tutor.

The renegade Sarnesh lowered himself into a soldierly crouch, trying not to meet that blisteringly innocent gaze. He had worked for more than one Aristoi in the past, but they had all been cynical old hands at the game, with plots and stratagems at their finger-ends, their words and expressions, actions and thoughts, not one serving as a clue to the next. This Arkaetien commission was different. Giselle was young. Oh, Spiders always looked young, and always elegant and beautiful too, but Balkus reckoned Giselle was no more than sixteen, and on her first piece of official house business. She looked at everything not only as though it was utterly novel, but as though she found it delightful. She smiled a lot, and she even smiled at Balkus. When he dared look back at her, he saw infinite reserves of faith in his experience of the world.

*Even Spiders have to start somewhere*, he considered. The problem was that he strongly suspected that a lot of them never quite made it to their majority. Spider Aristoi played for the highest stakes, always. They had no place for the clumsy or the witless, or even the naive.

"Lady..." he started.

"Please Balkus, I do keep asking you to call me Giselle," she said. "I know Artice calls me 'lady', but she was my nurse and from her, believe me, it's anything but a term of respect. So, was this nothing you discovered last night more of a something after all?"

"No, not that, l- G-" Wrong-footed, he forced himself to a compromise. "Lady Giselle." Merriment was dancing all over her face, but he pressed on gamely. "I have to be blunt. I think you've been set up for a fall. I think someone back home has it in for you."

Instantly she was serious. "But what do you mean?"

"Your family, the Arkaetien - you have rivals there?"

"What would life be without rivals?" It was a Spider truism, but he saw from her expression that it was also true, and that she did.

"Lady Giselle, you're being sent into Tark, which believe me is far from the friendliest Ant city-state, and your retinue is a dozen Kessen mercenaries, led by Aulus the loud-mouth, and me, probably the only rogue Sarnesh they could find at short notice. If there'd been a fugitive criminal from Vek, no doubt he'd be along for the ride as well. This is not good company to go into Tark with. Ants hate Ants."

She nodded, frowning, a woman barely more than a child pretending to sagacity. "My aunt told me that it was time to learn about the Ant-kinde," she told him.

"Well you might learn more than you want, is what I'm saying."

"Do you suggest Artice and I go through their gates alone?" she asked him.

"Seriously," he told her, "if it weren't that you'd have to try and manage the goods alone, I'd say yes."

She regarded him for a moment, and then smiled, radiant. "I do not deserve this care, Balkus, but I am touched, truly."

"Just my job, is all."

"But you have not called me 'lady' through all your advice." She leant forward and caught his hand before he could draw it back. Her own were tiny in comparison, and exquisitely clean. "I have faith in you, Balkus. I trust to your ability to protect me. I must, what else have I? After all, you have been into Tark before, have you not, and left it."

"Three times," he said, aware he was not strengthening his case, but wanting to show it off anyway. "But I'll wager Aulus and his lot haven't."

"Then you and Artice will have to keen them in hand, Balkus." Abruptly she was sitting back, arms clasped about herself. "You may be right, for all that. I am far from the best-loved of my family and they may have planned this adventure to be the end of me." Her use of the childish term for the mercantile business they were about was wounding. "Still," she told him, all resolve now, "what else is there? And if I return, the matter accomplished despite it all, then perhaps I may find more acceptance there. I have seen the poor wretches forced from their families, trying to live as Aristoi in far cities, in darned robes. I would rather try, try against all the odds, and fail if I must. You Ant-kindens understand dying in battle, don't you? Well this is my battle."

"We understand it's better to live," Balkus muttered, but her fragile bravery had cut him, in places that he had thought too well armoured for hurt. That and the soft, fleeting touch of her hand, the slightly awestruck way she looked at him, had sparked all manner of thoughts unfitted for a mercenary to harbour for his employer. *Well just maybe we will get through Tark*, he decided, *and give the cursed Arkaetien something to chew on.*

This time he spotted them before his mind caught the echoes of their speech: the three Sarnesh, cloaked, walking in a defensible little clump between wagons and automotives. Of course, his three countrymen were headed to Tark as well, for their rescue or whatever it was that they planned. Giselle travelled in style: A low, flat-backed beetle painted in gold and red and purple bore her howdah, with Artice sitting behind the beast's head to keep it steady. The Kessen marched uncomplainingly behind, and Balkus fit in where he wanted, ranging ahead and back and keeping an eye out.

He considered ignoring them, but he reckoned that they would have noticed him before the caravan struck Tark, whether by spotting his face or feeling his mind. *Best to bring matters to a head then.* He placed himself ahead of the tireless insect, in Giselle's view, his nailbow tilted over one shoulder.

It took only a moment, although he had not sent any intentional thought their way. Then all three were glaring at him, stopped in their tracks and expecting him to stop and await their confrontation. He walked straight by them, and they were put to an undignified scrabble to keep level with him. Their eyes were raw hatred: two men and a woman who could be his brothers and sister.

*Renegade*, came the thought in his head, and *Traitor*, *Deserter*, from the others.

*And what about yourselves?* he sent back, sublimely unconcerned. *Sarnesh secret service, are you? Doing a good job. Took me almost two seconds to spot you.* It was a good thought, actually. If they were spies, agents of the city, they were lamentably bad at it. They were as out-of-place and clumsy as he had been when he first fled Sarn.

*You are Balkus*, one of them came out with, which surprised him, although he kept his face and tread even.

*Didn't realise the old place missed me so much*, he said.

*The weapon you stole is worth more*, the woman spat. He was starting to match voices to faces now, for all that, to an outsider, the faces would be practically identical.

*Well you can tell them back in Sarn that I'm keeping it in good order. Don't make me demonstrate just how good*, he told them, waiting for the predictable response. There were swords out on the instant, three short military blades clearing their scabbards. Balkus himself just

regarded them, hearing the comforting sound of the Kessen drawing their own weapons, and knew that each of the Sarnesh would have a crossbow trained on them.

"Is there some difficulty, Balkus?" As the beetle was reined to a halt, Giselle parted her curtains and looked out. Her imperious gaze passed over the belligerent Sarnesh trio and made them shuffle their feet, abruptly ridiculous.

"Just giving some fellow countrymen directions, Lady Giselle," he replied easily. "They're a long way from home, see, and they don't know how things work around here."

*Traitor, just you wait,* one of the men hissed in his mind.

*This isn't the field of battle, you pack of clowns,* Balkus sent back contemptuously. *This is real life. Anyone here, anyone in Tark, could be on my side. You have only each other. How you expect to spring this mate of yours, I'll never know.* Even before they could respond he put in, *And yes, I know all about that. I may or may not tell the Tarkesh, depending. Now clear off or, I swear, I'll have you sold to Tark as privy-cleaners. This is my playground, children, not yours.*

He could see in their faces, and feel in the space between all four of their minds, their bitterness and frustration, but also their fear, their uncertainty. He had it absolutely right. They were far beyond anything they knew and he was being cruel to taunt them, but he found he enjoyed it a great deal and regretted none of it. They slunk off towards the caravan's rear in a welter of half-formed threats and Artice started the beast of burden up with a flick of reins.

Aulus the Kessen picked up his pace to get within ten feet of Balkus, about the closest he ever cared to come. "They going to be a problem?" he grunted.

"If they are, we'll kill them." Balkus told the man. He caught a glimpse of Giselle's expression as she let the howdah's curtain fall, and it was much as said, 'My hero'. He considered how he had looked, standing there, facing off three armed Ants without even reaching for his sword, and had to conclude that he had been pretty heroic, at that.

It was late in the day before they reached the Tarkesh walls, and the gates had closed already, working less to a timetable and more to the Tarkesh's wish to make all foreign visitors understand just who was in command. Magically, the tradertown reassembled itself in all its shabby glories around the gate. There would be a very different mood tonight, though, with none of the liberties of earlier. The Tarkesh liked order and quiet, like all Ant-kindens, and there would be a detachment of soldiers amongst the traders, enforcing laws and, no doubt, taking bribes. It was not that the Tarkesh were corruptible. Their duty to their city was ironclad. Any bribes would find their way to the city's coffers, and the Tarkesh Royal Court would decide what preferential treatment, if any, would result.

Balkus found that, like it or not, he was keeping an eye on the other Sarnesh. It was always possible that they would have a go at killing him, for no other reason than that he had walked away from what they held so dear. Artice had criticised him about bringing trouble down on her mistress.

"The opposite," he had told the Fly. "They'd have known I was there soon enough, and then they'd start thinking about how to get me. Facing them down, showing them I'm not alone here, should make them think twice."

The old woman obviously knew enough about Ants to see the sense in that.

He kept his mind open after that, once Giselle's tent was set. Whilst Aulus and his soldiers jostled elbows to give their employer appropriate space amongst the traders and the travellers, Balkus patrolled, loaded nailbow slung ready to hand, and felt for the echoes of three Sarnesh inexperienced at hiding their thoughts.

Sure enough he sensed them whilst a few turns away from Giselle's tent. He took quick stock of his surroundings, choosing as his battlefield the space outside the camp of a Beetle merchant, some prosperous Heleron man with beasts and stock aplenty, and guards to match.

The three Sarnesh were doing their absolute best to be stealthy, creeping up on him from three directions with not even a clink of armour, but they were far from home and from the things they knew, so they could not help sending one another constant thoughts of reassurance and coordination, and he felt the echo of them, enough to know exactly where they were. They had never had to fight Ants of their own city before, whereas renegades like Balkus learned to shield their minds.

He turned on his heel, the nailbow levelled, stepping back until he knew he could have shot all three through the canvas they were using as cover. *Come on out*, he sent to them. *You're so bad at this I'm amazed you're still alive.*

That brought them out, the three stubborn, sullen Ant-kindens, and they came out with drawn blades, moving for him swiftly even as he brought the nailbow up.

The nailbow had been the key, of course: a man with a nailbow on your doorstep attracts attention. The merchant's guards, all Beetle-kindens mercenaries, were bundling out of the man's tent even as Balkus prepared to shoot: four men with crossbows directed at the would-be combatants, and a couple at the back who had been caught off-guard and were frantically tensioning the strings on their own bows.

"Hold!" the Beetle merchant himself shouted out. To his credit he had a weighty mace in his hand and a leather cuirass beneath his open robe. "You take your stupidity elsewhere!"

The Sarnesh had stopped, bewildered at the response, scowling at the crossbows. Balkus rested his nailbow on his shoulder, a comfortingly familiar burden.

The Beetle glowered at all concerned, including the slackest of his guards. "I'll have the lot of you Ant bastards shot before you bring the Tarkesh down on us, or d'you think they wouldn't care, that you're brawling at their gates? They won't care whether I'm involved either, before they confiscate my stock and haul me off to their cells, so I'll forestall the matter by presenting them with some dead Sarnesh and see if that makes them any happier."

"I was just walking," Balkus said mildly, looking only at the Sarnesh.

"Well you go walk somewhere else," the Beetle spat. "I don't care if they're rogues and you're a loyalist, or the other way round, or what. You just take your trouble away from my door."

"Actually I'm signed on with the Arkaetien," Balkus said nonchalantly.

The merchant made a face at that, but the Spider house was name enough to conjure with that there was a distinct shifting of attention amongst the guards, crossbows inching over towards the three Sarnesh loyalists.

*You see, you know nothing*, Balkus told them. *Trouble me or my employer again and you're dead. And if anything should happen to befall me, don't think you won't be the very first that my employer and her Tarkesh friends, will come looking for. Don't make me prove it. Now go.*

Their exchange was silent to the Beetles, who only saw the three Ants twitch, teeth baring in impotent fury, and then slink off, sheathing blades, stalking away like whipped beasts.

That night Giselle wanted to talk to him. Lounging on her cushions, sipping carefully at a bowl of mulled wine, she asked, "Was it hard to leave your home?"

He wondered if she was considering her own options if this venture failed. "Hard? No. It was going to happen sooner or later. I didn't fit in." Under her bright gaze he continued, "Most places you can rub along, if you're odd, but with them - with my people - they'll make you fit or force you out, one or the other."

"But your family, your city... they say Ants are so very close. How did you manage alone?"

"So close? Too close, like lodging ten to a room, which I've also done, and I can't recommend it. No privacy, not a moment to yourself, everyone always knowing your business. Oh I won't say it wasn't hard, to make my own way, but I'd have run mad, otherwise. There was just no place for me there the way I was, the way I am."

"But even now, with those Sarnesh you met...?"

Balkus shrugged. "There's like a list engraved in the minds of every Sarnesh, a list of those that have left their posts. You hear about renegades like me being hunted down, often." He was trying on an air of rugged unconcern which he felt was going down well. "That's why I came out east. Not far enough, obviously. But they're not here for me. They're after some clown the Tarkesh have got hold of, here for a rescue. They'll get themselves killed and that's an end to it. If they try me again, I'll cut their throats myself."

She sipped at her wine again, and he thought she looked concerned for him. "But are they not your kin, even so?" she enquired. "Would you truly see them dead, cast them off?"

Balkus wondered again if it were really his family she was thinking of, or her own. "Oh, Lady Giselle," he told her, heartfelt, "if they could do it without endangering their mission, they'd make a corpse of me. That loyalty, that binds an Ant to his city, when it breaks, it *breaks*. Just knowing they're out there, I feel hate for them, I feel I need to empty their veins before I'm truly safe. If I wasn't bound to you, we'd be hunting each other with drawn blades in the dark, right now."

She stared at him, one hand to her mouth, the cooling wine forgotten. "Then I'm glad my aunt hired you," she said, almost a whisper.

The Tarkesh opened their gates at dawn, and there were sufficient of their soldiers in attendance to suggest they expected the traders to throw off their cloaks and reveal themselves as invaders. Each merchant and traveller was examined and questioned. Some, without obvious pattern, were turned away. Inching towards the gates, Balkus exchanged glances with Aulus of Kes. If trouble was in Giselle's future then trying to get a dozen foreign Ant-kinde into Tark was a gift of an opportunity for it.

Behind them, down the line, Balkus could see the three Sarnesh, cloaked like murderers, petitioning merchants up and down, trying to secure some manner of patronage that would get them through the gate. Apparently they had grasped the idea that to walk through as free Sarnesh would do nothing but get them killed or get them the cell next to whoever they were seeking to liberate. Once again he wondered that, if this prisoner was important enough to warrant the attempt, his old home had no better agents to send out than these three clueless fools.

Then the gate was looming, and he braced himself to take the backlash of the Arkaetien family's apparent attempt to strip itself of an unnecessary heir. *When it kicks off*, he told himself, *up onto the animal, let Aulus' lads draw blade and then it's her ladyship over my shoulder and I'm out of here*. After a thoughtful moment he added, *and hope they're rotten shots*, because a fair few of the Tarkesh had crossbow bolts nocked to the string.



Artice was already at the gate, though, and talking nineteen to the dozen, gesticulating at the gaily-coloured howdah, the stoic Kessen mercenaries. The Tarkesh were saying little back, but no doubt the words were running backwards and forwards across the city, from head to head. As Balkus and the rest drew closer he heard a little of the Fly woman's speech, all full of the flower of the Arkaetien, the honour of service to such a noble line, so that any Ant of a lesser city than Tark would surely cast aside their bonds of patriotic loyalty for the chance of such a cause. It was a good line, Balkus had to admit, and he could see money changing hands too, a sign of value the Arkaetien continued to place on the friendship of the Ants of Tark. By the time Balkus himself reached the gate the regard the guards gave him had gone from open loathing to amused contempt, which might hurt feelings but got surprisingly few people killed.

In a flurry of wings Artice resumed her seat before the howdah, but she leant down to Balkus long enough to say, "Looks like I'm good at more than taking your money, eh?"

The business that the Arkaetien had sent Giselle to Tark after was a little forced recruitment. Tark was always a grand market for slaves. The Tarkesh themselves were keen slavers, more than most Ant-kinde and a great deal more than Balkus' Sarnesh kin, who had given up the trade. More than that, though, the city was conveniently situated in the south-east of the Lowlands, easy travel up the Silk Road from the Spiderlands for buyers like Giselle, easier still for the Scorpion-kinde who came out of the Dryclaw with their wretched strings of captives. Helleron factory-owners came down to buy up cheap labour, who they would set free under a crushing burden of debt to be their slaves still in all but name. In recent years there were even the helmed, arrogant Slave Corps of the Wasp Empire, who rode in with the Scorpion caravans, eager to feed their great nation's inexhaustible hunger for human blood and sweat. It was a grim trade, and Balkus still found the thought of it distasteful, but a mercenary could not be too choosy and Spider-kinde paid better than anyone.

First they went to the Arkaetien's townhouse in the Foreigner's Quarter, which was as stark as any Ant-kinde hostelry on the outside, but hung with silks and tapestries within, strung with brass lamps and gaudy with frescos. While Aulus and his men installed themselves Giselle decided that she would go and see what the market had to offer, and took Balkus and Artice as her escort. When Aulus wanted to send some of his men she pointed out that, under the heavy hand of Ant law, there would be little enough trouble from outsiders, and if the Tarkesh themselves took exception to her then Aulus' little band would be of no use whatsoever.

The stock on display was a mixture, more quantity than quality. True there was a fair selection of skilled Beetles and Fly-kinde, mostly debtors from Helleron or Merro or arrests from Tark's own Foreigner's Quarter. There were enough Scorpion-kinde there to lower prices, losers in the clan struggles of the Dryclaw, but Giselle looked over them carefully, obviously considering bidding for a lot. Scorpions were popular slaves in the Spiderlands: give them work to do that required casual violence and they were more eager than freemen of any other kinde.

There were Wasp Slave-corps soldiers selling, which was new to Balkus. It looked as though their colossal war against the northern Commonweal had finally produced an excess crop, for there were Dragonfly and Grasshopper-kinde slaves aplenty, and even a few Mantids bound and shackled, destined for deaths in some fighting pit somewhere. Giselle paused near one, watching the sharp-featured woman spit and snarl, arm-spines flexing against her bonds. Beyond the Commonweal imports were the pens of children, a bumper crop this year it seemed. Child slaves were not the most lucrative, but they sold to certain discerning markets, the kindest of which was to guilds of professional slave trainers who would teach them skills and sell them at a profit. Other fates awaited the less lucky.

Beyond them there was a great morass of those who had nothing to recommend them save a full complement of limbs. A rabble brought in by slavers of all kinds, here were captives from Scorpion raids, luckless imperial deserters, the wretched poor sold by their creditors, fugitives from Spiderlands politics. Balkus looked over them with as dispassionate an eye as he could. They were held crammed together, not worth any space in which to display the talents they did not have. They stank, and flies hovered and buzzed about them in clouds. Balkus glanced at Giselle, and thought he saw her flinch from this morass of failed humanity. *Not lost to the Spiderlands yet*, he thought, and then he spotted his mark.

Amongst this assembly of the hopeless he would have missed the man, save for the feel of his mind: a solitary Sarnesh Ant, his face swollen and mottled with bruising, stuffed into a cage with a dozen other captives. The only Sarnesh there, though, and just by casting his thoughts out Balkus knew that to be true. The man, therefore, that the three clowns were here for.

That made him frown: if this man was important enough to warrant a rescue, why would the Tarkesh sell him on as a slave? If he was a spy, an agent, then surely they would have tortured his wits out of him and then disposed of him, too dangerous to let all that knowledge loose. *Unless they don't know who he is*. But it didn't sit right. Something was missing from the picture.

He met the imprisoned Ant's gaze, and heard in his mind a spitting noise. It was all the captive would spare for him.

By that time Giselle was done. Abruptly she turned from the ranks of cages, the assembled stock in trade of the Tarkesh slave markets. "Enough," she said, her voice tight. "I've seen enough."

Of course she had lived with slaves all her life, but house slaves to the Aristoi lived lives that middling merchants of Helleron might envy, surrounded by wealth and privilege and beauty, and lowly only in that their masters and mistresses were so lofty. Balkus knew that there were fleshpits like this in the Spiderlands, that there were slaves sent to die in mines, in sport-fights, in factories, but the Aristoi did not need to see such things in person. They had other slaves who deal with the unpleasantness for them. What was slavery for, but to add so many levels between the great ones and the harsh realities of life? Giselle hid her thoughts well, barely letting them spill out on her face at all, but Balkus was sure that this was her first introduction to the true foundations of her culture.

He took her arm and led her from the place, feeling the captured Sarnesh thinking hate at the back of his head all the way.

That night Giselle asked for him again, in her rooms at the Arkaetien townhouse. When he entered, Artice was just lighting the last of a scattering of candles that filled the air with a subtle, dreamy scent. The Fly gave him a disdainful look before retreating from the chamber, drawing the curtain across the doorway.

"Lady Giselle?" Balkus asked. She looked uncertain, withdrawn, sitting cross-legged on her bed.

"I wanted someone to drink with me," she told him solemnly. "I feel I have learnt a great deal here in Tark, even on my first day. Back home I would have cousins, peers, to confer with, entertainers and servants to take my mind from troubling thoughts. Here I have Artice, and I have you. Drink with me, Balkus."

There were two bowls and a couple of full jars on the floor, and she slipped down from the bed to them, deftly pouring out two measures. Balkus stood just inside the doorway,

awkwardly, and Giselle rose lithely to her feet, a bowl in each hand and not a drop spilled. After that it would have been a discourtesy not to take one from her and drain it. The wine was thick, sweet, mingled with honeydew and cinnamon, a good deal finer than the best draft his purse had ever bought.

She had a hand to her mouth, failing to hide a smile. "Is that how soldiers drink?" she asked him. He saw belatedly that she had politely sipped at hers.

"I'm not a soldier any more, lady Giselle," he said. The aftertaste of the wine was warm and rich enough that he could not help glancing at the jar, and Giselle sat gracefully straight down with the elegance of her kinden, not even an arm to steady herself.

"Sit, Balkus. If you're not a soldier then you needn't be on parade." Her look at him was all mischief. "Unless you'd prefer that." As he began to lower himself she sighed with mock-exasperation. "At least take off your armour!"

"My armour?"

"I promise I won't attack you, Balkus, and I doubt the Tarkesh will choose tonight to declare war on the Arkaetien," she told him.

Feeling foolish, he reached for the buckles at his side, and she said, "Aulus' men have mail that fastens at the back. Why not you, Balkus?"

"Aulus has the mail his city issued him with. In an Ant city there's always another man to tie your shoelaces for you. I had to get by alone." He reached for the buckles once more but she had sprung up again, seeing a new game.

"Let me! I want to see if I can do it."

"Ah..."

"No, I insist," she said sternly, and a moment later was virtually in his armpit, working at the clasps and no doubt ruining the nails that Artice carefully painted each morning.

"Lady Giselle, I'm not sure this is right," Balkus said, feeling one buckle surrender to her fumbling. She giggled, slipping round his back as she pulled at the next, making him turn round and round as she fought with the straps. "Look, it doesn't..." he started, and, "Not like that..." as she yanked it tighter by mistake, but she would not give in, and he ended up holding his arms patiently over his head until, more by luck than judgment, she had the mail undone all down one side, and he shrugged it off. She stared wide-eyed at his stained, stitched arming jacket.

"You have armour *under* your armour!" she declared. "Is there another layer beneath that? Is there actually a man in there at all?" She reached for the nearest clasp and he took her wrist, more forcefully than he had meant.

"This isn't right," he told her. "You're my employer."

She put a hand about his, holding his grip closed. For a moment she said nothing, seeming to steel herself. "I don't want to be your employer, not tonight."

"Then what do you want?" he asked slowly, suspiciously.

"I want to learn about Ant-kindens, like I was told." She brought her lips to her trapped wrist and kissed his fingers lightly.

"I don't..."

"Do you want me to dismiss you, just for this night, and re-engage you in the morning? Would I have to go that far, to strip you of your hired man's propriety?" she asked. Her free hand touched his cheek, flinching a moment at the coarse stubble. "It's lonely, amongst the Aristoi."

Slowly he released her arm. *This is a test, a trap, a something.* Her waist was nearly slender enough for him to close his hands about it. Her expression was all things: fear, eagerness,

breathless excitement, the rich girl playing in the gutter, the child of deceit grasping for something solid.

He picked her up effortlessly, as though she weighed nothing, and laid her down on the bed.

Later that night, and feeling extremely full of himself, he found himself on the streets of Tark. It was nothing he'd usually do, in a hostile Ant city-state, but just then he was feeling invulnerable, ready to take on the entire Tarkesh army. He strode through their streets as though he had just won them in a game of cards, and the Tarkesh watchmen stepped to one side without challenging him. He was surrounded by an aura of fortune and favour.

The very fine wine indeed had been freely flowing, leaving his head comfortably smoky, and he decided that the only thing for a good son of Sarn to do in these circumstances was go tell his kin how well he was doing. He meandered for the main gate, his mind fumbling into the ether for them. As he had suspected he found them as he reached the wall. They had been importuning merchants and travelers all day, and nobody had been fool enough to try and get them into the city.

*What do you want, traitor?* one of them hissed into his mind.

*Oh well, if you're going to call me names, maybe you don't want my news,* he sang out to them, leaning against the wall. The Tarkesh sentries eyed him suspiciously, in case he tried to open the gates to let in an invading army of three.

They did not answer that, and he felt their truculent silence like a physical thing, as gnarled and hard as a walnut shell inside his brain.

*Don't be sore,* he told them admonishingly. *I met your mate today, matey that you're after.*

He sensed them hurriedly conferring, and then: *He lives?*

*Oh just, just about, last I saw. Tarkesh gave him a right going over, though. I hope you're not after him for his looks, is all I can say. Shame you can't get in, really. I don't think they were asking much for him. Just a handful of coin, and he's yours. Pity, really, how you're on the wrong side of the wall, and all.*

They had no words for that, but a wave of loathing rolled over him, failing to pierce the armour of alcohol and satiation that he was encased in.

*I mean, the more I think of you clowns, the gladder I am I went,* he told them expansively. *Oh sure, it's not easy at first, the silence and all, but when I see the fools I left behind... Look at you! Sarn sent you to get matey there, did it? Royal Court gave you your top secret orders? 'You're the best we have, don't fail us!' Look at you! You utter bag of shambles, the lot of you. I'd not send you to get water from the well, let alone mount a rescue. Sarn must be on its last legs, is all I can say. I got out at the right time.*

He waited for the arrows of their despite, but there was nothing, no insults, no taunts. Instead the timbre of their minds had changed to something less angry, more desperate, almost ashamed.

He frowned, trying to make sense of it. *What do you say to that, eh?* he assayed, hoping for a vitriolic comeback, but still they just drew into themselves, not even conferring. Their minds shrank from him, and he tried to think round it, to understand why.

*Eh?* he prodded again, but the fun was fast going out of it. Abruptly he felt the chill of the night air, sobriety leaching into him through his arming jacket, that was still open down one side.

*They didn't send you, did they?* he hazarded, and he knew, just from the change in the silence, that he was right.

*They...* The one word, from one of them, and the others trying to shut the speaker up, but she – Balkus guessed it was she, anyway – pressed on. *They will have sent us, if we retrieve him. If we go back to Sarn with him, then... how can they not acknowledge that it was Sarn's will?*

What bit deepest was that the words were forced from her not because she was justifying herself, but because she was defending the decisions of her city against his accusations of incompetence. Of course Sarn would not send three clueless fools to do its work.

*And if you don't rescue him...* He did not need to complete the thought. If Sarn had not sent them, then they were renegade, as renegade as he was. Maybe the city would take them back, if they returned as rescuing heroes. Otherwise, well, there was only one remedy for disobedience, as Balkus well knew.

*I don't see what's so special about your mate in here,* he grumbled, trying to recapture some of his earlier ire. *I mean, if he's so special, why hasn't Sarn sent some decent agents down here to get him. Why is it just you dumb bastards?*

They did not answer him, not directly, but in the echoes between them he caught the distant words, *Because we're his friends.*

The next day Giselle was out early, taking the Arkaetien purse to the markets to purchase her string of slaves to take back to the family. It was not that the Spiderlands was short of slaves, but the Spider Aristoi were fond of variety, and their constant aristocratic forays north allowed them to maintain their influence and prestige amongst the kinden of the Lowlands.

Her attitude to Balkus had been strange, but only in that it had not been awkward. She had smiled at him, a little shyly, but she had neither been overly familiar in front of the others nor stand-offish, just taking the whole thing in her stride. Balkus himself had been dreading either being dismissed, or being kept so close all day that he might as well have been on a leash. Spiders were an enlightened breed, he decided. *And tonight...*

At Giselle's command, Artice haggled with some of the Wasp Slave Corps until she was able to walk away with a string of dispirited Grasshoppers and Dragonflies for a good price. The Commonwealers were weary, footsore, ill-treated and far from home, and Balkus told himself that they would be better off as chattels of the Arkaetien than victims of the Wasp Empire. Then Giselle decided to get ambitious. She had Artice deal for the papers on a Mantis-kind, not even a Commonwealer but one of the fanatics from Felyal, a shipwrecked pirate and as murderous a woman as Balkus had ever seen. Still, it would be a rare coup for Giselle to bring home one of those that had declared themselves her people's direst enemies. She was bidding against a couple of imperials, though, who no doubt wanted the belligerent Mantis for some blood sports of theirs, and sums of money were named back and forth as the subject of all this commerce raged and snarled.

Balkus had halfway hoped that the Wasps would have larger purses, but in the end Artice beat them down, and the Mantis, loaded with chains, was given into their care.

There was no question of keeping the spine-armed woman waiting around, and Giselle gave Balkus two of Aulus' men, and instructions to take her purchases to the townhouse, where the Mantis would be secured in one of the cellars, and the rest held in the stables. Giselle herself

would see how far her remaining coin would stretch, and return home with Aulus and the others later on.

Balkus had no faith in the Kessen, when it came to Giselle's safety. Two of them had already been arrested by the Tarkesh, beaten soundly and then released again without comment or charge, just on general principles. Still, a direct order was not something he felt like quibbling with, and so he gave Artice a meaningful *you look after her* kind of a look, and set off back.

Getting the Mantis into the cellar, even chained hand and foot, was like getting a two inch cork into a one inch bottle, and it seemed to take until past noon before the Felyal woman was finally locked out of sight. Balkus, scratched and bruised, felt that he had earned a break by then, and told the two Kessen to keep an eye on the rest of the merchandise while he hunted out some wine. They glowered at him, but they knew he was Giselle's favourite and so obeyed with poor grace.

Not long after that, to his relief, Giselle and the rest of her entourage returned, with another string of slaves stumbling in their wake. Whilst Aulus stowed them, she met Balkus in the courtyard, smiling brightly.

"It's done," she declared. "Tomorrow we head for home, and I shall bask in the adoration of my family." She said it with a self-mocking humour that Balkus liked. "Dear Balkus, I owe you a great deal. My family may have thought they were testing me, by hiring you to bring me into Tark, but their underestimated your experience." Heedless of Artice's stony face she leant into the big Ant, hands on his mailed chest. "I have a present for you."

"Not necessary, really," he muttered, but she was having none of it.

"Come with me to the stables," she told him. "Come and see."

He knew before he had gone a dozen paces. He felt the man's mind. No barriers of stone could sever the link of Art that bound all kindred Ants together.

"You didn't," Balkus said hoarsely.

Giselle turned, frowning for a moment, and then her face lit up. "Of course. Of course you know, You must feel his mind there. I did it, Balkus, just for you. A slave of your own. Think of it as a bonus, O mercenary, if you must, though I'd rather you took it as a gift from me."

Hurrying now, Balkus marched into the stables, seeing all the slaves tied there, all the mournful Commonwealers, and the Beetles and Flies that Aulus had just brought in. In the midst of them all, like an island in a sea, was the Sarnesh, sitting with his back to the wall and his bruise-mottled head bowed. Still, even though the man's eyes were downcast, Balkus felt his mind glaring, thinking loathing at him with all the venom in the world.

*And you're mine*, Balkus told him. *She gave you to me, you surly bastard. How does that feel?* His heart was not quite in it, though.

Despair, a brief wave of it before the man clamped down on his thoughts. Balkus looked back to see Giselle still smiling, desperate for his approval, his nod.

"Thank you," he said heavily. He felt a little sick, in truth.

“Do anything you want with him. He’s yours,” she told him, certainly loud enough for the man to hear. “Kill him now, if you want. You could even torture him. You told me how much you hated your kin, how much they hate you. You could even sell him on, if you wanted. A life in the Empire, or the plaything of Scorpion-kinde, whatever you think would be a fit punishment for his city casting you out.”

She went inside then, leaving him staring at the bound Ant, his kin. Aulus and the Kessen guards were studying him thoughtfully, and he wondered what they would have done had Giselle presented them with a clutch of their former compatriots in lieu of wages.

He thought of the three failed rescuers, still waiting outside the city, too late now to go the easy way of simply purchasing their captured friend. What then? Would they trail Giselle all the way to Seldis? Would they try some doomed night assault against the Kessen crossbows? Would they end up themselves as slaves, only in that way reunited with their comrade. *Useless idiot children*, he told himself. *Coming out here, abandoning their city, and for what?*

It would be so easy to just cut the man’s throat now, for what satisfaction it would bring him. Probably it would even be a kindness.

Balkus turned and stomped off.

Giselle had called for him that night, and they had drunk a little wine but not lain together. She had observed him, as he withdrew into his own thoughts, into a mind violated by that distant spark that was the prisoner’s own consciousness. His conversation had been halting, awkward, but she had seemed to understand.

That night he dreamt of Sarn for the first time in years. Sarn, that had birthed him and rejected him, made him the ill-fitting cog in its great machine, the mind that did not mesh. Balkus, who had lived in a dozen cities in the Lowlands and beyond, rubbing shoulders with twenty different kinde, and the one place he could not go was home.

That night he dreamt he returned to Sarn, but he was invulnerable, and they all feared him. He dragged the Sarnesh slave behind him, took him to the great commodities exchange on nineteenth and fourth street. He dreamt he saw the people of Sarn gather, wide-eyed and impotent, as Balkus took out his knife.

He dreamt of killing the Sarnesh slave. He stabbed and hacked at him, cutting his throat, opening his guts, he dug the man’s eyes out, tore his tongue. He shot him down with an explosive glitter of nailbow bolts. He strangled him with bare hands. All the while the horrified populace watched on, powerless to prevent him enacting atrocity after atrocity on a man who never seemed to die.

“You see!” he shouted at them in his dream. “You can’t save him! You’re all cast out! You’re all renegades now, because you couldn’t save him!” The feeling, as he raved at them, as he browbeat them with his superiority, was as intensely sexual as his encounter with Giselle the previous night.

And the next morning, of course, they were ready to go: the servants of the house had Giselle's howdah, her beetle, and all the slaves assembled in the courtyard, even the double-chained Mantis. Balkus awoke to the clatter of armour as Aulus' people made ready.

He hurried down to join them, still buckling on his mail, arriving just in time to see Giselle ascend to her mount. The Sarnesh slave was a glowering, baleful presence behind Balkus' eyes. The dream returned to Balkus then, and he cuffed the slave viciously across the head with gauntleted hand, sending him reeling.

They reached the Tarkesh gate early enough that they could leave without much waiting, Artice smoothing the way out as she had the way in. Outside there was already a little tent-town of merchants who had come in too late the previous day to gain admittance. Slavers and provisioners, artificers, silk and spice dealers, they watched the progress of Giselle's entourage enviously, seeing those who had come through the Tarkesh mill unscathed and at a profit.

He felt them out there, of course, the three of them. They kept out of sight, but to Balkus the air stank of their frustrated rage and disappointment. Their comrade was tied on his own short line, close to the toiling beetle and within the cage of Aulus' guards. Worse, Balkus stood close by, nailbow on shoulder. The three would-be rescuers must have been plotting all night, back and forth and going mad with desperation. Here was the morning, though, and all their plans had come to naught. The best they could do was a suicide charge against Balkus and the Kessen.

He could sense them considering it, and he knew the slave was bitterly cautioning them against it. *Go home*, Balkus heard him tell them, but of course there was no going home for them. Without a rescue to turn their desertion into something more noble, they were cut loose. They would learn to live as Balkus lived, or they would die as their friend was doubtless going to die.

The dream in its entirety came back to Balkus then, all of it, all the blood and the triumph, the gloating and the satisfaction, all the way to the end of it.

At the dream's end, the Sarnesh, all the Sarnesh, had bowed to his logic. It was clear they were as cast-out as he, and so they left their city, each soldier and artisan, each merchant and bureaucrat. Even the queen and her tacticians had abandoned the Royal Court to trail off across the dusty farmland. Each one of them, from the lowliest to the greatest, was Balkus' equal in solitude, cut off from each other, cut off from home.

Balkus held himself steady, because he was *not* going to do it. He would rather knife the bastard now and let his body drag all the way to Seldis.

Because of course, in the dream, it had been no sop to his loneliness, to know that they were all alone as well. Ten thousand lonely strangers in the world took the edge off his own abandonment not one bit.

He sensed eyes on him, not the eyes of his estranged kin, but eyes he knew well. *Oh preserve us from those who can see through us better than we see ourselves.*

His knife was in his hand, and he felt them twitch, the slave and the three freemen, not at the sight, but at the feel of the hilt in Balkus' mind.



He did it before he could stop himself doing it, ducking under the reach of his own best interests. The knife flashed, severing the slave's rope, and he gave the man a shove with his free hand that sent the wretch sprawling.

Aulus shouted something, but there must have been a counter-signal because, when the Sarnesh slave ran, no crossbow bolt found him, nobody gave chase.

*This means nothing, traitor,* came the clear words in Balkus' head. *You cannot buy your way back by these means.*

*Shove your city up your arse,* was his round reply, but his heart wasn't in it. The murderous part of him was filling him with sour, baffled hate. *He was ours! How could you let him go? He was our revenge against the whole sanctimonious pack of them.* His knife-hand shook.

He looked round and saw that Giselle was leaning out of the howdah, looking down on him. Her expression was cool, slightly amused, and he knew that she could see every bitter, self-loathing thought as though she, too, partook of the great Sarnesh mind.

"Careless, Balkus," she said lightly. "But how your people will rejoice, no doubt." Driving her own knife in, the kind that is never seen, and never sheathed.

*They sent her out to understand Ant-kindens,* he thought bitterly, as he trudged on after the beetle before Aulus' mocking grin. *I reckon she's just about there.*