

**BLOOD
OF THE MANTIS**

ALSO BY
ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

SHADOWS OF THE APT 1
EMPIRE IN BLACK AND GOLD

SHADOWS OF THE APT 2
DRAGONFLY FALLING

SHADOWS OF THE APT 4
SALUTE THE DARK

BLOOD OF THE MANTIS



SHADOWS OF THE APT

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



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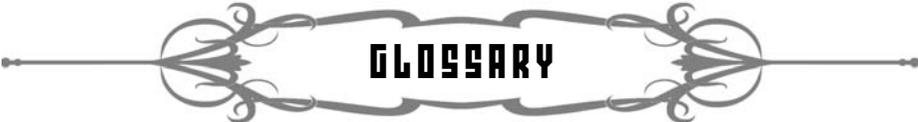
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*To Annie, without whom many things
would not have been possible*

A Map of the Empire
and lands south, showing the Exalsee





GLOSSARY

PEOPLE

STENWOLD MAKER—Beetle-kindens spymaster and statesman

CHEERWELL “CHE” MAKER—his niece

TISAMON—Mantis-kindens Weaponsmaster

TYNISA—his half-breed daughter, Weaponsmaster

ACHAEOS—Moth-kindens magician, Che’s lover

NERO—Fly-kindens artist

ARIANNA—Spider-kindens, Stenwold’s lover, former Rekef agent

BALKUS—Ant-kindens, agent of Stenwold, renegade from Sarn

SPERRA—Fly-kindens, agent of Stenwold

THALRIC—Wasp-kindens, former Rekef major, now renegade

TEORNIS OF THE ALDANRAEL—Spider-kindens Aristos

GAVED—Wasp-kindens mercenary

FELISE MIENN—Dragonfly-kindens duellist

DESTRACHIS—Spider-kindens doctor and companion of Felise Mienn

PAROPS—Tarkesh Ant-kindens soldier, now in exile

SALMA (PRINCE SALME DIEN)—Dragonfly-kindens nobleman

PRIZED OF DRAGONS—formerly Grief in Chains, Salma’s Butterfly-kindens lover

ALVDAN II—the Wasp Emperor

SEDA—Alvdan’s sister and one surviving relative

MAXIN—Wasp-kindens general in the Rekef

REINER—Wasp-kindens general in the Rekef

BRUGAN—Wasp-kindens general in the Rekef

MALKAN—Wasp-kindens, general of the Seventh Army (the “Winged Furies”)

UCTEBRI THE SARCAD—Mosquito-kindens magician, Alvdan’s slave

GJEVEVEY—Woodlouse-kindens, imperial advisor

DARIANDREPHOS (“DREPHOS”)—half-breed artificer and imperial colonel

TOTH0—half-breed artificer in Drephos’s cadre

KASZAAT—Bee-kindens artificer in Drephos's cadre
BIG GREYV—Mole Cricket-kindens artificer in Drephos's cadre

SCYLA—Spider-kindens spy, magician and thief
LINEO THADSPAR—Beetle-kindens Speaker for the Collegiate Assembly
PLIUS—foreign Ant-kindens in Sarn, Stenwold's agent
ODYSSA—Spider-kindens agent of the Rekef

PLACES

CAPITAS—capital city of the Wasp Empire
COLLEGIUM—Beetle-kindens city, home of the Great College
COMMONWEAL—the great Dragonfly state
THE DARAKYON—forest, formerly a Mantis hold, now haunted and avoided by all
FELYAL—Mantis-kindens hold
HELLERON—Beetle-kindens industrial city, conquered by the Empire
MYNA—Soldier Beetle-kindens city conquered by the Empire
SARN—Ant-kindens city allied to Collegium
SPIDERLANDS—Spider-kindens cities south of the Lowlands, believed rich and endless
SZAR—Bee-kindens city conquered by the Empire
TARK—Ant-kindens city conquered by the Empire
THARN—Moth-kindens hold near Helleron
VEK—Ant-kindens city-state hostile to Collegium

ORGANIZATIONS AND THINGS

THE ANCIENT LEAGUE—recent alliance of Moths and Mantids from the holds north of Sarn
ARCANUM—the Moth-kindens secret service
ASSEMBLY—the elected ruling body of Collegium, meeting in the Amphiophos
BATTLE OF THE RAILS—recent defeat of Sarnesh troops by the imperial Seventh Army
GREAT COLLEGE—in Collegium, the cultural heart of the Lowlands
MERCERS—Dragonfly-kindens order of knights errant
PROWESS FORUM—duelling society in Collegium
REKEF—the Wasp imperial secret service
SHADOW BOX—a mysterious artefact stolen from Collegium by Scyla

The Wasp Empire has commenced its great war against the Lowlands, capturing the cities of Tark and Helleron and defeating the Ant-kinde of Sarn in a pitched field battle. Now General Malkan's Seventh Army, the Winged Furies, waits for reinforcements before pressing on to Sarn itself. Malkan's victory over the Sarnesh was accomplished by a new weapon, the snapbow, devised by the former Lowlander Totbo, now an apprentice of the Empire's foremost artificer.

The Wasp Emperor, however, is distracted by the promises of his slave Uctebri, who has pledged him eternal life in return for the blood of the Emperor's sister, Seda, and possession of the mysterious Shadow Box, a relic containing the power of a twisted ritual that turned the forest Darakyon into its current haunted and lifeless state.

Amongst the imperial agents sent to retrieve the box from Collegium were the Wasp mercenary Gaved and the face-changing Spider spy Scyla, the latter of whom has stolen the box and intends to sell it for her own profit.

Stenwold Maker, meanwhile, faces the task of attempting to unite the squabbling Lowlander cities against the Wasp menace before the imperial armies advance once again. His worries are increased by the loss of his niece, last seen fighting alongside the Sarnesh. Unbeknownst to him she has escaped her imperial captors, released by her former friend Totbo, and carries with her the precious blueprints of the new snapbow.

Floating at a hundred feet above the clear waters of the Exalsee, Taki threw the gears of her orthopter's engine into place with a tug of a stubborn lever. She listened for the rhythm of the two wings as they suddenly picked up pace from a mere thunderous beating to a steady buzz. Satisfied, she leant on the stick, throwing the *Esca Volenti* into a low, wide and, above all, swift turn that the fixed-wing giving chase could never match. She caught the brief glitter of bolts shot from its rotary piercer, but they were far off now, no more than specks above the glitter of the waters.

Below her the two ships were still locked together, but she had no chance to determine whether the crew of the *Ruinous* was still putting up any resistance, or whether the pirates had already begun their looting.

She flicked the smoked-glass lenses over her goggles and looked toward the sun. Sure enough, the little heliopter that was her other worry was trying to hide there, now a stark silhouette against the sun's muted sepia glare. She continued executing her turn, dragging the stick back to gain height. The fixed-wing craft in pursuit had cast itself across the waters too fast for its own good, and was making a ponderous business of turning itself around, arcing high over the distinctive white-walled retreat of the distant isle of Sparis.

The heliopter suddenly stooped on her, cutting its twin rotors altogether to drop like a stone and then, as she sped past, spinning the left blades a second before the right ones in order to sling the machine onto her tail in a remarkable piece of flying skill. A moment later she felt the *Esca Volenti* shudder under the impact, but the heliopter was a tiny thing, barely more than a seat and an engine, and she had to trust that whatever crossbow it had mounted before the stick would miss any vital part of her own craft.

Thinking of her flier, Taki became aware of an ominous clicking from the engine. *Running down again—always at the worst possible moment!* The fixed-wing was now coming back, fast, swooping low over the waters and then pulling up hard, trying to barrel in for her. She climbed and climbed, so that, with his rotary letting loose in a blaze of wasted ammunition, he passed in a blur below her. They had both left the heliopter well behind. Whilst it could balance and hover on a gnat's ball, as the saying went, it had nothing for speed.

She had to wrap this up quickly and then get back to the ships, but at the same time she had to do something about the warning noises her engines were making. *Time to do the usual.*

Taki yanked the stick back one-handed, so that for a second the *Esca* was pointing straight at the apex of the sky, and then she flipped the craft on its wing tip and turned into a steep dive. She saw the fixed wing flash past her again, unable to compete. After all, the *Esca Volenti* was one of the nimblest machines over the Exalsee and she could even give dragonfly riders a run for their money on the turns.

Releasing a catch, she felt the wood and canvas of the flier shudder as the parachute unfurled. This was her second, so if she didn't close matters here before the engine ran down again, then it would mean a forced landing at best. Taki listened anxiously, above the rushing of the wind, and heard the clockwork mechanism that sat immediately behind her screaming with spinning gears as the drag of the chute rewound it. Sometimes, not often, that failed to happen, and at that point she really would have had a problem, for the world before her eyes now was already a sheer expanse of sea.

She pulled the stick back again, putting all her weight on it, and heard the struts and frame of the *Esca* give all their familiar protests. Another catch flicked and the chute was gone, billowing away into the ether, and the *Esca Volenti* levelled out over the Exalsee, no more than ten feet over the wave tips, speeding past the jutting Nine Fingers crags.

The flash of piercer bolts zipping past told her the fixed-wing had found her again, and she led it sideways in a turn easy enough for it to manage, banking left and right erratically to avoid its aim, until, and too late for the fixed-wing to avoid it, they were heading straight for the wooden side of the pirate vessel. . . . And then the fixed-wing's rotary was punching holes in its own ally, both above and below the waterline.

She pulled up, dancing past the white sweep of the sails, and a glance over her shoulder told her that the fixed-wing had flown wide of the ship's stern. The *Esca* could turn like nothing else in the air. Most orthopters around the Exalsee had four wings, some had two, but she had her secret: two wings and a little pair of clockwork halteres—drumstick-shaped limbs whose metronomic beating kept the flier under her control in even the steepest of arcs.

And now she was following the fixed-wing, which had slowed down to match her speed to accomplish the turn. She lined the *Esca* up directly behind it, with one hand on the trigger of her rotary piercer, the weapon that had so revolutionized air fighting over the last ten years. Like an infantry piercer it had four powder-charged barrels with spearlike bolts, but these discharged one at a time, not all together, rotating as they did so while the feeding gears pulled through a strip of gummed canvas that fed new bolts into the machine. It possessed the speed and power of a repeating ballista fitted neatly below the nose of her craft.

Bang-bang-bang, and the fixed-wing faltered in the air. A moment later it was smoking, the mineral oil in its fuel engine catching fire. She pulled out from behind it, seeing it dip lopsidedly toward the waves.

The helicopter was right there, over the ships, puttering toward her, and she saw the repeating crossbow loose and loose again, its bolts falling short at first, and then flying wide. It was jinking sideways, trying to throw her aim off, and she missed with half a dozen shots before one, by sheer chance more than skill, struck near the left rotor, sending the wooden blades flying into pieces. The little craft spun wildly for a moment, and she saw the Fly-kindens pilot make a jump for it, darting off under his own power and doubtless hoping she would not follow him.

Behind her a plume of fierce black smoke began to rise from the waters where the fixed-wing had crashed.

She took the *Esca* right over the two ships, and noted that there was still fighting on board the grappled *Ruinous*. Slinging her machine into another tight turn, she opened up with the rotary again, punching holes down the length of the pirate's decks. She had been trying for the foremast and, as she pulled out of her strafing dive, she saw it sag slightly against the stays. Down below there was confusion, and then the pirates, with their aircraft downed and their ship damaged, were fleeing from the *Ruinous* under archery from the surviving defenders, cutting their grappling lines and trying to get underway.

If she had been more certain of her engine or her remaining ammunition, Taki would have dogged them all the way to the shore, but, as it was, she kept them under shot until they were committed to flight and the *Ruinous* had built up steam once again, and then she coasted the *Esca Volenti* back down, hoping for a landing on the vessel's foredeck. She fumbled between her legs for her string of flags, finally finding the right signal, but had to make three further passes before an answering flag granting permission was flying from the *Ruinous* and they had cleared the deck sufficiently for her to land.

The *Esca Volenti*, coming in slowly and pitching back, with its wings beating furiously against its descent, almost managed to hover. It was a sharp divide between almost and actually, however, and she had to throw the control stick every which way to stop overshooting the deck and ending up in the sea. The blast of her wings buffeted every loose thing on deck before her, scattering papers and hats and baskets and anything else light over the side. Then the spring-loaded legs she had now deployed were scraping the *Ruinous's* wooden deck and she finally stilled the wings, letting the clockwork grind to a halt, as the *Esca* made its ponderous settling.

Taki unbuckled and hopped over the side of the cockpit, her wings fluttering a moment as she undertook the drop to the deck. A slight little thing, even for a Fly-kindens; her kind always made the best pilots, because of better reflexes and less

weight to drag at their machines, though few of them ever wanted to engage in such a dangerous profession.

There was a big Soldier Beetle approaching who must have been master of the ship. "You, boy," he was shouting, "you took your sweet time!"

Boy, is it? Well, in her overalls and still wearing her helmet and goggles, why not? She hinged up the smoked glass, squinting under the sudden glare, and then pushed the goggles themselves up over her forehead.

"I came as soon as I saw the flare, *Sieur*. What losses?"

"Four crew dead," he grunted. He was rather old for this line of work, cropped hair just a greying speckle against his sandstone-coloured skin, and she reflected how it was odd that older ship's captains always drifted into the slave trade. "Two others wounded as won't work their way to Solarno now," he added.

"Then you'll have to limp along like the rest of us," she replied without sympathy, thinking how those men injured in defence of his ship would get scant sympathy from him. "Your . . . cargo?"

"Still below, where the bastards never reached," the ship's master said.

"Slaves?"

"Slaves from *Porta Mavralis*," he confirmed. "Plus five passengers, three of whom had the grace to come raise a blade in their own defence."

She nodded, fiddling with the buckle of her leather helm. "I suppose you'll be wanting my mark, *Sieur*."

His face darkened at that, and she smiled sweetly. *What, you thought I'd forgotten?*

"Give it here, then. Which mob are you with?"

"The Golden House of *Destiavel* wishes you a happy and prosperous journey to Solarno," she told him, handing him the token of her employers so that he would know who to pay the bounty to. "If it's any consolation, you can claw back a little for giving me and poor *Esca* here a float home."

"Having you on my ship all the way? Some consolation. You know they'll dock me my fee for this?"

"Take it up with your *Domina*. Take it up with your guild," she suggested. "Just don't take it up with me, for I don't rightly care that much, *Sieur*."

He scowled at her, four times her weight and almost three feet taller, and she armed with nothing but a knife because a pilot carried no more weight than need dictated. She just smiled at him, though, to let him know all the trouble he'd be in if he started down that course, and he stamped away to shout at his crew.

They were mostly Soldier Beetle-kindens too, that odd halfway house between Ants and Beetles, neither of whom had much influence in these parts. She knew Solarno was a strange kind of city—in fact all the cities of the *Exalsee* were strange. Those kindens who had lived here since long ago, since the Age of Lore, were not

natural city builders. Some of them did not even know how to work metal. Instead, a peculiar crop of exiles and visitors from the north and the west and the east had come shouldering the original natives aside to found a scattering of communities about the shores of this vast and glittering lake.

She finally tugged the buckle of her chitin helm loose. *Passengers*, she recalled the master just mentioning. If she was going to be ferried home at a snail's pace by this tramp steamer then she could at least seek out better company than the master himself.



There was blood on Che's blade. From a mortal wound that she had inflicted? Impossible to be sure, but she doubted it. Her recollection of the sequence of events aboard ship was at best cloudy. She had decided that she did not like fighting very much.

That decision had come after watching a battle, an actual battle. She had read accounts of battles before, of course, but those came in two distinct flavours. The traditional romances painted them in vivid colours where great heroes reared up, surrounded by their foes, and slew tens on tens, or were slain heroically while holding a bridge or a pass just long enough for their fellows to prepare a defence. The second flavour was found in the history books, dry as chalk dust, stating how "Garael with her five hundred met the superior forces of Corion of Kes by laying ambush at the pass, triumphing by guile and surprise though losing most of her followers to the fray."

No mention, in either case, was made of all the blood. She had seen enough of that by now, both as she had performed her little best to assist the field surgeons, and then later when she was led along the rails, through that appalling litter of the dead and dying, with Wasp soldiers stalking amid them and finishing off those that still lived in a soldier's final mercy.

Cheerwell Maker, known mostly as Che, shuddered, and continued cleaning her blade. The pirates had outnumbered the crew by two to one and so she had brought her resisting sword from its sheath and cut and slashed, drawing its edge across arms and legs, thrusting its point into any part of the enemy that presented itself. The routine moves had come naturally enough, just like in those hours spent practising in the Prowess Forum. She had, in that brief moment, put her thoughts aside like a true swordswoman was supposed to.

Now she stood shaking slightly as one of the crew began to mop at the deck, swabbing the blood from it. Another man was heaving the bodies of slain pirates overboard, only five of them and one shot in the back. The dead crewmen were wrapped in canvas, gone from crew to silent passengers in a sharp moment.

“Well, damn me but look at *her*,” said her companion, moving up beside her. He had fled to the top of the wheelhouse once the pirates had attacked, but had taken a few shots with his bow from that vantage point. He was Fly-kindens, but a particularly unsavoury specimen of one, bald and coarse featured and dressed in dark tunic and cloak like a stage-play assassin. Now he was staring at the approaching pilot whose aerobatics had apparently defeated the pirates’ fliers.

The pilot was a female Fly even smaller than himself, clad in an all-in-one garment of waxed cloth strapped across with various belts and bandoliers. She seemed very young, with a round, tanned face and smiling eyes, and Che envied the light way she moved across the deck.

There were other passengers aboard, but only one had come up on deck to help them fight. He was a tall, severe-looking Spider-kindens man, who gave the pilot a little nod of acknowledgement as she approached.

“So,” he said, with a bitter smile. “The Destiavel, is it?”

“My ever generous-hearted employers, Sieur,” the pilot confirmed, grinning at him. “And you are Sieur Miyalis of the Praevrael Concord, unless I mistake a face. Your cargo still safe in the lower hold, is it? A shame for you if they’d been taken by pirates. Not so much shame for them, though. A slave in Princep Exilla or a slave in Solarno, I see no difference.”

The Spider-kindens slaver narrowed his eyes. “Then I advise you not to meddle in the trade, little pilot,” he snarled, and stalked away.

“Superb,” the Fly pilot said vaguely, before gazing brightly at Che. “Let’s see if I can piss you off too, just as quickly.” She took a second look at the woman she was talking to. “You’re a foreigner—in fact you both are, by your dress.” She pulled the chitin helmet from her head, unleashing an improbable cascade of chestnut hair. There came a low whistle from beside Che and the pilot fixed the bald man with an arch stare. “What’s wrong, Sieur? Is it your daughters I remind you of, or your granddaughters?”

“Nice, very nice,” he replied sourly. “Well, lady aviatrix, my name is Nero, the artist.” Che caught the moment’s pause as Nero recalled just how far they now were from his usual haunts where his reputation might carry some weight. “And this is Cheerwell Maker, a scholar of Collegium.”

“Collygum?” the pilot echoed, mangling the name somewhat. “Spider Satrapy, is that?”

“Not within the Spiderlands at all, Madam Destiavel,” Che informed her, whereupon the pilot looked suddenly interested.

“You don’t say? Look, I’m not Destiavel—they’re just the house that pay my way so I can afford to keep my *Esca Volenti* in the air. The name’s Taki, and you’re well met. If you’ll tell me more about where you come from, I’ll stand you a drink

on the Perambula when we touch land. Maybe even find you a place to stay. I take it you're on business?"

"Of a sort," Che admitted, conscious of how suspicious she sounded. Of course, their current business was not the sort to be discussed with just any stranger, but this Taki seemed their best chance of finding their feet quickly in Solarno, about which Che knew almost nothing.

"How comes you've got a boy's name then, Miss Taki?" Nero asked, still looking a little stung by her earlier comment. It was true though, Che decided: he was old enough to be the girl's father.

"Well, old man, strictly speaking it's *te Schola* Taki-Amre, but most people lose interest by the time I get through all that." She grinned, and Che had to admit that she was really very pretty.

"*Te Schola*, is it?" Nero replied, clearly nettled. "Well if it's noble blood, I can't compete with that."

She looked at him strangely, and then grinned once more. "Sieur, such a name's no rarity in Solarno. As for you, why, surely you can't merely be known as 'Nero' in whatever port you hail from? That would seem just dreadful." Her grin seemed to feed off his scowl. "When they came to Solarno, the ladies and lords of the Spider-kind brought with them the chiefs of their servants to provide for them but, as we tell it, they had left their homes in more of a hurry than was wise, and so the chiefs were the only ones who made the journey. My grandmother assures me that we were all little ladies and lords of our own people back then, and only came with our own mistresses out of love. Take that how you will." Taki now leant on the rail, looking north to where a distant shadow on the horizon must surely be the coast of the Exalsee.

"Where I come from we're a bit choosier about who we give the honorifics to," Nero told her.

"And do *you* merit one, Sieur Nero?"

He glowered at her and remained silent.

"We have a lot to learn about Solarno," Che intervened. "In return you'd like to hear about my home, and Nero's?"

"Very much." Taki grinned up at her. "If you're proposing a deal, Bella Cheerwell, you have my hand on it."

Che took that hand, so much smaller than her own. "I must ask one thing first, though."

"Ask away."

"Have you . . . are you familiar with the Wasp-kind, or their Empire?"

Something tugged briefly at Taki's expression. "Ah, them," she said, and there was suddenly a distance between her and Che. "I apologize but I hadn't realized you were one of theirs." The next words seemed almost forced out of her: "If you're an ambassador, I'll point you toward the Corta. They can deal with you."

She chose her own words carefully. "I'm not 'one of theirs.' In fact . . ." It was the crucial moment, to trust or not to trust. "I am no friend of theirs at all."

In Taki's eyes the same caution was reflected. "Well then, Bella Cheerwell . . ." the Fly said slowly, "perhaps we have something in common after all."