

DRAGONFLY FALLING

ALSO BY  
**ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY**

SHADOWS OF THE APT 1  
**EMPIRE IN BLACK AND GOLD**

SHADOWS OF THE APT 3  
**BLOOD OF THE MANTIS**

# DRAGONFLY FALLING

A decorative flourish consisting of a central dark grey oval with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork on either side, flanked by two horizontal lines that extend to the left and right edges of the page.

SHADOWS OF THE APT

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



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*For Alex*





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## GLOSSARY

**STENWOLD MAKER** Beetle-kinde n spymaster and statesman  
**CHEERWELL “CHE” MAKER** his niece  
**TISAMON** Mantis-kinde n Weaponsmaster  
**TYNISA** his half-breed daughter, formerly Stenwold’s ward  
**SALMA (PRINCE SALME DIEN)** Dragonfly nobleman, agent of Stenwold  
**TOTHO** half-breed artificer, agent of Stenwold  
**ACHAEOS** Moth-kinde n magician  
**SCUTO** Thorn Bug-kinde n artificer, Stenwold’s lieutenant  
**SPERRA** Fly-kinde n, agent of Scuto  
**BALKUS** Ant-kinde n, agent of Scuto, renegade from the city of Sarn

**THALRIC** Wasp-kinde n major in the Rekef  
**ULTHER** Wasp-kinde n governor of Myna, killed by Thalric  
**REINER** Wasp-kinde n general in the Rekef  
**TE BERRO** Fly-kinde n lieutenant in the Rekef  
**SCYLA** Spider-kinde n magician and spy

**LINEO THADSPAR** Beetle-kinde n Speaker for the Assembly of Collegium  
**KYMON OF KES** Ant-kinde n master of arms in Collegium  
**HOKIAK** Scorpion-kinde n black-marketeer in Myna  
**SKRILL** half-breed scout in Stenwold’s service  
**GRIEF IN CHAINS** Butterfly-kinde n dancer

### PLACES OF IMPORT

**ASTA** Wasp-kinde n staging post for the Lowlands campaign  
**COLLEGIUM** Beetle-kinde n city, home of the Great College  
**THE COMMONWEAL** Dragonfly-kinde n state north of the Lowlands, partly conquered by the Empire  
**THE DARAKYON** forest, formerly a Mantis stronghold, now haunted and avoided by all

**HELLERON** Beetle-kinde n city, manufacturing heart of the Lowlands  
**MYNA** Soldier Beetle-kinde n city conquered by the Wasp Empire  
**SARN** Ant-kinde n city-state allied to Collegium  
**SPIDERLANDS** Spider-kinde n cities south of the Lowlands, believed rich and endless  
**TARK** Ant-kinde n city-state in the eastern Lowlands  
**THARN** Moth-kinde n hold near Helleron  
**VEK** Ant-kinde n city-state hostile to Collegium

## **ORGANIZATIONS**

**ARCANUM** the Moth-kinde n secret service  
**ASSEMBLY** the elected ruling body of Collegium, meeting in the Amphiphos  
**FIEFS** competing criminal gangs in Helleron  
**GREAT COLLEGE** in Collegium, the cultural heart of the Lowlands  
**PROWESS FORUM** duelling society in Collegium  
**REKEF** the Wasp imperial secret service

*For many years the Wasp Empire has been expanding, warring on its neighbours and enslaving them. Having concluded its Twelve-Year War against the Dragonfly Commonwealth, the Wasps have now turned their eyes toward the divided Lowlands.*

*Stenwold Maker realized the truth of the Empire's power when it seized the distant city of Myna. Since then he has been sending out covert agents to track the progress of an enemy whose threat his fellow citizens will not recognize.*

*Among these agents are his niece Cheerwell, his ward Tynisa, the exotic Dragonfly prince Salma, a humble half-breed artificer Totbo . . . and staunchest of his allies is the terrifying Mantis warrior Tisamon.*

*But can their efforts bring the Lowlands to their senses before it is all too late?*



The morning was joyless for him, as mornings always were. He arose from silks and bee fur and felt on his skin the insidious cold that these rooms only shook off for a scant month or two in the heart of summer.

He wondered whether he could be accommodated somewhere else—as he had wondered countless times before—and knew that it would not do. It would be, in some unspecified way, *disloyal*. He was a prisoner of his own public image. Besides, these rooms had some advantages. No windows, for one. The sun came in through shafts set into the ceiling, three dozen of them and each too small for even the most limber Fly-kindens assassin to sneak through. He had been told that the effect of this fragmented light was beautiful, although he saw beauty in few things, and none at all in architecture.

His people had been building these ziggurats as symbols of their leaders' power since forever, but the style of building that had reached its apex here in the great palace at Capitas had overreached itself. The northern hill tribes, left behind by the sword of progress, still had their stepped pyramids atop the mounds of their hill forts. The design had changed little, only the scale, so that he, who ought to expect all things as he wanted, was entombed in a grotesque, overgrown edifice which never truly warmed at its core.

He slung on a gown, trimmed with the fur of three hundred moths. There were guards stationed outside his door, he knew, and they were for his own protection, but he felt sometimes that they were really his jailers, and that the servants now entering were merely here to torment him. He could have them killed at a word, of course, and he needed to give no reason for it, but he had tried to amuse himself in such capricious ways before and found no real joy in it. What was the point in having the wretches killed, when there were always yet more, an inexhaustible legion of them, world without end? What a depressing prospect: that a man could wade neck-deep in the blood of his servants, and there would still be men and women ready to enter his service more numerous than the motes of dust dancing in the shafts of sunlight from above.

His father had taken no joy in the rank and power that was his. His father had run through life, never taking time to stop, to look, to think. He had been born

with a sword in his hand, if you believed the stories, and with destiny like an invisible crown about his brow. The man in the fur-lined gown knew what that felt like. It felt like a vice around the forehead forbidding him rest or peace.

His father had died eight years ago. No assassin's blade, no poison, no battle wound or lancing arrow. He had just fallen ill, all of a sudden, and a tenday later he just stopped, like a clock, and neither doctor nor artificer could wind him up again. His father had died, and in the tenday before, and the tenday after, all of his father's children bar two, all of this man's siblings bar one, had died also. They had died by public execution or covert murder, for good reason or for no reason other than that the succession, his succession, must be undisputed. He was the eldest son, but he knew that the right of primogeniture ran thin where lordly ambitions were concerned. He had spared one sister only, the youngest. She had been eight years old then, and something had failed in him when they presented him with the death warrant to sign. She was sixteen now, and she looked at him always with the carefully bland adoration of a subject, but he feared the thoughts that swam behind that gaze, feared them enough to wake, sweat-sodden, when even dreaming of them.

And the order lay before him still, to have her removed, the one other remaining member of his bloodline. As soon as he had a true-blood son of his own it would be done. He would take no pleasure in it, no more than he would take in the fathering. He understood his own father's life now, whose shadow he raced to outreach. Yet how envied he was! How his generals and courtiers and advisers cursed their luck, that he should sit where he did, and not they. Yet they could not know that, from the seat of a throne, the whole weighty ziggurat of state was turned on its point, and the entire hegemony's weight from the broad base of the numberless slaves, through the subject peoples and all the ranks of the army to the generals, was balanced solely upon him. He represented their hope and their inspiration, and their expectations were loaded upon him.

The servants who washed and dressed him were all of the true race. At the heart of a culture built on slavery there were few outlander slaves permitted in the palace, for who among them could be trusted? Besides, even the most menial tasks were counted an honour when performed for *him*. Of foreign slaves, there were only a handful of advisers, sages, artificers and others whose skills recommended them beyond the lowly stain of their blood, and though they were slaves they lived like princes while they were still of use to him.

His advisers, yes. He was to speak with his advisers later. Before that there were matters of state to attend to. Always the chains of office dragged him down.

Robed now as befitted his station, his brow bound with gold and ebony, His Imperial Majesty Alvdan the Second, lord of the Wasp Empire, prepared to reascend his throne.



The Emperor kept many advisers and every tenday he met with them all, a chance for them to speak on whatever subject they felt would best serve himself and his Empire. It was his father's custom too, a part of that clamorous, ever-running life of his that had taken him early to his grave as the Empire's greatest slave and not its master. This generation's Alvdan would gladly have done without it, but it was as much a part of the Emperor as were the throne and the crown and he could not cut it from him.

The individual advisers were another matter. Each tenday the faces might be different, some removed by his own orders, others by his loyal men of the Rekef. Some of his advisers were Rekef themselves, but he was pleased to note that this was no shield against either his displeasure or that of his subordinates.

Some of the advisers were slaves, another long tradition, for the Empire always made the best use of its resources. Scholarly men from conquered cities were often dragged to Capitas simply for the contents of their minds. Some prospered, as much as any slave could in this Empire, and better than many free men did. Others failed and fell. There were always more.

His council, thus gathered, would be the usual tedious mix. There would be one or two Woodlouse-kindens with their long and mournful grey faces, professing wisdom and counselling caution; there would be several Beetles, merchants or artificers; perhaps some oddity, like a Spider-kindens from the far south, a blank-eyed Moth or similar; and the locals, of course: Wasp-kindens from the Rekef, from the army, diplomats, Consortium factors, members of high-placed families and even maverick adventurers. And they would all have counsel to offer, and it would serve them more often than not if he followed it.

His progress into the room was measured in servants who opened the doors for him, swept the floor before his feet, removed his outer robe and the weight of the crown. Others were serving him wine and sweetmeats even as he sat down, food and drink foretasted by yet more invisible underlings.

His advisers sat on either side of him in a shallow crescent of lower seats. The idea was that the Emperor should look straight ahead, and only hear the words of wisdom that tinkled in his ears, without being in any way swayed by the identity of the speaker. Ideologically brilliant, of course, though practically useless, since he had an ear keen enough to identify any of the speakers from a single uttered word. Instead, all they gained for themselves were stiff necks as everyone craned around to look at whoever spoke.

*I could change this.* He was, after all, the Emperor. He could have them sitting around a table like off-duty soldiers on a gambling spree, or kneeling before him like supplicants, or hanging on wires from the ceiling if he so wanted. Not a day

went by without some petty detail of the imperial bureaucracy throwing thorns beneath his feet, yet he always found a reason not to thrust his hand into the works of the machine: it would be bad for morale; it had worked thus far; it was for a good reason, or why would they do it like that?

And in his worst dreams he heard the true reason for his own reticence, for at each change he implemented, each branch he hacked from the tradition-tree, they would all doubtless murmur, *He's not the man his father was.*

He had sired a legion of short-lived bastards and no true-blood sons, and perhaps that was why: the burden of the imperial inheritance that he did not want to pass to any child of his. Still, *that* problematic situation was looming closer each year. The imperial succession was a matter he had forbidden his advisers to speak on, but he felt the weight of it on him nonetheless.

The assembled advisers shuffled in their seats, waiting for his gesture to begin, and he gave it, listening without interest as the first few inconsequential-seeming matters were brought before him. A famine in the East-Empire, so perhaps some artificers should be sent to teach the ignorant savages something approaching modern agriculture. A lazy gesture signalled his assent. A proposal for games to celebrate the first victory over the Lowlands, whenever it happened. He ruled against that, judging it too soon. Another proposal, this from the sad-faced Woodlouse-kindens Gjegevey, who had a sufficient balance of wisdom and acumen to have served Alvdan's father for the last nine years of his reign and yet survived the purges that had accompanied the coronation.

"It might be possible to proceed more gently in our invasion plans," the soft-voiced old man said. He was a freakish specimen, as all his people were: a whole head taller than any reasonable man, and with his grey skin marked by pale bands up over his brow and down his back. His eyes were lost in a nest of wrinkles. "These Lowlanders have much knowledge of, mmn, mechanics, philosophy, mm, logistics . . . that we might benefit from. A, hrm, gentle hand . . ."

Alvdan sat back and let the debate run, hearing the military argue about the risk inherent in relying on a slow conquest, while the Rekef insisted that foreigners could not be trusted and the Consortium pressed for a swift assault that would see their Lowland trading rivals crushed. All self-interest, of course, but not necessarily bad for the Empire. He held up a hand and they fell silent.

"We have faith in our generals," was all he said, and that was that.

Before speaking, the next speaker paused long enough that Alvdan had a chance to steel himself for the words to come.

"Your Imperial Majesty." General Maxin, whose frown could set the entire Rekef trembling, began carefully. "There remains the matter of your sister."

"Does there?" Alvdan stared straight ahead with a tight-lipped smile that he knew must chill them all.

“There are those who would—”

“We know, General. Our dear sister has a faction, a party, but she has it whether she wishes it or not. They would put her on this seat of mine because they think she would love them for it. So she must be put to death like all the others. Are you going to counsel us now about the place of mercy in imperial doctrine, or lack of it?”

He heard nothing, but in the corner of his eye caught a motion that was Maxin shaking his head.

“Do you remember General Scarad?” the Emperor continued. “I believe he was the last man to counsel us about mercy. An unwise trait in a ruler of men, he claimed.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Remind us of our response, General.”

“You agreed with him, praised him for his philosophy and then had him put to death, Your Majesty,” replied General Maxin levelly.

“We praise you for your memory, General, so pray continue.”

“An alternative disposition of your sister has been suggested to me, Your Imperial Majesty,” Maxin said, picking his way carefully. “She cannot be married, obviously, and she is not fit for office, so perhaps she should find some peace of mind in some secular body. Some philosophical order, Majesty, with no political aspirations.”

Alvdan closed his eyes, trying to picture his sister in the robes of the Mercy’s Daughters or some such pack of hags. “Your suggestion is noted, General, and we will consider it,” was all he would say, but it appealed to his sense of humour. Yes, a nice peaceful life of contemplation. How better to drive his little sister out of her mind?

When he was done, and his advisers had no more advice to give, the servants repeated their rigmarole, but this time in reverse. Once he had stood up, his advisers began to sidle out of the room, leaving only General Maxin, who seemed to be taking an unaccountably long time to adjust his swordbelt.

“General, we sense by your subtlety that you wish to speak to us.”

“Some small diversion, Your Imperial Majesty, if you wish it.”

“The Rekef are becoming entertainers now, are they, General?”

“There is a man, Majesty, who has fallen into the hands of my agents. He is a most remarkable and unusual man and I thought that Your Majesty might welcome the chance to meet this individual. He is a slave, of course, and worse than just a slave, not fit to serve any useful purpose. In private he is full of strange words, though. Your Imperial Majesty’s education might never have another chance such as this.”

Alvdan at last looked at Maxin directly, seeing a slight smile on the stocky old soldier's face. Maxin had not advised his father, the late Emperor, but he had been wielding a knife on the night after Alvdan's coronation, making sure that the next morning would be free from sibling dissent or disunity. He was not one for jokes.

"Well, General, we are intrigued. Take us to this man."

The flight had been like something out of a fever dream, nightmarish, and unheard-of.

Thalric had come to Asta expecting to be punished. He had anticipated encountering the grim face of Colonel Latvoc or even the pinched features of General Reiner, his superiors within the Rekef, because he had failed the Empire. There had been a mission to seize the rail automotive that the city of Helleron had called the *Pride*, which was then to have provided the spearhead of an invasion to sack Collegium and have any dreams of Lowlands unity die stillborn. Instead, motley renegades under the command of Stenwold Maker had destroyed the *Pride* and even managed somehow to cast suspicion of that destruction on the Wasp-kinde who had so stalwartly tried to save it.

A small setback for the Empire, which must take by force, now, what might have been won by stealth. A great setback indeed for Captain Thalric of the Imperial Army, otherwise Major Thalric of the Rekef Outlander.

And yet there had been no court martial for him to face in the staging town of Asta. It seemed that the race for the Lowlands was now on, and even a flawed blade like Thalric could be put to good use. There had been sealed orders already awaiting him: *Board the Cloudfarer. Further instructions to follow.*

And the *Cloudfarer* itself: it was a piece of madness, and no Wasp artificer had made her. Some maverick Auxillian technologist had come up with that design and inflicted it upon him.

It had no hull, or at least very little of one. Instead there was a reinforced wooden base, and a scaffold of struts that composed a kind of empty cage. There was a clockwork engine aft, which two men wound by pedalling furiously, and somewhat stubby wings that bore twin propellers. Thalric had boarded along with a pilot-engineer and Lieutenant te Berro, Fly-kinde agent of the Rekef, who was to brief him. Then the *Cloudfarer* had lifted off, a fragile lattice of wood shuddering up and up through the air under the impelling force of her propellers. Up and up, rising in as tight a spiral as her pilot could drag her into, until they were sailing across the clouds indeed, and higher. Then the pilot let go the struts to either side, and the *Cloudfarer's* vast grey wings fell open left and right, above and below, and caught the wind. The vessel that had seemed some apprentice's mistake was abruptly speeding over the world beneath it, soaring on swift winds westward until they were casting across the Lowlands as high, it almost seemed, as the stars themselves sailed.

And it was so *cold*. Thalric was muffled in four cloaks and layers of woollens beneath, yet the chill air cut through it all, an invisible blade that lanced through the open structure of the *Cloudfarer* and put a rime of white frost on him, and painted his breath into white plumes before the wind whipped it away.

They would reach Collegium faster than any messenger, eating up any lead that Stenwold had built, so that despite Thalric's detour to Asta it was anyone's guess who would arrive first. They were so high, up in the very icy roof of the sky, that no flying scout would spy them. Even telescopes might not pick out their silvery wings against the distant vault of the heavens.

And as he suffered through this ordeal, from the cold and the wind, he hunched forward to catch te Berro's fleeting words, for these were his instructions, his mission, and he would need to remember them.

"You're a lucky man," the Fly said, shouting over the gale. "Rekef can't spare an operative of your experience simply for a disciplinary trial. Lowlands work to be done all over the place. You get a second chance. Don't waste it." They had worked together before, Thalric and te Berro, and a measure of respect had grown between them.

"We'll put you down near Collegium," te Berro continued. "Make your own way in. Meet with your agents there. There can be no unity allowed for the Lowlands. There are two plans. The first is swifter than the second, but you are to enact both of them if possible. Even if the first succeeds, the second will also help the war effort."

And te Berro had explained to him then just what those plans were, and whilst the first was a commonplace enough piece of work, the second was a sharp one and the scale of it shook him a little.

"It shall be done," he assured the Fly, as the *Cloudfarer* continued its swift, invisible passage over the Lowlands so far beneath them.

He walked into Collegium without mishap, entering at the slow time near noon when the city seemed to sleep a little. Collegium had white walls but the gates had stood open for twenty years, had only been closed even then because the Ants of Vek had harboured ambitions to annex the Beetle city for themselves. There was a guard sitting by the gate, an old Beetle-kinde who was dozing a little himself. Collegium was not interested in keeping people out. If it had been, then he might not have needed to destroy it.

Thalric had been granted a short enough time in the city when he was here last. Two days only and then he had been bundled onto a fixed-wing flier to go and catch Stenwold Maker on the airship *Sky Without*. At that thought he tried to discern where the airfield lay from here and see whether the great dirigible was moored there today, but the walls were too high, the buildings looming above

him, for much of Collegium was three-storey, and the poorer districts were four or five. He knew that the Empire had much to learn here. The poor of Collegium cursed their lot and complained and envied, but they had never witnessed how the poor of Helleron lived, or the imperial poor, or the slaves of countless other cities.

*If we destroy Collegium, will we ever regain what is lost in the fires?* Because it was not only a matter of writing down some secret taken from one of the countless books in the College library. This was a way of life, and it was a good thing to have and, like all good things, the Empire should have it. Imperial citizens should benefit from the knowledge of the men and women who had built this place.

But the second plan that te Berro had given him would kill all that, and he had his orders.

The kernel of discontent that had been within him for a while now gave him a familiar kick, but he mastered it. If the Empire wanted things in such a way, the Empire would have it. He was loyal to the Empire.

He stopped so suddenly in the street that a pair of men manhandling a trunk barged into him and swore at him before they passed on.

*What a heretical idea.* Better keep that one hidden deep in one's own thoughts. To even think that loyalty to the Empire, to the better future of the Empire, was not the same as loyalty to the Emperor's edicts or to the Rekef's plans, well, that sort of thinking would get a man on the interrogation table in a hurry. He had avoided a well-deserved reprimand for failing at Helleron and he wasn't about to start playing host to that kind of thought now, that was just asking for trouble.

But in the deepest recesses of his mind the idea turned over, and waited for another off-guard moment.

There had been Rekef agents before him in Collegium, of course. Whilst the Inlander branch of the Empire's secret service purged the disloyal at home, the Outlander had been seeding the cities of the Lowlands with spies and informants. Thalric had made contact with them when he was here last but their networks were four years old. Thalric sent Fly messengers across the city with innocuous letters into which codewords had been dropped like poison into wine. Those men and women the Rekef had infiltrated into this city had been making everyday lives for themselves. Now that was to end. He was calling them up.

He met with them in a low sailors' taverna near enough to the docks for them to hear the creak of rigging through the windows. It was a place where people would forget who it was that met with who, or what business might have been done there—and that was just as well, too. They made an ill-assorted quartet.

The most senior was a lieutenant in the Rekef, and when Thalric had needed a pair of assassins to catch Stenwold Maker in his home he had gone to Lieutenant Graf, true blood Wasp-kinde, who was working here as a procurer for the blades

trade. That, in local parlance, meant that he made introductions between fighting men and prospective patrons, and it put Thalric's operation here on a sound footing straight off. Graf was a lean man, his face marred by a ragged sword scar from brow to chin that Thalric knew for a duelling mark from the man's days in the Arms-Brethren. The eye traversed by that scar was a dark marble of glass.

The other three were all unranked on the Rekef books, mere agents. Hofi was a Fly-kinde who cut the hair of the rich and shaved the mighty, and Arianna was a Spider and a student of the College. The fourth man, Scadran the half-breed, worked as a dockhand, catching all the rumours going in and out from both ways down the coast. Wasp blood adulterated with Beetle and Ant, his heavy features displayed the worst of all three to Thalric's eyes, but he was a big man, a brawler. That might be useful, in the end.

He had them at a corner table, drawn far enough from the others that low voices would not carry. They had come in plain garb and armed and they looked at him expectantly. If he sent them out into the city to kill that very night, they would be ready.

"Tell me about Stenwold Maker," he said.

Lieutenant Graf glanced at the others and then spoke. "He arrived the day before you, sir. Quite a tail of followers, too."

"Was there a Mantis-kinde with them?" Thalric asked. His mind returned abruptly to the night battle at the engine works at Helleron that had seen the *Pride* destroyed. There had been a Mantis there, making bloody work of every man who came against him—until Thalric had burned him. Tisamon, Scyla's reports had named him, and his daughter had been Tynisa. *Tynisa*, who had very nearly done for Thalric when he came to finish the matter. In his heart he had hoped that the man had died from his wound, but Graf's next words surprised him not at all.

"Yes, sir, his name is Tisamon. I've learned he was a student at the College many years ago, at the same time as Maker. Even from back then, he had a reputation."

"And well deserved," Thalric confirmed. "What movements?"

"Maker's settling his men in. He's applied to speak before the Assembly, but that's likely to take a few days. He's not exactly popular. A maverick, they think, and he leaves his College duties too often. They'll stall him with bureaucracy for a while, maybe even a tenday, before they let him in. A slap on the wrist."

"And the rest?"

"Many of the others are now at the College," Arianna said. "Some are in the infirmary, in fact. They brought some wounded with them from Helleron. There's a monstrous little wretch with them, though, some spiky kinde I've never seen before, and he's been going about the factories a lot, the engine yards and the rail depot."

“That would be Scuto,” Thalric explained, “Stenwold’s deputy from Helleron. He’s an artificer, I understand, so some of that might just be professional curiosity.” Thalric remembered his one meeting with Stenwold Maker, a few brave words over a shared drink: two men in the same work on opposite sides, but common ground nonetheless; they were two soldiers who had suffered the same privations under different flags.

And now I stalk him to his lair, and I must destroy him. Because I must believe he would do the same to me, I shall feel nothing.

“I have your orders,” he addressed the foursome. “We’ll need armed men, Lieutenant—and craft from the rest of you. Stenwold Maker is not long for this world.”