

**EMPIRE**  
**IN BLACK AND GOLD**

ALSO BY  
**ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY**

SHADOWS OF THE APT 2  
**DRAGONFLY FALLING**

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

# EMPIRE IN BLACK AND GOLD

A decorative flourish consisting of a central grey oval with ornate scrollwork on either side, flanked by horizontal lines with dots at the ends.

SHADOWS OF THE APT

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**  
Amherst, NY

Published 2010 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tchaikovsky, Adrian, 1972-  
Empire in black and gold / by Adrian Tchaikovsky.  
p. cm. — (Shadows of the apt ; bk. 1)  
ISBN 978-1-61614-192-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
I. Title.

PR6120.C53E47 2010  
813'.92—dc22

2009047152

Printed in the United States

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





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I** owe a great deal to a great many people whose inspiration, aid and encouragement have made this book possible; more than can reasonably be named in such a short space. However, I would like to thank: the support of my family and extended family; twice-yearly meetings of the Deadliners writing group in York; swordfights and archery practice in the wilds of Reading; late-night drinking sessions in the stews of Oxford; and the oldest and best of friends, Wayne, Martin and Shane, because they've been there from the start.

And I would like to thank especially my agent Simon Kavanagh, and to thank Peter Lavery, Jon Mitchell, Michael Bhaskar, and everyone else who collectively made all this possible.



**A**fter Stenwold picked up the telescope for the ninth time, Marius said, “You will know first from the sound.”

The burly man stopped and peered down at him, telescope still half-poised. From their third-storey retreat the city walls were a mass of black and red, the defenders hurrying into place atop the ramparts and about the gates.

“How do you mean, the sound?”

Marius, sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, looked up at him. “What you hear now is men braving themselves for a fight. When it starts, they will be quiet, just for a moment. They will brace themselves. Then it will be a different kind of noise.” It was a long speech for him.

Even from here Stenwold could hear a constant murmur from the gates. He lowered the telescope reluctantly. “There’ll be a great almighty noise when they come in, if all goes according to plan.”

Marius shrugged. “Then listen for that.”

Below there was a quick patter of feet as someone ascended the stairs. Stenwold twitched but Marius remarked simply, “Tisamon,” and went back to staring at nothing. In the room beneath them there were nine men and women dressed in the same chain hauberk and helm that Marius wore, and looking enough like him to be family. Stenwold knew their minds were meshed together, touching each other’s and touching Marius too, thoughts passing freely back and forth between them. He could not imagine how it must be, for them.

Tisamon burst in, tall and pale, with thunder in his expression. Even as Stenwold opened his mouth he snapped out, “No sign. She’s not come.”

“Well there are always—” Stenwold started, but the tall man cut him off.

“I cannot think of any reason why she wouldn’t come, except one,” Tisamon spat. Seldom, so very seldom, had Stenwold seen this man angry and, whenever he had been, there was always blood. Tisamon was Mantis-kinde, whose people had, when time was young, been the most deadly killers of the Lowlands. Even though their time of greatness had passed, they were still not to be toyed with. They were matchless, whether in single duel or a skirmish of swords, and Tisamon was a master, the deadliest fighter Stenwold had ever known.

“She has betrayed us,” Tisamon stated simply. Abruptly all expression was gone from his angular features but that was only because it had fled inward.

“There are . . . reasons,” Stenwold said, wishing to defend his absent friend and yet not turn the duellist’s anger against himself. The man’s cold, hating eyes locked on to him even so. Tisamon had taken up no weapon, but his hands alone, and the spurs of naked bone that lanced outward from his forearms, were quite enough to take Stenwold apart, and with time to spare. “Tisamon,” Stenwold said. “You don’t know . . .”

“Listen,” said Marius suddenly. And when Stenwold listened, in that very instant there was no more murmur audible from the gates.

And then it came, reaching them across the rooftops of Myna: the cry of a thousand throats. The assault had begun.

It was enough to shout down even Tisamon’s wrath. Stenwold fumbled with the telescope, then stumbled to the window, nearly losing the instrument over the sill. When he had the glass back to his eye his hands were shaking so much that he could not keep it steady. The lens’s view danced across the gatehouse and the wall, then finally settled. He saw the black and red armour of the army of Myna: men aiming crossbows or winching artillery around. He saw ballista and grapeshot-throwers wheel crazily through the arc of the telescope’s eye, discharging their burdens. There was black and gold now amongst the black and red. The first wave of the Wasp divisions came upon them in a glittering mob: troops in light armour bearing the Empire’s colours skimming over the tops of the walls, the air about their shoulders ashimmer with the dancing of nebulous wings. For a second Stenwold saw them as the insects they aped, but in reality they were armoured men, aloft in the air, with wings flickering from their backs and blades in their hands. They swooped on the earthbound defenders with lances and swords, loosing arrows and crossbow bolts and hurling spears. As the defenders turned their crossbows upward toward them, Stenwold saw the bright crackle as golden fire flashed from the palms of the attackers’ hands, the killing Art of the Wasp-kind.

“Any moment now,” Stenwold whispered, as though the enemy, hundreds of yards away, might overhear him. From along the wall he heard a steady thump-thump-thump as Myna’s huge rock-launchers hurled missile after missile into the ground troops advancing beyond the wall.

“They’re at the gate.” Marius was still staring into space, but Stenwold knew that one of his men was positioned on a rooftop closer to the action, watching on his behalf.

“Then it must be now,” Stenwold said. “*Now.*” He tried to focus the jittery telescope on the gates, saw them flex inward momentarily and heard the boom of the battering ram. “*Now,*” he said again uselessly, for still nothing happened. All that

time he had spent with the artificers of Myna, charging the earth in front of the gates with powder, and *nothing*.

“Perhaps they got it wrong,” Marius suggested. Again the ram boomed against the metal-shod gates, and they groaned like a creature in pain before it.

“I was practically looking over their shoulders,” Stenwold said. “It was ready to go. How could they have . . . someone must have . . .”

“We are betrayed,” said Tisamon softly. “By Atryssa, clearly. Who else knew the plan? Or do you think the people of Myna have sold their own to the slaver’s block?”

“You . . . don’t know . . .” But Stenwold felt conviction draining from him. Atryssa, so expected but so absent, and now this . . .

“Spider-kind,” Tisamon spat, and then repeated, “Spider-kind,” with even keener loathing. On the walls the vanguard of the Wasp army was already engaged in a hundred little skirmishes against the shields of the defenders. Tisamon bared his teeth in utter fury. “I knew! I knew you could never trust the Spider-kind. Why did we ever let her in? Why did—Why did we trust her?” He was white knuckled, shaking, eyes staring like a madman’s. The spines flexed alarmingly in his forearms, seeking blood. Stenwold stared into his face but barely heard the words. Instead he heard what Tisamon had left unsaid, and knew not fear but a terrible pity. Spider-kind, as Tisamon said. Spider-kind, as subtle and devious as all that implied, and still Tisamon, with a thousand years of race hatred between them, had let her into his life and opened the gates of his soul to her. It was not just that Atryssa had betrayed her friends and betrayed the people of Myna; it was that she had betrayed Tisamon, and he could not bear the hurt.

“It has been a long time,” Marius said quietly. “A lot can happen that even a Spider cannot predict.”

Tisamon rounded on him, livid with anger, but just then with a great scream of tortured metal, a thundercrack of splintering wood, the gates gave way.

The ramming engine was first through, no telescope needed to see its great brass and steel bulk as it blundered over the wreckage it had created, belching smoke from its funnels. A ballista atop its hood hung half off its mountings, mangled by the defenders’ artillery, but there were eyelets in its metal sides from which spat crossbow bolts and the crackling energy of the Wasps’ Art. Swarming either side of it were their line infantry, spear-armed but shieldless. Clad in armour too heavy to fly in, they pushed the men stationed at the gate back through sheer force, while their airborne divisions were beginning to pass over the city. The guardians of Myna were a disciplined lot, shield locked with shield as they tried to keep the enemy out. There were too many of them, though; the assault came from before and above, and from either side. Eventually the defenders’ line buckled and fell back.

“We have to leave now,” Stenwold said, “or we’ll never get out. Someone has to know what’s happened here. The Lowlands have to be warned.”

“The Lowlands won’t care,” said Marius, but he was up and poised, and Stenwold knew that, below them, his soldiers would be ready with shield and sword and crossbow. They went down the stairs in quick succession, knowing that, now their single trick had failed, nothing would keep the Wasps out of Myna. Their army had five men for every defender the city could muster.

*What a band we are.* The thought passed through Stenwold’s mind as he took the stairs, bringing up the rear as always. First went Marius, tan-skinned and dark, with the universally compact build of his race: he had abandoned his people to come here, gone renegade so that he could fight against the enemy his city would not believe in. After him came Tisamon, still consumed with rage and yet still the most graceful man Stenwold had ever known. His leather arming jacket bore the green and gold colours, even the ceremonial pin, of a Mantis Weaponsmaster. Stenwold had never seen him without it and knew he was clinging to his grudges and his honour like a drowning man.

*And then myself: dark of skin and receding of hair; stout and bulky, loud of tread. Not my fault my folk are so heavy boned! Hardwearing leathers and a scorched apron, a workman’s heavy gloves thrust through my belt, and goggles dangling about my neck. Not at first sight a man ever intended for war. And yet here I am with a crossbow banging against my legs.*

Down in the room below, Marius’s soldiers were already alert and on their feet, Some had their heavy square shields out, swords at the ready, others had slung them and taken up crossbows. Two carried the baggage: a heavy leather bag containing Stenwold’s tools, and a long wooden case. Even as Stenwold got sight of the room they were unbarring the door, throwing it open. Immediately two of them pushed out, shields first. Stenwold realized that he had paused halfway down, dreading the moment when there would no longer be a roof above him to keep off enemy shot. Tisamon and most of the soldiers were gone. Marius, however, was waiting for him, an unspoken urgency hanging in his gaze.

“I’m coming,” Stenwold said, and hated the shaking of his voice. He clumped on down the stairs, fumbling for his crossbow.

“Leave it, and just move,” Marius ordered, and was out of the door. Following behind Stenwold, the final pair of soldiers moved in to guard the rear.

And then they were out into the open air. The sounds of the fighting at the gate were very close, closer than he could have thought, but this street had seen no blood—not yet. There were citizens of Myna out and about, though, waiting in a scatter of anxious faces. Men and women, and boys and girls still too young to be here at all, they were clutching knives and swords and staves, and waiting.

At his unheard direction, Marius’s soldiers formed up: shields before and

shields behind, with Stenwold, the baggage and the crossbows in the middle. Marius was at point, already setting a rapid pace down the narrow street. His troop's dark armour, its single purpose, moved people quickly out of the way without need for words or action.

"I can't run as fast as your lot," Stenwold complained. He already felt out of step and was just waiting for the men behind to jostle or stumble over him. "Where's Tisamon, anyway?"

"Around." Marius did not look back or gesture, but then Stenwold caught a glimpse of the Mantis warrior passing through the crowd like an outrider, constantly pausing to look back toward the gate and then move on. He wore his armoured glove, with the blade jutting from between the fingers, flexing out like a sword blade one moment, folded back along his arm the next. It was an ancient tool of his kind and a laughable anachronism, save that Stenwold had witnessed what he could do with it.

"What about your man, at the gates?" Stenwold called, trying desperately to fall into step with those around him.

"Dead," was the officer's curt reply.

"I'm sorry."

"Be sorry when you know the full tally," said Marius. "We're not out of it yet."

There was a ripple among the people of Myna, and not from the passage through them of this little squad of foreigners heading for the airfield. Stenwold realized what it must mean. All around now, they were brandishing their swords or workman's hammers or simple wooden clubs. It would not be quick or easy to capture this city, but the Wasps would have it in the end. Their dream of a black-and-gold world would accept no less.

Stenwold was Beetle-kinde and in the Lowlands his people were known for their industry, their artifice, even, as he liked to think, for their charity and kindly philosophy. The people of Myna were his distant cousins, being some offshoot of Beetle stock. He could spare them no charity now, however. He could spare no thought or time for anything but his own escape.

A brief shadow passed across him as the first of the Wasp vanguard soared overhead in a dart of black and gold, a shimmer of wings. Three more followed, and a dozen after that. They were heading in the same direction that Stenwold was moving.

"They're going to the airfield. They'll destroy the fliers!" he shouted in warning.

Instantly Marius and his men stepped up the pace and Stenwold wished he had not spoken. Now they were jogging along, effortlessly despite their armour, and he was running full tilt within a cage formed by their shields, feeling his gut lurch and his heart hammer. Behind him there were screams, and he made the mistake

of looking back. Some of the Wasps, it seemed, were not heading for the airfield, but had stopped to rake across the assembled citizens with golden fire and javelins and crossbow bolts, circling and darting, and coming back to loose their missiles once again. This was no ordered attack, they were a frenzied mass of hatred, out solely for slaughter. Stenwold tripped even as he gaped, but the woman closest behind caught him by the arm and wrenched his bulk upright again, without breaking stride.

A moment later his rescuer herself was hit. There was a snap and crackle, and the stink of burned flesh and hot metal, and she sagged to one knee. Stenwold turned to help but nearly fell over the man reaching to drag her upright. The Wasp light airborne troops were all around them now, passing overhead, or diving at the citizens to drive them off the streets. A crossbow bolt bounded past Stenwold like a living thing.

The injured woman was on her feet once more. She and the man beside her turned to face the new assault. Marius and the rest kept moving.

“Come on, Stenwold! Hurry!” the officer shouted.

“But—”

“Go,” said the injured woman, no pain or reproach in her voice. She and the man with her locked shields, waiting. Stenwold stumbled away from them, then turned and fled after Marius and the others.

Tisamon was beside him in an instant. He had a look on his face that Stenwold had never seen before, but he could read it as though the Mantis’s thoughts were carved there. Tisamon wanted a fight. He had been betrayed. He had been broken. Now he wanted a fight that he could not win.

“Get a move on, fat-Beetle,” he hissed, grabbing one strap of Stenwold’s apron and hauling him forward. “You’re getting out of here.”

“We are,” corrected Stenwold, too out of breath by now to say any more. He watched Tisamon snatch a Wasp spear from the air in his offhand and then the Mantis spun on his heel, launched it away into the sky behind them, and was immediately in step once again. Stenwold did not pause to look, but he had no doubt that behind them some Wasp soldier would now be dropping from the sky, pierced through by his own missile.

Myna was a tiered city and they hit a set of steps then, a steep, narrow twenty-foot ascent. Stenwold tried to slow down for it but Tisamon would not let him, grabbing his arm again and pulling him upward, exerting every muscle in his lean frame.

“Keep moving,” the Mantis snapped at him through gritted teeth. “Move your great big fat feet, you Beetle bastard!”

The sting of that insult got Stenwold to the top of the steps before he realized. There were more citizens up there, all trying to head in the wrong direction,

directly toward the gates. Something in Tisamon's face or body language pushed them easily aside. Ahead, Stenwold could see Marius's squad taking the next set of steps at a run.

And Stenwold ran, too, as he had never run before. His toolstrip, and his sword and crossbow, all clattered and conspired to trip him up. His breath rasped as he dragged ever more of it into his lungs, yet he ran, because up beyond those steps lay the airfield. Then he would know if he could stop running or if it was already too late.

There were Wasp soldiers scattered across the airfield. At the far end, the great bloated bulk of an airship balloon was slowly settling into itself, gashed in a dozen places and deflating. Some half a dozen dead men and women were strewn like old toys between the flying machines, but a dozen more were putting up a final desperate defence, letting off their crossbow bolts at the circling Wasp soldiers from whatever shelter they could find. If the Wasps had been arrayed in military order they could have swept the place clean in a minute, but they were mad for blood, each one on his own.

Stenwold noticed one old man frantically stoking the boiler of a sleek orthopter that stood there like a tall ship, its slender wings folded together and pointing up toward the sky. A Wasp soldier passed close and caught him by the collar, hauling him ten feet away from the machine before touching down again and putting his sword through the old man once, twice, three times. A moment later a bolt caught the same soldier between the shoulder blades. He pitched forward, trying even as he fell to reach behind him and pull it out.

"That one!" wheezed Stenwold, stumbling toward the now deserted orthopter. It was stoked. It was ready to go. "Come on!" he gasped.

In a moment Marius's men were around him, and then they were past him, deliberately moving away from the machine and making a brief wall of their shields with crossbows poised behind it, guarding the retreat as effectively as they could.

"Can you fly this?" Marius demanded. Stenwold merely nodded, because he had no more breath to speak, and no room left for doubt. The officer clapped him on the shoulder. "Get it moving. We'll join you." And then, as Stenwold hurried past him, "Watch out for Tisamon. He does not want to leave this place."

*I know why.* But Stenwold did not have the breath for it.

Tisamon was already at the orthopter, hand reaching for the hatch, then stopping. He looked back at Stenwold with an agonized expression. "I—how . . ."

"The handle. Turn the handle."

Hand on the lever, the Mantis shook his head, baring his teeth. One of Marius's men arrived just then, ducked neatly under his arm and hauled the hatch open, hurling Stenwold's toolbag inside. Stenwold reached the orthopter so fast

that he bounced back off the scuffed wood of its hull. The soldier had already unslung his crossbow and was running to join his colleagues. Tisamon turned and went with him.

“Wait—” Stenwold got out, but the Mantis was already sprinting across the airfield with his blade drawn back ready for action. Even as Stenwold hauled himself up into the machine, the Mantis leapt and caught a passing Wasp by his black-and-gold boot, dragging the flailing man out of the sky and lashing the two-foot edge of his metal claw across the invader’s throat. It would be a poor day for any Wasp who met with the Mantis just then.

Stenwold shouldered his way through the cramped interior of the flier toward the cockpit, there finding a single seat too small for him and unfamiliar controls. He was an artificer, though, and had lived with machines all his life. A moment’s observation told him which glass bar indicated the boiler pressure, which lever unleashed the wings. A Wasp soldier darted across the large and wide-open ports that were mainly what Stenwold had between him and the fighting outside. Then the wings clapped down and outward with a roar of wood and canvas and the soldier was sent spinning by the concussion of air. Stenwold’s feet found pedals in the narrow confines of the footwell. The boiler pressure was now closing on the optimal. He put his head back, peering through the open hatch for any sign of his comrades.

Half of Marius’s men were already dead, he saw, and this jolted his heart. They fought beautifully: even he, though no warrior, could see that. Each man knew by heart the thoughts of his fellows, so they moved as one. They were so few, though, and the Wasps swarmed all over the field. Shield and crossbow were no defence against their numbers.

“Come on!” Stenwold bellowed. “Let’s go now!” He could not believe that they would hear him over the din of combat but one of them must have, and so they all did. They began to fall back, shields held high. Even as he watched, another was lanced in the side by a crossbow bolt, falling awkwardly before rising to one knee. The others continued to retreat, and Stenwold might have thought it heartless of them had he not been so sure that the fallen man would be exhorting them to go, to leave him there. Stenwold realized that he knew none of their names, had not even heard many of them speak.

Ant-kindens, he would never understand them or their communal world. Or how Marius had managed to leave that world and not look back.

The hatch went suddenly dark. A Wasp soldier forced his way in, the dance of his wings dying behind him. One open hand still crackled with the fire of his sting but he was now leading with his sword. Stenwold was lurching backward even as the man’s shoulders cleared the entrance, hurling the first thing that came to hand, which happened to be a mechanic’s hammer. It thumped into the Wasp soldier’s

shoulder and knocked him half out of the hatch. Then Stenwold was upon him, grabbing for his sword arm with one hand, lunging with the other. He never got hold of the man's sword, but his right hand somehow managed to draw his own, and he rammed it up to its narrow guard in his adversary's armpit.

The Wasp spat at him and he recoiled in shock, then recoiled again as he saw the blood stringing across the man's lips. Then the dying soldier was falling out of the flier, the weight of him taking Stenwold's sword from his suddenly nerveless fingers.

He had just killed another human being. *There's a first time for everything.*

One of Marius's soldiers now reached the hatch and cast the wooden case inside. Marius himself and three of his men were still inching their way back, painfully slow.

"Tisamon!" Stenwold called out. "Tisamon!"

He saw him then, the Weaponsmaster, moving in and out of the Wasps as they tried to corner him. But he stepped through the golden energy of their stings, their crossbow bolts that fractured on the hard earth of the airfield. He caught their spears easily and hurled them back. His blade, twisting and darting too swift to see, was never still for a second. It moved as naturally as his wrist and hand and arm could, and there were always the spines of his arms to cut and tear at anything the metal missed. Tisamon was going to die, but he would have more company on his journey than he knew what to do with.

"Tisamon!" Stenwold shouted and the Mantis-kinde broke off from the fight, danced across to him, casually cutting down a Wasp that tried to put a spear in him.

"Get Marius inside and go!" Tisamon commanded. "Go! Just go!"

Stenwold's face twisted up in anger and fear. "You bloody-handed bastard! If you stay here then you're taking me with you! I'm not going without you!"

Even as he moved to meet the next attacker Tisamon's face showed how utterly unfair he felt that threat was. Even so, he was returning to the orthopter in the very next instant.

"Marius, now!" Stenwold shrieked, and at last Marius and his two survivors broke into a run, shields temporarily slung on their backs. Stenwold ducked away from the hatch and even as he did so a lance of energy blasted a smoking hole in the rim. Hands shaking, he squeezed himself back into the pilot's seat, and began to pedal fast. He felt the entire frame of the flier creak as the wings moved, first up and then down, powered by the steam boiler but guided by his feet.

Someone vaulted into the flier, and Stenwold flinched in fear, but it was only Tisamon, face grim. He set on the wooden case immediately and tugged at the buckles, his bladed glove now removed. A moment later a woman belonging to Marius's squad climbed in too and turned to help her commander aboard. By now

Stenwold had the wings working smoothly and felt the orthopter lurch as though eager to be gone from here.

Marius was halfway in when he arched backward without warning and began to fall away. The female soldier caught his belt and dragged him to safety, but Stenwold caught a glimpse of the leather vanes of the crossbow bolt buried deep in the commander's lower back beside the rim of his shield.

"Any more?" He could barely keep the machine on the ground.

"No!" the woman yelled to him, and he doubled his pace and the orthopter sprang into the sky, spinning a couple of Wasps out of their way with the displaced air.

Stenwold risked a single glance behind him to see what was happening. Marius was lying on his side, his skin turned from tan to ashen grey, his sole remaining soldier investigating the wound. Tisamon had opened his case and was stringing his greatbow. Another relic of the Bad Old Days, Stenwold knew, but he would not have swapped such a bow in Tisamon's hands for the latest repeating crossbow. The Mantis crouched at the still-open hatch and nocked an arrow. A moment later he loosed it and Stenwold saw, as he circled the airfield, another Wasp go whirling downward, sword spinning off separately, outreaching him as he fell.

"Away would be good!" Tisamon snapped, reaching into the case for another arrow.

"I have to gain height first," Stenwold told him, knowing that the Mantis would not understand. He was pulling the orthopter into a ponderously slow upward circle of the airfield as the steam-driven wings worked up and down. None of the other Mynan flying machines had got off the ground. He did not want to think about what might be happening in the city below them. He just pedalled and steered, watching a rising circle of Wasps below them, flying men with swords and spears milling in a furious swarm. Tisamon leant far out, securing his position with one knee and one elbow, and drew back the string.

*High enough.* Stenwold decided, and wrestled the orthopter out of its curve. But he had misjudged the angle and ended up sending it straight out over the teeming city. Below him a dozen Wasp soldiers passed by, oblivious, but Stenwold's attention was by now somewhere else.

"Hammer and tongs!" he swore. "Will you look at that!"

It was ugly as sin and it hung in the air as elegantly as a hanged man, but nevertheless it stayed up and there had to be some craft in that feat. A helioper in Wasp colours, a monstrous, uneven metal box with three spinning blades straining to keep it from crashing to the ground. There must have been hatches in its underbelly, he realized, because there was a stream of missiles falling constantly from it onto Myna. He thought they were rocks at first but, on seeing the explosions, decided they must be firepots or firepowder grenades.

*Why am I still flying at it?* He wrenched quickly at the simple wooden stick and the orthopter veered away, the Wasp helicopter sliding out of his frame of vision as he cast his newly acquired vehicle across the city and out over the walls. The orthopter was a simple piece of machinery, and the artificers back at his native city of Collegium, hundreds of miles away, would have called it “prentice stuff.” It was all Stenwold needed, though, for it could outpace the Wasp light airborne, and in only minutes their pursuers were dropping back, turning for the city again, and Tisamon could lower his bow.

The Wasp helicopter, however—that was a crude and primitive piece. Any self-respecting artificer would have been rightly ashamed of it. And yet it flew, and only five years ago the Wasps had possessed nothing like it.

“Marius . . .” he began. He could crane over his shoulder, but even while letting the machine glide on its canvas wings he dared not take his attention from the controls. “Marius, talk to me.”

“He is sorry,” said the woman, and after a moment’s blank surprise Stenwold realized that Marius must now be too weak to speak, but strong enough to send his thoughts into her mind.

“We have to tell them what has happened here,” Stenwold continued. “Marius, we have to tell Sarn. We must warn your city.”

“He says we are considered renegades there,” the woman replied impassively. “He says we can never go back.”

Beneath them the fields and small villages that were Myna’s tributary settlements swept past. “But Marius only left because he thought this was for your people’s good,” Stenwold said stubbornly. “He saw the threat even when they did not. You know this, and you have to tell them.”

“We can never go back there,” the woman said, and he realized she was speaking for herself this time. “Once the bonds of loyalty are broken, we can never go back.”

“But Marius—Sarn isn’t like the other Ant cities any more. There have been changes. There are even some of my own kin on the council there,” Stenwold insisted.

There was a lengthy silence from behind him, and he assumed that Marius must have died. He choked on a sob, but then the woman put a hand on his shoulder in a strong soldier’s grip.

“He says you must do what you can,” she told him softly, and even her intonation resembled Marius’s own. “He says he regrets that things have ended this way, and he also regrets that the others, Atryssa and Nero, were not with us, but he does not regret following you from his city, and he does not regret dying in this company.”

Stenwold wiped a hand across his eyes and felt the first shaking of his shoul-

ders. "Tell him . . ." he managed, but then the woman's hand twitched on his shoulder, just once, just for a moment, and he knew that Marius was dead.

He let out a long, racked breath.

"We can tell nobody about this, because nobody will listen," Tisamon said. "We tried to warn your people at Helleron that the Wasps were coming, and what did they say? That nobody would invade Helleron. They claimed that the city was too useful. That Wasps needed to trade and deal in arms like everyone else. They look upon the Empire as just another Ant city-state."

"And if we told your people?" asked Stenwold bitterly.

"Then they would simply not care. They have quarrels a thousand years old that they have yet to settle. They have no time for new ones." And Stenwold heard, to his surprise, an equal bitterness in Tisamon's voice. The Mantis was hinging his metal claw forward and back, rolling his fingers about the crosspiece to lay the blade flat against his arm, then bringing it out to jut forward from his knuckles. It was not a threat, but just the man seeking reassurance in his old rituals.

"We saw their map," Stenwold whispered. That one glimpse he had caught, of the Wasps' great map, had been a harsh education. A map of lands he had never seen, extending down to lands he knew all too well, the Lowlands of his home, and all sketched out with lines of advance and supply. A map of a projected conquest that stopped only with the Wasps' knowledge of their world.

"Nobody will care," Tisamon repeated, and there was a rare wisdom in his voice. "What is the Lowlands, anyway? A half dozen feuding city-states, some holdovers from the Days of Lore, when things were different, and perhaps a few men like yourself, trying to make sense of it all. The Wasps are a unity, we are a motley." The gloom about him deepened, and Stenwold knew that his thoughts were turning inexorably toward Atryssa, toward the betrayal. Stenwold wished he could find some other way to explain her absence and their failure at the gates.

"What will you do," he asked the Ant-kind woman, "if you cannot go home?"

"I will not be the first Ant renegade to go mercenary. If you now take us to Helleron I will sell my sword there," she said. "The market for us is good, and like to get better."

"The same for me," Tisamon confirmed.

"Tisamon—"

"No." There was more finality in the Mantis's voice than Stenwold had ever heard from him. "No return to Collegium for me, Stenwold. No debate and diplomacy. No society. No kind words, ever again. I followed you down that path once, and see where I am now."

"But—"

"I will stay at Helleron and I will oppose the Wasps the only way I can." With

careful movements Tisamon replaced his greatbow in its case. “You yourself have other means, Sten. You must go back to your college and your clever, machine-fingered people, and have them make ready. Of all of us, you were always the real hope of the future.”

Stenwold said nothing as, below them, the last of the straggling fields gave out, and a scrubby, dry landscape passed beneath them without so much as a whisper.