

SALUTE
THE DARK

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 3
BLOOD OF THE MANTIS

SALUTE THE DARK

A decorative flourish consisting of a central grey oval with ornate black scrollwork on either side, flanked by horizontal lines that end in small black dots.

SHADOWS OF THE APT

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



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*To my parents,
who are wondering how they lost out on book 3 to a dead Frenchman*

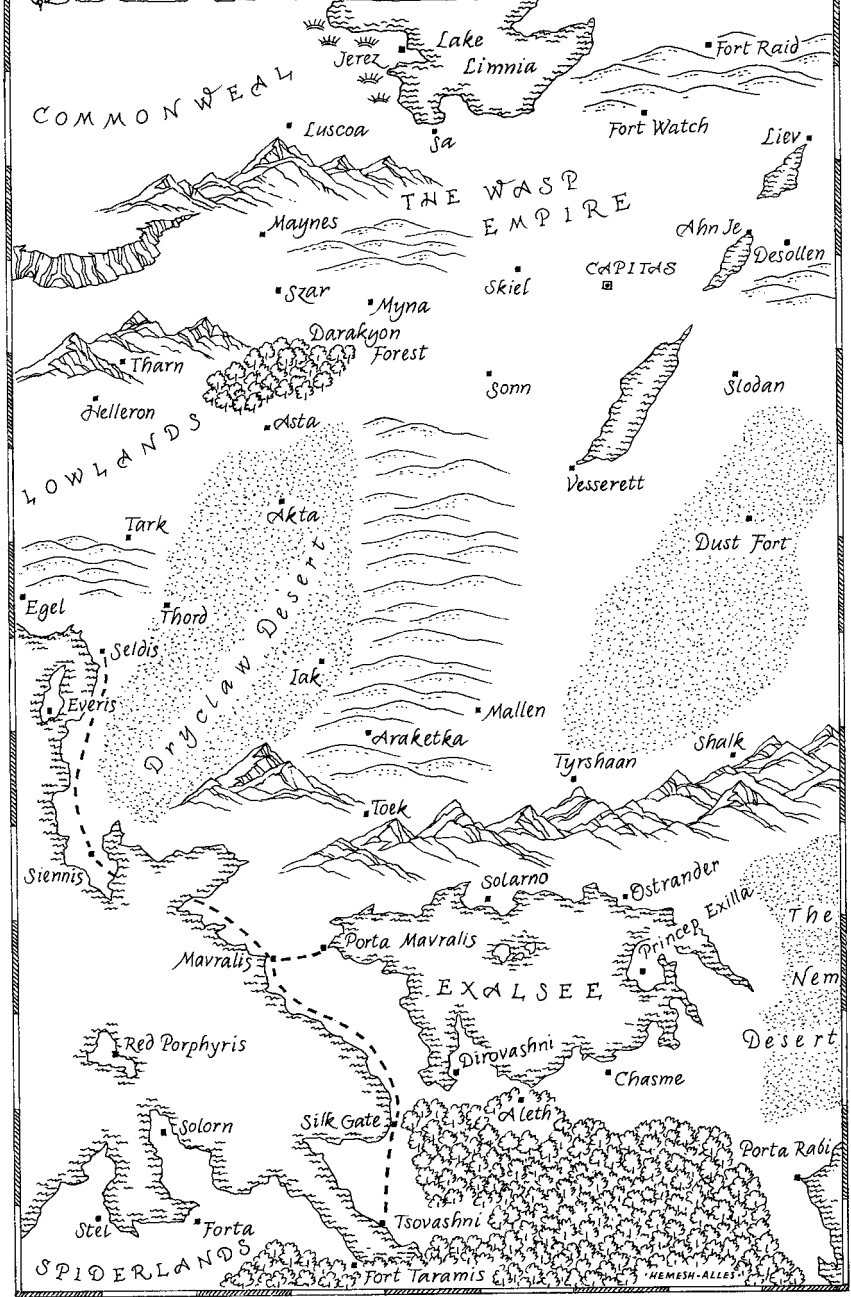


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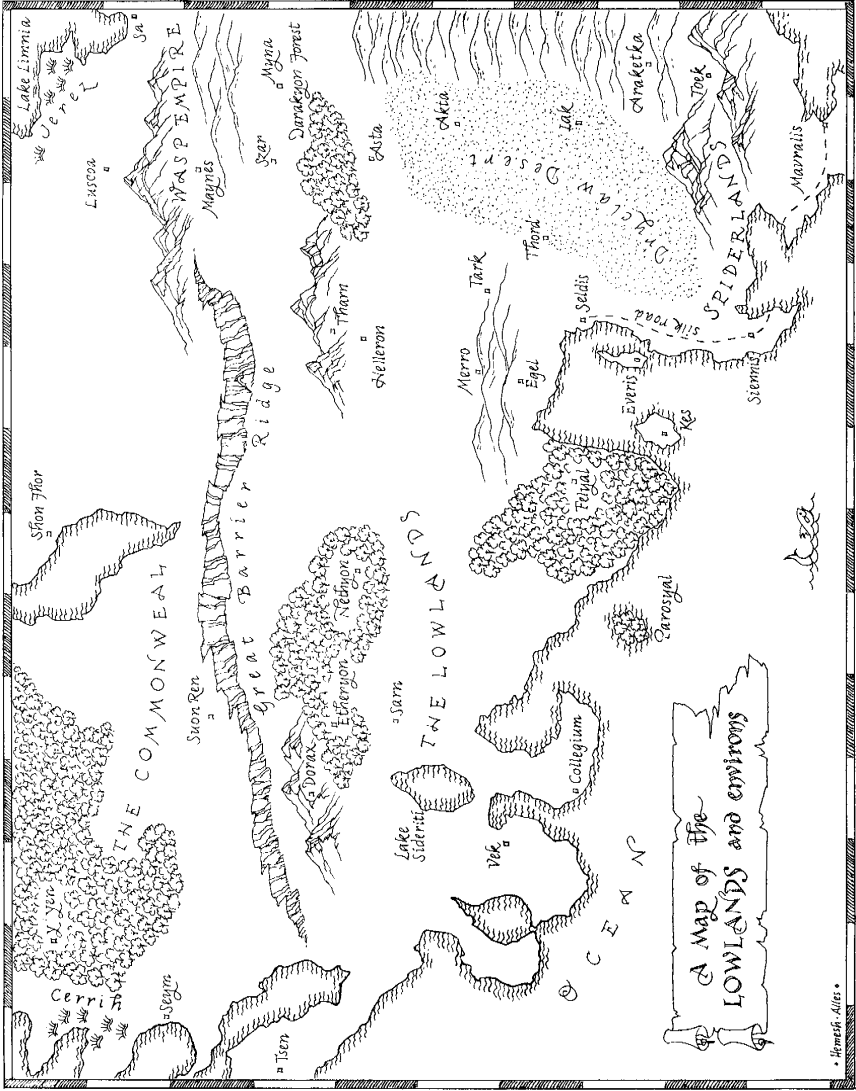
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A Map of the Empire
and lands south, showing the Exalsee



HEMESH-ALLES



A Map of the
LOWLANDS and environs



GLOSSARY

PEOPLE

STENWOLD MAKER—Beetle-kindens spymaster and statesman

CHEERWELL “CHE” MAKER—his niece

TISAMON—Mantis-kindens Weaponsmaster

TYNISA—his half-breed daughter, Stenwold’s ward

ACHAEOS—Moth-kindens magician, Che’s lover

ATRYSSA—Tynisa’s mother and Tisamon’s former lover, deceased

THALRIC—renegade Wasp-kindens, former Rekef major

NERO—Fly-kindens artist, old friend of Stenwold

FELISE MIENN—Dragonfly-kindens duellist

TAKI—Solarnese Fly-kindens aviatrix

LINEO THADSPAR—Beetle-kindens Speaker for the Collegium Assembly

BALKUS—renegade Sarnesh Ant-kindens, Stenwold’s agent

SPERRA—Fly-kindens, Stenwold’s agent

DESTRACHIS—Spider-kindens doctor, companion of Felise Mienn

PAROPS—Tarkesh Ant-kindens, leader of the free Tarkesh

JONS ALLANBRIDGE—Beetle-kindens aviator

PLIUS—foreign Ant-kindens in Sarn, Stenwold’s agent

PRINCE MINOR SALME “SALMA” DIEN—Dragonfly nobleman, leader of the Landsarmy

PRIZED OF DRAGONS—Butterfly-kindens, Salma’s lover

PHALMES—Mynan Soldier Beetle-kindens, former brigand, Salma’s lieutenant

TEORNIS OF THE ALDANRAEL—Spider-kindens Aristos and Lord-Martial

ODYSSA—Teornis’ chief agent in Solarno

CESTA—Assassin Bug-kindens killer in Solarno

SCOBRAAN—Soldier Beetle-kindens aviator in Solarno

LAETRIMAE—Mantis-kindens ghost from the Shadow Box

XARAEA—Moth-kindens intelligencer in Tharn
TEGREC—Wasp-kindens major and magician, governor of occupied Tharn
RAEKA—Wasp-kindens, Tegrec's body-slave

KYMENE—Mynan Soldier Beetle-kindens, leader of the Mynan resistance
CHYSES—Mynan Soldier Beetle-kindens, Kymene's lieutenant
HOKIAK—Scorpion-kindens black-marketeer in Myna
GRYLLIS—Spider-kindens, Hokiak's business partner

ALVDAN II—Emperor of the Wasps
SEDA—his sister
MAXIN—Wasp-kindens general, Rekef
REINER—Wasp-kindens general, Rekef
BRUGAN—Wasp-kindens general, Rekef
MALKAN—Wasp-kindens general, Seventh Army
LATVOC—Wasp-kindens colonel, Rekef, Reiner's aide
GAN—Wasp-kindens colonel, governor of Szar
ULTHER—Wasp-kindens colonel, former governor of Myna, deceased
AXRAD—Wasp-kindens lieutenant and aviator
UCTEBRI THE SARCAD—Mosquito-kindens slave and magician
GJEGEVEY—Woodlouse-kindens slave and advisor

DARIANDREPHOS (“DREPHOS”)—half-breed auxillian-colonel and master artificer
TOTHO—half-breed artificer in Drephos' cadre
KASZAAT—Bee-kindens artificer, in Drephos' cadre
BIG GREYV—Mole Cricket-kindens artificer, in Drephos' cadre

PLACES

CAPITAS—the capital of the Empire
ASTA—Wasp staging post for the Lowlands Campaign
COLLEGIUM—Beetle-kindens city, home of the Great College
THE COMMONWEAL—Dragonfly-kindens state north of the Lowlands, partly occupied by the Empire
THE DARAKYON—forest, formerly a Mantis stronghold, now haunted
HELLERON—Beetle-kindens factory city, occupied
MYNA—Soldier Beetle city conquered by the Wasps
SARN—Ant-kindens city-state allied to Collegium
SOLARNO—Spider-ruled city on the Exalsee, occupied

SPIDERLANDS—Spider-kindens cities south of the Lowlands, believed rich and endless
SZAR—Bee-kindens city, conquered by the Wasps
TARK—Ant-kindens city-state, occupied
THARN—Moth-kindens hold, occupied
VEK—Ant-kindens city-state, recently at war with Collegium

ORGANIZATIONS AND THINGS

THE ANCIENT LEAGUE—a Moth–Mantis alliance of Dorax, Nethyon and Etheryon
ASSEMBLY—the elected ruling body of Collegium, meeting in the Amphiophos
BUOYANT MAIDEN—Jons Allanbridge’s airship
CRYSTAL STANDARD, PATH OF JADE, SATIN TRAIL—Solarnese political parties
ESCA VOLENTI—Taki’s orthopter
GREAT COLLEGE in Collegium, the cultural heart of the Lowlands
LANDSARMY—force of refugees and irregulars led by Salma
MERCERS—Dragonfly-kindens order of knights errant
PROWESS FORUM—duelling venue in Collegium
REKEF—the Wasp Empire’s secret service
SHADOW BOX—an artefact holding the heart of the Darakyon
SKRYRES—the magician-leaders of the Moth-kindens
STARNEST—great Wasp airship used in the conquest of Solarno
WINGED FURIES—name for the Wasp Seventh Army



SUMMARY

Following his victory over the Sarnesh field army, General Malkan prepares to lead his army toward Sarn itself to destroy the military capability of the Lowlands. The alliance of powers that Stenwold brokered at Sarn is still gathering its strength, so it falls to Salma's Landsarmy to hinder the Wasp advance while the Lowlanders prepare.

Over the winter the Wasps have added the Spider city of Solarno to their Empire, and also the Moth hold of Tharn. However, careful manipulation by the Moth Skryres and their agent Xaraea has ensured that Tegrec, the new governor of Tharn, is secretly sympathetic to their case, being a magician who has hidden his true nature from his kin.

Meanwhile the maverick artificer Drephos has been ordered to take his secret weapons to the city of Szar, whose Bee-kind people are in open revolt after the death of their queen, whom the Empire was holding as hostage for their continued servitude. However, amongst Drephos' cadre is Kaszaat, a former citizen of Szar, and the lover of Stenwold's former student Totho.

The mission to recover the Shadow Box has failed after Tynisa, under the control of the Mosquito-kind Uctebri, stabbed Achaeos, leaving him severely wounded. The box, meanwhile, has fallen into Uctebri's hands, and he has promised the Wasp Emperor that he will use the artefact to make Alvdan immortal. However, at the same time, Uctebri plots with the Emperor's sister to dethrone her brother and make her into an undying Empress.

W*hy do these things always come to plague us?*

A fatuous thought for a man about to fight a war, but the war had not even begun and already Stenwold had seen too many people hurt—and hurt on his business too. The knot of horror he had felt when they had brought Sperra out had not gone away. And now this.

Achaeos this time. O poor Che, my poor Che, to have come home to this.

And not just Che.

“I am so very sorry,” Stenwold said softly. He tried to put a hand on Tynisa’s shoulder, but she flinched away from it and would not let him.

“It isn’t me you should be sorry for,” she said. He had never seen his ward like this—Tynisa had gone through life without fear, the face and grace of her Spider mother, the lethal skill of her Mantis father and a Collegium citizen’s implacable self-confidence. Now she was standing at the door of the College infirmary, afraid to go in, yet unwilling to leave. The beds were not short of patients still recovering from injuries sustained in the Vekken siege. On one bed lay Achaeos, his eyes closed, grey skin gone so pale it was almost white. He had yet to wake up, yet to speak. The College physicians would not commit themselves on whether he ever would.

By his bed sat Che, holding the ailing Moth-kinde’s hand. The sight of her clearly tore into Tynisa with a raw pain, yet she could not take her eyes away. Her sword had put Achaeos where he was, though Stenwold had not needed her father’s protestations of magic to know that she could not have meant the man any harm. That itself was a tragedy, but Stenwold knew that it was the injury to Tynisa’s foster sister that cut deepest: the grief inflicted on Che, that marvel of innocence and foolishness, who would never again be quite the same.

Tynisa shuddered, and Stenwold as much as saw her think, *I have now severed her from me for always.*

“This war is not finished with its casualties,” Stenwold murmured. He was thinking about Sperra again, his thoughts returning and returning to the moment when the Sarnesh soldiers had brought out the little Fly-kinde’s tortured form. Sperra, who was walking now, even flying a little, but who would never forget

what had been done to her. *And by her allies! We do not even need the Wasps to maim us when we can harm ourselves.*

“Tynisa . . .” he began.

“No,” she said, “I don’t care what you want, Sten. I can’t go out there again. I’m not safe now. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Tisamon has explained to me what happened—”

“My father has simply invented something to make himself feel better.” She glared round at him. “Don’t tell me you believe it?”

“I believe that he truly believes it, and he knows more about such things than I.” Stenwold shrugged. “Tynisa, you’ve been to the shrine on Parosyal.”

“That was different. They drugged me, and I saw . . . visions, hallucinations.”

He stared down at his hands. “I used to think the way you do, but I’ve now seen so much. . . . There is more to life than just the things we can see. Achaeos would say the same, of course.”

“Much good it did him.”

“Tynisa . . . will you come with me to the council?”

“No,” she said. “I’m sorry, Sten, but I can’t. I can’t trust myself anymore. You’ll have to find someone else.”

He nodded slowly. *I can’t force her, for all that I need her.* Perhaps Tisamon would have more luck in persuading her. He spared one more look for his niece, Che, and then turned to go.

So the ranks diminish, he reflected sadly, yet the Lowlands was readying itself for battle. Sarn and Collegium and the Ancient League were summoning their allies. Stenwold needed every agent he could get, and he was still short, but he could not make the numbers add up. Sperra was now lost to him, as was Achaeos, who could have proved so useful amongst his own people. Tynisa would not fight, and he had not even asked Che to help him. His resources were growing fewer even as the Wasp armies massed.

He arrived at the council chamber early. Today was another war council and people were still calling him War Master since the siege. He was expecting to see old Lineo Thadspar turn up, and a score or so of other Assemblers, each with their own schemes and advice. There would be Tisamon as well, standing at the back and saying nothing, with a look of disdain on his face . . . and probably the Spider, Teornis . . .

Even as he thought the name the man himself came striding into the chamber, rubbing his hands briskly. He had chosen to wear a bone and leather cuirass over a red silk robe, while a cap of chitin, adorned with the feathery fronds of moth antennae, made him look like some ancient warrior-mystic. Behind him came the diminutive form of the Fly-kinde pilot known as Taki, who had brought Che home from her birthplace of Solarno, fleeing in the face of yet another Wasp conquest.

“Master Maker,” the Spider said, “times move faster than we do, I’m afraid.”

“In what way?”

“I’ve had news that calls me home, as swiftly as I can make the journey. I’ve arranged for an airship to take me and my retinue to Seldis.”

“The Wasps?”

“Camped outside our borders again, but this time it doesn’t look as though the Mantis-kinde will do our dirty work for us.”

“You’ll fight, then? The Spider-kinde will fight?”

“Impossible to say.” Teornis smiled. “However, retinues and mercenaries are mustering at Seldis and Everis, and once they’re gathered there I can make use of them. What’s the use of my being a Lord-Martial if I can’t lord it? Meanwhile, there’s more business afoot at Mavralis on the Exalsee, which is why I’m taking Taki here with me. I fancy the Wasps could do with being jabbed in the rear.”

Stenwold nodded. “My reports seem to suggest that, with their occupation of Solarno, the Empire is becoming overextended.”

Behind Teornis’ smile, something slipped aside to reveal for a moment the genuine tension within him. “My friend, we had better *hope* so, because if they aren’t, then there’ll soon be a great deal of black and yellow all the way down the southern coast. It may all come down to the abilities of some Wasp clerk filing supply requisitions in Asta, Master Maker. As you know, wars are fought by soldiers but won by logistics.”

“And you’re happy to go with Teornis?” Stenwold asked Taki.

“Sieur Maker, remember I’ve served Spider-kinde all my life. I want to free my city, and the Spiders want my city free.”

“There is another travelling companion that I shall be taking from your side, Master Maker. I trust you will have no objections,” Teornis said.

Stenwold looked at him blankly. For some reason he thought, *Tynisa?*—perhaps because the girl so clearly wanted to go somewhere and find some purpose to take her away from her guilt.

Teornis’ smile twitched. “I believe Master Nero wishes a return to Solarno. I had not realized that the city had so exercised its . . . charms on him.”

With that, Stenwold could not help glancing down at Taki and thinking, at first, *The old lecher*, and then, *I am in no position to judge!*

“What use he’ll be, I don’t know,” Taki remarked. “I just hope he can keep up with me, is all. But, anyway, we’ve got him, so we’ll just have to make some use of him.”

The other members of the war council now were filing in and taking their places, so Stenwold clasped hands with Teornis and then with the Fly girl.

“Good fortune to you,” he said.

“Good fortune to all of us,” Taki corrected him.



His stance was perfect for his blade: crouched a little, knees bent and balanced to move him forward or back at the speed of his reflexes, not of his thoughts. His arm was not straight like the arrow of a rapier duellist's stance, but crooked in so that the claw blade ran almost down the line of his forearm, looking deceptively passive but ready to lash out and draw back just like the killing arms of his people's insect namesake. His off-hand was held out, pointing forward, spines flexing all down his arm to the elbow, ready to beat aside an attack and thus create a gap into which his claw would strike.

He looked down the crooked line of his arm and claw. He looked at her.

Her stance was different in almost every particular, yet identical in its perfect poise, in its patience. She stood with one leg forward and almost fully extended, the other bent beneath her; her back straight. The sword, with its long hilt gripped in both hands, she held low and almost vertical: her entire being and energy focused on its leading edge, its diamond point.

They had not moved, either of them, for what must have been ten minutes, barely even a blink.

He wore his arming jacket of course, dark green padded cloth with his gold brooch, the Weaponmaster pin, on the left breast. She had eschewed her armour, instead wearing the closest she could find to Dragonfly garb: loose clothes of Spider silk pulled in tight at the waist, the forearms, the calves. She wore shimmering turquoise and gold, with a black sash for a belt.

Tisamon and Felise Mienn watched each other narrowly and waited for the other's move.

His soul was focused on the razor edge of her sword. They could only spar with real blades. To propose otherwise would be an insult to their skill.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was a memory of when they had fought each other on the streets of Collegium. She had thought him a Wasp agent, and for the first time in many years Tisamon had been truly fighting for his life in single combat. For ten years previously he had made a name for himself in Helleron, hiring his blade to whoever could meet his fees. The money was nothing; the fights were all. He had thought that he was taking pride in his skills, displayed in all those brawls and formal duels, but now he discovered that he had been waiting to meet the one who could properly challenge him. In Collegium she had found him.

After they had fought, after she had stepped out of the fight so abruptly, she had left him so inflamed, so fiercely *alive*, that he had even spared Stenwold's Spider traitress. In that moment it had not mattered, because only *she* signified—only this woman who had walked in and out of his world in those brief minutes, to scar it forever.

Somewhere deep inside, he was now out of balance, as though he had been struck, back then, and was still reeling. Seventeen years of penance he had endured, in Helleron and other places: penance for betraying his race by consorting with the Spider Atryssa; penance for trusting in her false heart; and, at the last, penance for mistrusting her, who had died while being true to him. *And I loved her, and she did not betray me after all.* It was the most jagged wound of them all that it had been he who abandoned her, in the end. *How she would have hated me, had she lived.*

His eyes were now fixed on Felise's—her eyes that were almond shaped, and shifted from blue to green even as he watched and waited for her to move.

It has been so long. His kind bore some of their scars forever, but it had been so long. *And I have broken the rules before.* Felise's face remained impassive. He could read nothing in it. He sensed no tension there, could foretell no gathering strike.

He had been dead, he realized, those seventeen years. Only Stenwold's return and the discovery of Tynisa had awoken him to some kind of half-life, but beneath it all some part of him had slumbered on. *Until Felise.* He had not known who she was, what her purpose, or her allegiance. He had not needed to, and would not have cared if she had served a Spider lady or been a slave of the Arcanum, or even worn the black and gold. Skill spoke a language all its own and, when he had fought her, even as her blade drove for his heart, he had thrilled to it. If she had killed him, as well she might, then he would have cried out in joy as her sword ran him through.

And he knew she understood that. She was no Mantis, but her kind understood such perfection, such dedication.

She moved, stepping in suddenly with a thrust. He caught it with his claw, parrying it aside, his off-hand lashing in to beat her blade aside.

They stopped, that single move and countermove frozen in time, standing now within each other's reach, face to face. She would seem beautiful to others, if made up as the Spider-kind painted their faces, yet to him she was beautiful in every line of her body. Something within him was screaming, as he moved his hand to within an inch of her face, the spines flexing on his forearm.

There was a heavy tread, heralding a Beetle-kind approaching the silence of the Prowess Forum. It was dark outside, and had been before they began his poised vigil. Tisamon broke away first, still gazing into her face.

It was Stenwold who entered, looking more haggard than ever. He nodded at the two of them but saw nothing of what had existed between them.

"You weren't at the war meeting," he said.

"I'm a soldier, not a tactician," Tisamon reminded him.

Stenwold considered that. "True, I suppose. I missed you, though. I like to be able to look over at you and remind myself of the reality of warfare. How so many people became experts on fighting wars without ever picking up a sword I'll never know."

He frowned suddenly, becoming aware in some small way of the tension here. “Is . . . everything all right?”

“Just sparring,” Tisamon replied briefly. Then: “Tell me, you and your . . . Spider girl, you are happy together, yes?”

Stenwold grinned a little sheepishly. “More than I deserve, with Arianna, yes. But you were right in what you said. After all, the war’s on us now, and who knows where I’ll be when it’s done—or where she’ll be . . .” He pressed his lips together then, no doubt imagining some harm coming to her, or to himself. “Anyway, I’ll leave you now to your practice. Four hours of talk is enough for any man.”

Tisamon barely noticed as the Beetle shuffled off. He himself had said that, had he not? He had said that Stenwold should take happiness where he could, and when he could. The future was looking uncertain—less certain by the day. A hundred thousand Wasps and more were on the march beneath their black and gold banner. There was a score of battlefields ahead waiting to be filled with the fallen.

Tisamon settled into a new stance, holding his claw high and back now, his pose more aggressive, more reckless. Felise countered with a low stance, one leg straight to one side, the other bent beneath her, sword held at waist level and pointing directly at his heart.

There was something in her eyes that pierced him. He dared not name it, but he saw it. He felt the wound.