

**THE
SCARAB
PATH**

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

SHADOWS OF THE APT 4
SALUTE THE DARK

THE SCARAB PATH



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To Val Patchett, who taught me much of the writer's art

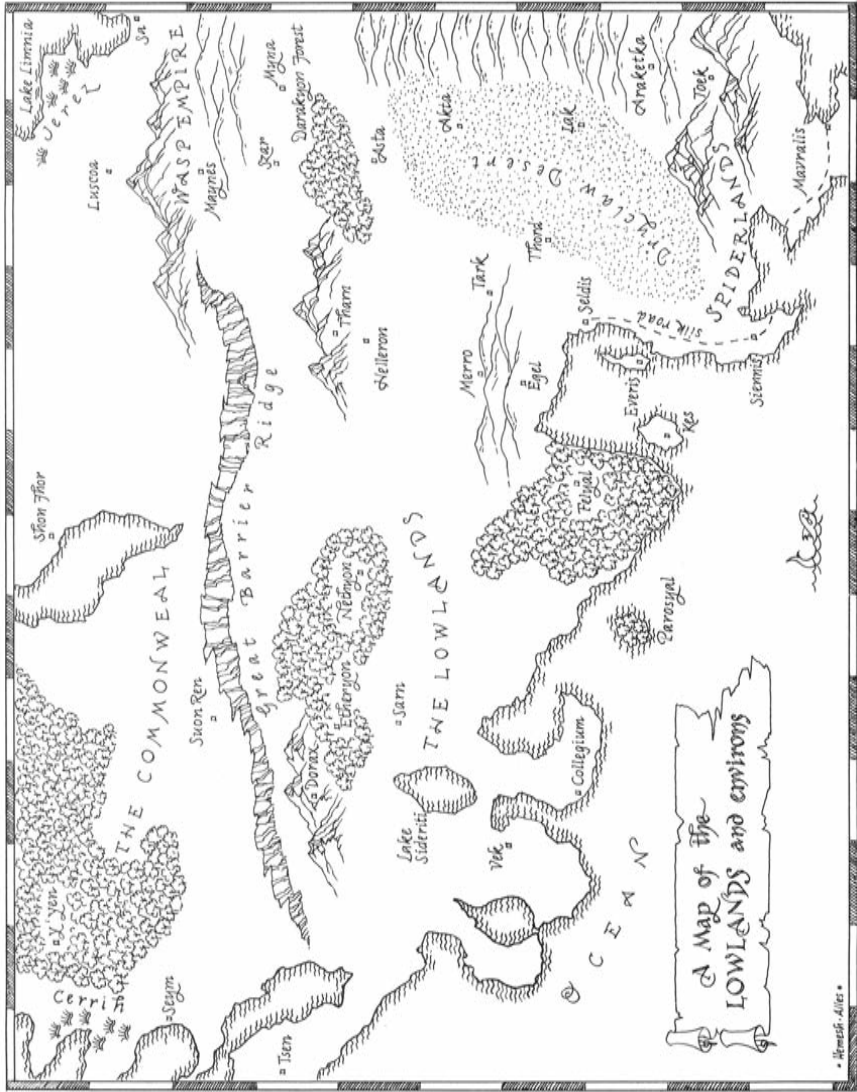


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For the better edification of the reader, there is a complete glossary of people, places, and things included in this book, as well as a complete cast list for the series on the website.





A Map of the
LOWLANDS and environs



GLOSSARY

PEOPLE

- ACCIOUS—Vekken Ant-kinde ambassador
ACHAEOS—Moth-kinde, lover of Cheerwell, deceased
AKNETH—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde tax gatherer
AMNON—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde, First Soldier of Khanaphes
ANGVED—Wasp-kinde engineer
ARIANNA—Spider-kinde former agent, Stenwold's lover
BERJEK GRIPSHOD—Beetle-kinde scholar
BRUGAN—Wasp-kinde Lord General of the Rekef
CHEERWELL MAKER (“CHE”)—Beetle-kinde scholar, niece of Stenwold
COROLLY VASTERN—Beetle-kinde Rekef agent
CORCORAN—Solarnese Beetle-kinde factor for the Iron Glove
DANNEC—Wasp-kinde Rekef officer
DARIANDREPHOS (“DREPHOS”)—half-breed artificer, former Imperial officer
DARISSET—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde soldier
ETHMET—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde, First Minister of Khanaphes
FAIGHL—Solarnese Beetle-kinde Iron Glove guard
THE FISHER—Khanaphir half-breed information broker
GENRAKI—Scorpion-kinde warrior
GJEJEVEY—Woodlouse-kinde advisor to the Empress
GRAM—Wasp-kinde Rekef agent
HAKKON—half-breed helmsman with the Iron Glove
HALMIR—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde soldier
HARBIR THE ARRANGER—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde assassin
HELMESS BROILER—Beetle-kinde statesman, enemy of Stenwold
HRATHEN—half-breed Rekef agent
JAKAL—Scorpion-kinde, Warlord of the Many of Nem
JODRY DRILLEN—Beetle-kinde statesman, ally of Stenwold
JONS ALLANBRIDGE—Beetle-kinde aviator
KHAM—Khanaphir Beetle-kinde soldier
KADRO—Fly-kinde scholar

KOVALIN—Scorpion-kindens chieftain
MALIUS—Vekken Ant-kindens ambassador
MARGER—Wasp-kindens Rekef officer
MANNERLY GORGET (“MANNY”)—Beetle-kindens scholar
MEYR—Mole Cricket-kindens Iron Glove factor
MOTHER—half-breed Fir eater
OSGAN—Wasp-kindens supply officer
PARROLS—Beetle-kindens aviator
PETRI COGGEN—Beetle-kindens scholar, Kadro’s assistant
PRAEDA RAKESPEAR—Beetle-kindens scholar
PRAVOC—Wasp-kindens colonel
PTASMON—Khanaphir Beetle-kindens soldier
SEDA—Wasp-kindens Empress
STENWOLD MAKER—Beetle-kindens statesman
SULVEC—Wasp-kindens Rekef officer
TATHBIR—Khanaphir Beetle-kindens Minister
TE BERRO—Fly-kindens spy, former Rekef agent
TE RALLO ALLA-MAANI (“TRALLO”)—Fly-kindens caravan master
TE SCHOLA TAKI-AMRE (“TAKI”)—Fly-kindens aviatrix
TEGREC—Wasp-kindens ambassador from Tharn to the Empire
TEUTHETE—Mantis-kindens Chosen
THALRIC—Wasp-kindens Regent of the Empire, former Rekef officer
TIRADO—Fly-kindens Iron Glove messenger
TISAMON—Mantis-kindens Weaponsmaster, deceased
TOTHO—half-breed artificer, leader of the Iron Glove
TYNISA—half-breed Weaponsmaster, daughter of Tisamon
VARGEN—Wasp-kindens governor of Tyrshaan
VOLLEN—Wasp-kindens Rekef agent

PLACES

ALIM—forest, source of the river Jamail
CAPITAS—chief city of the Wasp Empire
CHASME—city on the Exalsee, noted for its mercenary artificers
COLLEGIUM—Beetle-kindens city in the Lowlands, noted for its academics
COMMONWEAL—Dragonfly state north of the Lowlands, part-occupied by the Empire
DARAKYON—forest, formerly Mantis-kindens hold and, until recently, haunted
EXALSEE—inland sea east of the Lowlands

HELLERON—Beetle-kindens city in the Lowlands, noted for its merchants
JAMAIL—river running from the Forest Alim to Khanaphes
KHANAPHES—Beetle-kindens city far to the east of the Exalsee
MAYNES—Ant-kindens city, formerly occupied by the Empire
MYNA—Beetle-kindens city, formerly occupied by the Empire
OSTRANDER—Ant-kindens outpost on the Exalsee
PORTA RABI—Solarnese outpost on the Sunroad Sea
SARN—Ant-kindens city allied with Collegium
SHALK—Fly-kindens city in the Empire
SOLARNO—Spider-ruled city on the Exalsee
SONN—Beetle-kindens city in the Empire
SPIDERLANDS—wide expanse south of the Lowlands, ruled by the Spider-kindens
SZAR—Bee-kindens city, formerly occupied by the Empire
TARK—Ant-kindens city, formerly occupied by the Empire
THREE CITY ALLIANCE—coalition of Myna, Szar and Maynes
TYRSHAAN—Bee-kindens city in the Empire
VEK—Ant-kindens city, traditional enemies of Collegium
ZAFIR—Khanaphir city on the Jamail

ORGANIZATIONS AND THINGS

ASSEMBLY—governing body of Collegium, elected
CONSORTIUM OF THE HONEST—the mercantile arm of the Empire
GREAT COLLEGE—academic establishment at the heart of Collegium
IRON GLOVE—a merchant house trading out of Chasme
MERCERS—agents of the Commonwealth's Monarch
REKEF INLANDER—the Imperial secret service arm devoted to internal security
REKEF OUTLANDER—the Imperial secret service arm devoted to external security
SCRIPTORA—the seat of Khanaphir government
SKRYRES—the magi-rulers of the Moth-kindens
SPEAKER—the leader of the Assembly
TWELVE-YEAR WAR—the campaign waged against the Commonwealth by the Wasp Empire.



SUMMARY

The war that the Wasp Empire brought against all the cities of the Lowlands has ended in a stalemate and an uneasy truce.

The Mantis-kindens weaponsmaster Tisamon, in his dying moments, destroyed the Shadow Box that held all the darkness of the Forest Darakyon and the twisted history of his race. In the same clash, the Emperor himself died, as did the Mosquito-kindens Uctebri, who had sought to use the Box to make the Emperor's sister, Seda, an immortal puppet-queen. Now Seda has become Empress of a people never ruled by a woman before, and while she tries to hold onto power, the rest of the world is safe from Imperial ambition.

At Seda's side is Thalric, once an officer in the Rekef, the Imperial secret service, and then a fugitive on the run from his own people. His war record is one of dubious deeds done for both sides, but he provides Seda with a male figurehead while she rebuilds her Empire.

In Collegium, Stenwold Maker works on preparing his city for a return of hostilities that he sees as inevitable. Reminders of the toll that the war took are all around him, though. As well as Tisamon himself, it is the loss of the Moth-kindens, Achaeos, that cuts most deeply. Dying of his injuries during a ritual that invoked the power of the Darakyon, Achaeos left behind two women whose lives are shattered by his death. One is Stenwold's niece Cheerwell, Achaeos's lover. The other is Tisamon's daughter, Tynisa, who gave him the wound that eventually killed him.



PART I

THE ROAD TO KHANAPHEG

He was Kadro, Master Kadro of the Great College of the city of Collegium, which was half a world away and no help to him now. A little Fly-kindens man, long hair going grey and face unshaven, waiting for the pitchest dark before beginning his work. *Oh, I have striven all my life against the way my race is seen.* The perception of Fly-kindens as thieves, as rogues, as a feckless, rootless underclass in any city you cared to name. He had thought that he was beyond that, Master Kadro the antiquarian and historian, who had stood before a class of twenty avid scholars and propounded his learning. He had stood on a box, certainly, so as to be seen over the lectern, but he had stood there nonetheless.

And here he was, skulking like a villain as the evening drew on and the city below him grew quiet and still. The farmers would have come in from their fields by now. They would be lighting the beacons along the great wall. They would eventually be going to sleep. Those sentries that remained would be blind to the night hanging beyond their small fires. Kadro, who could see in the dark as the locals could not, would then strike. It was a poor way for a guest to treat his hosts, but he was beginning to believe that his hosts had not been entirely honest with him.

We sighted the walls of Khanaphes today. After the wastelands it was a view to take the breath away. Golden stone raised higher than the walls of Collegium or of any Ant city-state—and with statues piled on that—architecturally bewildering but, given the people that live here, I suppose it's not surprising. Huge buildings and broad avenues; every major building constructed vastly out of scale. For a man of my stature it was daunting—even for the locals it must make them feel like midgets. Beyond the walls, the strip of green that is the river's attendant foliage runs north, a single channel of life in the desert.

Everyone apparently pleased to see us—especially pleased to see Petri—much polite interest in Collegium but a little standoffish, as though news of a city inhabited by their close kin was something they heard every other day. Evening of the first day, and we seem to have been absorbed—found a place and now genteelly ignored, as the life of Khanaphes moves around us like a sedate and well-oiled machine.

Kadro reread it with a shake of his head. *How little I knew, then.* Crouching high above the plaza, with its great hollowed pyramid, he watched the torches of a patrol pass indolently by. He had not been noticed, either in absence or by presence. His heart was hammering. This sneaking around was not his trade. The deftness of the Fly-kindens, his birthright, had mouldered for a good long while before being given an airing now. He was lucky his wings still worked. *How they would scoff at me, back home.* Collegium born and bred, and living amongst the cumbersome, grounded Beetle-kindens all his life, he had almost forgotten that he was more than a pedestrian himself.

Now! he told himself, but still he did not go, locking into place instead, clutching flat against the stone like a badly rendered piece of sculpture. They were mad keen on their carvings here in Khanaphes. It was obviously the main outlet for all their stunted creativity, he decided. They could never leave a stone surface blank when they could chisel intricate little stories and histories into it. Histories that revealed nothing. Stories that hinted at everything. This whole city was just a maddening riddle created specifically to drive an aging Fly-kindens academic insane. And here was the culmination of his insanity.

It was totally dark now. There was a patchy spread of cloud above, too, which had recommended tonight to him: a rare occurrence out here on the fringes of this nameless desert. Nameless in the eyes of Collegium, anyway. In a lifetime of poring over the oldest of maps, Kadro had seldom come across the city of Khanaphes. The name existed only in those ancient, unintelligible scrawls that the Moth-kindens left behind, after the revolution had forced them out. The maps of Beetle merchant venturers barely admitted to its existence, barely gave it credence or fixed location, as though some conspiracy of cartographers existed to deny that a city called Khanaphes had ever taken physical shape. *East, somewhere east,* the stories ran: a city founded by the Beetle-kindens, and whose name, to those few academics who cared, was inseparable from legend and Inapt fancy.

And here he was, looking over this city, this great river Jamail with its acres of marshy delta and the desert that the locals called the Nem—all nothing but names to the academics of Collegium, until now.

It was the war, he knew, that had opened up so much more of the wider world to the Lowlands. Suddenly there had been a lot of new faces seen in the city, in the College even: Imperial diplomats and their slaves of many kindens, Solarnese Fly-kindens or the sandy-skinned near-Beetles they bred there, Spiderlands Aristoi, and even the occasional brooding Commonwealer. The world was bigger than it had ever been, and yet Kadro had found new territory still. The ever-talking Solarnese had eventually got around to comparing maps, and there, lying at the edge of their world, had been the winding blue line of a river with a jewel at its mouth: Khanaphes.

He shifted on his high perch, digging fingers into the reliefs to keep his balance. *They build high here, yet they never look up.* Rents in the cloud passed bands of silver moonlight over the Scriptoria, the big, brooding mausoleum that served Khanaphes as the seat of its administration. The ember glow of a rush-light was visible in one high window as some clerk continued working all hours for the implacable bureaucracy he served. Below the window rose great columns that supported the building's facade, carved from huge slabs of stone to resemble scaly cycads. This was such a serious city, where nobody hurried and everyone was busy, and it was all just an act. He was sure of that by now. It was all to take one's attention off the fact that there was something missing from the public face of Khanaphes. The city was intrinsically hollow.

This city of contradictions. To find an outpost of what should be civilization all these miles east of Solarno, untouched by the Wasp Empire, untouched by the squabbles of the Exalsee or the machinations of the Spiders . . . and yet to find it untouched, also, by time.

Khanaphes has welcomed me, and yet excluded me. Petri does not feel it, but she was always a dull tool. There is a darkness at the heart of this city, and it calls for me.

Last night's entry. He should have left this journal with Petri, just in case.

The heart of Khanaphes yawned for him, here overlooking this grand plaza. They liked their space, here. After they had won a victory against the Many of Nem, they had paraded their chariots all around this square, their soldiers and their banners, before immortalizing their own triumph on further expanses of stone. But who had they been parading for? Not for the ministers, who had stood with heads bowed throughout; not for the common people of the city, who had been away at their daily tasks. It had been for the *others*.

There *were* others. Kadro was convinced of that now. They were spoken of so often that their name became meaningless, and therefore they were never truly spoken of at all, as if held so close to the face that they could not be focused on. *Here* was the heart, though. If Khanaphes was holding a secret, then it was here in the tombs.

In the centre of the plaza stood the pyramid. It was a squat thing, rising just thirty feet in giant steps, and was sliced off broadly at the top, to provide a summit ringed with huge statues. From his high vantage, a vantage that the structure's earth-bound builders could never have enjoyed, Kadro could see that within the ring of statues' silent vigil there was a pit, descending into a darkness that his eyes had yet to pierce. It was the great unspoken *what* at the centre of Khanaphes, and tonight he intended to plumb it.

A bell rang deep within the city, maybe a late ship warning the docks of its approach. The sound took up all of the night, low and deep as wells, for the bells

of Khanaphir ships were as hugely out of scale as the rest of the city. Aside from the faint scratchings of crickets and cicadas from the riverbanks, there was no other sound in the darkness.

Petri would already be looking for him. By tomorrow she would be asking questions of their hosts, in her well-meaning and perplexed manner. She would bumble about and make a mild nuisance of herself, and yet be utterly, patently oblivious to what was going on. That was good. It meant that, if something bad happened to him, if he was caught, then they would not suspect her of any complicity. He hoped that was the case, anyway. He had no guarantees.

With a flicker and flare of his wings he coasted gently down to stand between two of the statues. The Khanaphir really loved their statues, and these were huge and strange. It had been the expressions on their white stone faces that had drawn him here in the first place. *They know something*. They were older than the rest, and bigger than most, and better made, and *different*. There was no man or woman in Khanaphes who could lay claim to those beautiful, arrogant and soulless smiles.

He now crouched between the pyramid summit's edge and the pit. The same rush-light ember still glinted in a high-up window of the Scriptoria, that diligent clerk hard at work. Or perhaps it was a spy, tracking Kadro in the darkness? The Fly-kinde huddled closer, trusting to the bulk of the statues to conceal him. *They would have come for me, by now, if they knew*. He had no choice but to believe it. They had a word here: *reverence*. It was not the word that the Collegium scholars thought they knew: here it carried tomes of unspoken fears. It was stamped on all the minds and faces of Khanaphes.

He peered down cautiously, into the black. The shaft fell into a gloom that even his eyes wrestled with. *The Royal Tombs of Khanaphes*, he told himself, and Kadro of Collegium will be the first outlander to enter there in a thousand years. The thought brought a rush of excitement that dispelled the fear. He had always been a man to dig in strange places. Back in Collegium he had been a bit of a maverick, dashing all over the Lowlands to look at unusual rocks or talk to wizened mystics. There had always been method in his research, though, as he negotiated with grim Moth-kinde or bandied words with shrewd Spiders. There had always been a trail to follow and, although he could not have known at the start, that trail led here.

All around him the statues kept silent guard, and he even summoned courage enough to grin at them. If the Khanaphir had wanted to keep him out, they should have posted a living watch here. The white faces stared impassively out into the night over the sleeping city.

Kadro hunched cautiously at the top of the steps, staring downwards. Fly-kinde had no fear of darkness or confining walls. They were small and nimble, and left to their own devices they built complex warrens of narrow tunnels, impos-

sible for larger folk to navigate. There was a cold breath coming from that hole below him, though: chill and slightly damp, and he wondered whether the tombs connected to the river.

No matter. He had not dared this much only to fall victim to his own imagination. He shifted the strap of his satchel and took a deep breath. *Into history*, he spurred himself.

He glanced across the pit and saw one of the statues staring at him, its blind white eyes open at last, and now darker than the night sky behind. Something moved close by, and he gave out a hoarse shout and called up his wings to take flight, but by then it was already too late.