

The Sea Watch

SHADOWS OF THE APT
BOOK SIX



ADRIAN
TCHAIKOVSKY

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ADRIAN
TCHAIKOVSKY

TOR

To my childhood heroes:
Gerald Durrell
and
Sir David Attenborough

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Part One

Those Who Move on the Face of the Waters

One

Four years ago

Above all, what the boy remembered was the rushing of the waters as his head finally broke through. Paladrya was pushing from behind, forcing him up towards the surface. He could feel the urgency merely through her touch: she who was normally so mild.

Marcantor was ashore already, a tall, narrow form just visible amongst a labyrinth of dark and darker. The boy fell back. It was not because of the air's bitter chill on his skin, at that moment. He did not even recognize the awful emptiness of the sky above. It was that clustering darkness, the darkness of the forest, the knotted overreaching of the clawing trees. Even with the sea still lapping about his calves he realized he was in an alien world.

Marcantor stepped forward, reaching out a hand, but the boy twitched back. The narrow-framed man regarded him bleakly: in the moon's light his face was more than readable, and the boy saw what tight control he exercised. All the boy's fears were written in miniature on the man's face, and the boy knew he should offer him some comforting words, some echo of his heritage, but he had none to give.

Paladrya was beside him, the tide swirling about her legs. She put an arm about the boy's shoulders and hugged him to her. With the seawater still streaming off her he could not tell for sure if she was weeping or not. They shivered together in the unexpected cold, a breeze from within the trees chilling them drier.

'Get the cloaks out,' she hissed at Marcantor. 'He's freezing to death. We all are. Where's Santiren? Must I do everything?'

Marcantor was a foot and a half taller than she was, lean and angular, his armour sculpted – helm and breastplate and bracers all – into flowing lines of pale bone. He had his spear loose in one hand, its barbed-needle head dipping in the water. For a second the boy thought he would use it against her. Paladrya faced him off, though, in her expression only an angry reminder of his place and hers, and the boy's. She was shorter, her body rounded and a little plump where the warrior's was hard, but she had authority. Even in this illicit venture, she was the leader, he the follower. Marcantor scowled and began to cut open a package sealed with a rind of vegetable-leather, using the horny teeth that jutted from the palms of his hands. They trembled now, those

hands, from cold or from fear of the unknown. The boy wanted to reach out to him, but his own fear was too great. He had looked up: there was nothing above them but the moon. The world was suddenly without limits and it filled him full of awe and terror. *But that is fitting*, he decided. *What we have done today is also beyond all limits.*

Marcantor thrust something at him: dry cloth, a cloak. Paladrya took it before the boy could, draping it over his shoulders. It was short, thin, barely blunting the wind. He clutched it to himself gratefully. A similar garment went to Paladrya herself, shrugged over the close shift that she wore. Marcantor had acquired something longer for himself, his slender frame half swallowed by it.

Abruptly another tall, thin shape was with them, a woman as lean and towering as Marcantor, each of them reaching seven feet in their peaked helms. She was already cloaked, picking her way, with deliberate care, over the arching, leg-like roots of the shoreline trees. Santiren had been Paladrya's co-conspirator for longer, since before the boy had even been aware of a conspiracy. She had visited this freezing, boundless place before, several times. Her face held no fear of it, only the shadow of their common desperation.

'Any sign of followers?' she asked.

'None.' Paladrya was still shivering. Her face, which the boy had always seen as beautiful, was taut with tension now. 'None yet. And I will return and turn aside any such as do come.'

'No!' the boy said, too loud. 'You can't leave me!'

Paladrya held him out at arm's length. She had been his tutor since his eighth year, and he had loved her a long time, in that silent, awkward way that boys often love their mentors. 'They'll kill you,' he protested.

'Not if I'm back swiftly enough that they cannot suspect me,' she said, but he knew enough not to believe her.

'They'll torture you,' he said.

'And find out what? Santiren has made the arrangements. I know your fate from here on no more than they.'

'But they will *torture* you. Do you think the Edmir will not?'

Her expression was infinitely sad. 'I have hopes that Claeon . . . that the Edmir will not do so. I am no stranger to him, no unknown flesh to be torn.'

'He's right, you should come,' Santiren said, and the boy's heart leapt with hope.

Paladrya just shook her head, though. 'I will accomplish more back in the colony. Do not fear for me. There is yet work to be done.'

He did his best, then, to memorize her face in the cold moonlight: the elegant curve of her cheek, her large eyes that the moon bleached grey but that he knew were violet, the dripping ringlets of her hair.

'Be safe,' she told him. 'Your time will come.' She hugged him to her again, and he found that he was crying like a child. 'Santiren,' he heard her say, his face still pressed to her shoulder. 'Your accomplice?'

'Is here, watching,' the tall woman told her. 'Fear not, all is ready.'

'Then the moon and the tides be your friends here,' Paladrya said, her lips twisting wryly as she added, 'Here where there are no tides, and where the moon is too large.'

'And may the luck of the abyss protect you,' Marcantor said from the shadows. 'For

you will surely need all of it.'

Paladrya stepped back from the boy, glancing around one last time before retreating away from the straggling treeline, into the water. The boy wanted to go with her, simply because it was her, and because she was returning to the only world he had known all his life. *Surely better to die there than live here?*

It was not his choice, though. He would have to live here, if he could, and she . . .

She would die there. He felt it inside him, the certainty. He was no oracle, as some of his people were, as Paladrya herself sometimes professed to be, but he felt just then that he had worked some small, bleak prophecy nonetheless.

'So where is this land-kind of yours?' Marcantor snapped. His face said so very clearly, *I do not wish to be in this place*, and the boy wanted to let him go. *But I need him. I need both of them. I need all the help I can get.*

'I am here,' said a new voice, a woman's. A figure stepped from between the trees.

The boy stared at her, for she was different.

She was tall, though not as tall as the two Dart-kind warriors. Her features were sharp: pointed chin, pointed ears, narrow eyes. She had hair like pale gold, cut short as if with a butcher's uneven hand. She was clad, neck to feet, in brown and green cloth, hard-wearing stuff like nothing he knew. Jagged barbs jutted from her forearms. The boy had never seen anything like her, and it was clear Marcantor hadn't either. The warrior moved to level his spear at the apparition. In a single step she was inside the weapon's reach.

The movement had been too fast for the boy to follow. It left her almost standing next to the man. A small knife was clasped in one hand, close to Marcantor's neck. The woman's expression was still neutral.

'Don't,' she said – or that was what the boy thought she said. Her accent was clipped, equally as sharp as her eyes.

He saw Marcantor tense ready to make some move: a leap backwards, perhaps, to get her at the end of his spear. Muddled in that unfamiliar cloak, over unfamiliar ground, it would not end happily for him.

'Stand down!' Santiren snapped, and Marcantor scowled at her. She was nobody he should need to take orders from. Paladrya was gone.

'Marcantor,' the boy heard his own voice shake, 'please, stand down.'

The tall Dart-kind regarded him archly for a moment, seeing in the boy only the cause of his banishment to this alien place, then something broke inside him. He grounded his spear, its tip rattling branches, and for a moment his long face held nothing but an exhausted sadness.

'Cynthaen,' Santiren interrupted. 'You know me.'

The knife was gone from the strange woman's hand. Dismissing Marcantor entirely, she focused again on the Dart-kind woman. 'You I know – these others, not so much.' The boy had to pass her words back and forth in his head before he could interpret them.

'We have our compact,' Santiren said, 'and you understand what I mean. We call upon you.'

The boy watched curiously. This was something he knew nothing of, this touching of fingers across the shoreline. Santiren's kin, though, had come from strange places before her mother made a home within the colony. Paladrya had known. Paladrya

always knew.

The land-kinde woman's harsh stare turned suddenly towards the boy. 'You, I know,' she repeated. 'This other, he's like your brother, so I know him, but not this child. Not the woman who was with you. You cannot think I'd help Spider-kinde. No compact binds me to that.'

The boy just stared at her, and he was thinking, *To be all the time in this cold and tangled place? All the time, and never once to step into the waters? How can she live? How can anything live here, exposed to this awful openness?*

'What is Spider-kinde?' Santiren asked. 'We know of no Spider-kinde.'

The land-kinde's eyes flicked in her direction without ever ceasing to look at the boy. He saw the likeness, then, in the way she stood, in that hard-edged face. *She is like the Swiftclaw, I think, save that she has hair and they have none. Is it just the likeness, then? Or is she a killer, inside, like them?*

'Boy,' the land-kinde woman addressed him directly. He saw Marcantor shift, angry at this lack of respect, but that knife was still somewhere, and now the woman was very close to his charge.

'I listen,' the boy said to her. She crouched a little, staring very closely at his face.

'Spider-kinde,' she spat, 'you and that woman. I should kill you here. Were she still here, I would kill her without a thought.' Her eyes, slanting and brown, bored into his. 'You fear me.'

'Why should I fear you?' he got out. He hoped she took any shivering for the cold. *For I can show no fear, not to the Swiftclaw-kinde, nor to her.*

'I can kill you,' she hissed. 'I've been killing Spider-kinde since before you were born. I need no reason.'

He stared into her face, exotic and uncompromising. 'I have been driven from my home into this dark place by my enemies, yet I do not fear them. How could I fear you, who can do so much less.' His voice was definitely trembling by the end, beyond his control.

He noticed the smallest tug at the corner of her mouth. 'No Spider-kinde ever knew such eyes as you, boy. So large, such a colour.' She straightened up. Without any concrete change, the threat had evaporated from her. 'I am Cynthaen,' she told them. 'Santiren knows me, and we have our compact.' The boy saw Santiren sag with relief at that statement, although she had masked her worry well.

'You cannot stay here,' Cynthaen added, 'not amongst my people. They will not be as restrained as me. They will kill the boy, or give him to the beasts of the forest. He looks too like our enemies.'

'But our compact—' Santiren started to say, and Cynthaen cut her off with a short gesture.

'Our compact holds. I will find your boy somewhere to hide.' A smile made it to her face at last. 'I know just the place, but you must be swift. Follow me and never leave my presence, or you will surely die, compact or no.'

'What's in it for her?' Marcantor demanded, following Cynthaen as closely as he could, through the tangle of roots and branches.

'Quiet, Marcantor,' Santiren warned him from the back.

'Tell me. What's this compact?' he pressed. He was in a foul mood, cold and scratched, limping like all of them. This new place was not kind to bare feet.

‘I’ll tell you,’ came Cynthaen’s voice.

Marcantor hissed at her angrily, but the boy said, ‘I would hear it, if you would tell us. You are helping us, and therefore we have no right to an answer, but I would hear it.’

The land-kinde woman stopped at that, turning back to gaze at him with a slight smile on her face. The boy decided that she was pretty when she smiled like that. Not beautiful like Paladrya, but there was something in her exotic features that could be appealing, when she tried.

‘I’ll tell you,’ Cynthaen said, turning and heading off again. ‘Only a little. What little there’s left. Go back long enough, you know, we were the masters of everything, or our masters were. Better times then. Age of Lore. Everyone knows it.’

The boy had to strain to hear her, to sieve the words from the quick, accented speech.

‘Then it all went to the pyre. We used to roam everywhere. Now, just a few places left where we can keep them out. So many traditions lost. What was a whole Hold once, now just a few families to it. The old ways, gone now, most of them, or going. We’re all on each other’s toes. Can’t keep hold of what used to be the important things. The differences. The traditions.’

She led them on for quite a while without speaking further, and the boy tried to work out if she had answered him somehow, lost in those rapid, disjointed phrases, or not. Then she said: ‘They still call us Fisher-kinde sometimes. My family and a couple of others who keep the Sea Watch. We’re all that’s left of the original Felyal, before all these other types ended up here. They think we’re strange. They don’t care about us. Still, there’s none that can bring in a netful like us. That’s right, isn’t it, Santiren?’

‘That’s right,’ came the Dart-kinde woman’s patient voice. The boy was still trying to come to some understanding of what was being said, the ‘Felyal’ and the ‘netful’ and the rest.

‘When we go to the beach on the last moon,’ Cynthaen went on more slowly, sounding wistful, ‘when we dance and cast our gifts, when our seers close their eyes they hear your folk down below. The compact is made again. The others don’t understand.’

I don’t understand, the boy thought, but he thought again of Santiren’s kin, the nomad places where her family hunted. *Magic*, he knew. Magic was in it, this talk of dancing, the magic of the turn of the year: longest night and shortest day, last full moon and winter tides. He was no magician but he realized there was magic in all these things.

Marcantor stumbled and cursed, clutching at his ankle. Cynthaen turned and regarded them pityingly. ‘You people never heard of sandals, I’m gathering.’

The boy, whose own feet were sore and raw, said, ‘What is sandals?’ That took her by surprise, for it was clear she had not been serious. She studied them again, the thin cloaks covering light armour for two warriors, – armour that left thighs and upper arms bare, to move more swiftly. The cloak covering a kilt and then bare skin, for the boy. Something of the strangeness of them – such as they had already seen in her – touched her, and she shivered.

We are strange reflections of each other, the boy thought. *And the mirror is the sea’s*

edge. By force of habit, he tried to fashion a couplet from the thought, but the cold and the pain and the yawning sky robbed him of the power.

‘You stay here, now,’ she told them. ‘Can you hide? Hide, if you can. Don’t come out for anyone but me.’ She made a spitting noise. ‘Fact is, if my people find you, like as not you’ll be dead anyway.’

She was gone abruptly, slipping off through the forest of stiff, interweaving trees and into the dark. *So still, here*, the boy thought. *Everything is so still and rigid and heavy, frozen and cold.*

‘Hide,’ Santiren urged him. ‘Marcantor and I will stand and watch.’ She hefted her spear, even though, in the close clutter of branches, it would be an awkward weapon.

The boy called upon his Art. That took a few moments, in this unfamiliar place, but he found it calmed him, as the colours rose within his skin, flowing over his arms and legs, matching themselves to the plantlife around him – at first awkwardly, then more and more naturally. He let out a long, calm sigh.

The night forest around them was full of noises. It was another jarring, alien aspect of this place. Things rustled and buzzed and creaked all around him, a constant patter of small life, and some not so small. The boy’s eyes, and his companions’ eyes, were well used to darkness – there was darkness far greater than this where they came from, places where the limn-lights had never shone – but their darkness was near-silent, not this constant chatter.

Something large moved there, between the trees. They all spotted it at once and he saw the two warriors grow tense, spears levelled. It was tall and slender, and the boy tried hard to make it out, seeing the glint of eyes, the thin spindles of legs, one hooked forearm held close, the other extended forward to aid the thing’s careful progress. It regarded them.

Some kind of claw-kindén thing, but moved to the land. He knew, without thinking, that this must be the heraldic beast of Cynthaen’s kindén. It was close enough to the shrimp they called the swiftclaw, and she herself was close enough to that thing’s kindén. The creature was larger than a man, and he guessed it shared a swiftclaw’s temper and hunger. Marcantor and Santiren held their spears now in both hands, the thin barbed heads barely moving. The land monster regarded them impassively, huge eyes aglitter in the moonlight.

Cynthaen was there beside it, without warning, putting a hand up to touch its armoured flank. The triangular head cocked to look at her, mouthparts circling, and then it began to creep off, one deliberate move after the next, sometimes solely on the ground and sometimes reaching from tree to tree.

‘Now,’ she said, and then enquired: ‘Where’s the little one?’

The boy let his Art flow from him, the dark colours running like paint until he had recovered his pale skin. Cynthaen watched cautiously. This was obviously Art she had never witnessed before.

The land-kindén woman now dropped something at their feet, pieces of a strange material, crawling with straps. When she realized they did not know what to do with them she uttered a tired sound and took the boy’s feet in her hands, heedless of Marcantor’s twitch at such presumption. The heavier piece went under his sole, and the straps held it to his foot. It felt exceedingly strange. He saw that Cynthaen herself wore something different, an enclosing sheath of skin that went almost to her knee.

The two Dart-kindens copied the arrangement, with varying success, so that Cynthaen had to correct their crossed and twisted strapping. Marcantor sat very still as she attended to him, but the boy saw his hands constantly clenching, the palms rough with the teeth of his Art. She saw it, too, and grinned up at him wickedly.

‘Don’t spoil too much for a fight, tall one,’ she advised him. ‘For my kind, that’s wooing.’

Once she was done, she took out something else, a hood of stiff skin. She passed it to the boy. ‘Wear it – in case of my people. Now we’d best move. Dawn’s getting close.’

‘The sun?’ the boy asked.

She gave him a look. ‘That’s what we mean when we say dawn, boy.’

She led them faster this time, although they kept slipping and skidding in their new footwear. They saw no sign of her mysterious, hostile people, but the boy had the sense that she was forever on the lookout for them, deliberately choosing a path to avoid them. All was not peace and harmony amongst the land-kindens.

When the sun came, it was a slow brightening through the trees, first on one side only, and then on all sides. The harsh chill slunk resentfully away, and gradually the night noises gave place to more and different sounds made by the beasts of the day. The boy spotted almost none as large as the swiftclaw-thing of the night, only heard them go quiet as he and the Dart-kindens passed, and then pick up their lives behind them. Once or twice there was the shape of an armoured thing clattering between the plants, or hanging off them. Of smaller things there were legion, and mostly creatures of the air, darting and diving and swarming, glittering in the first light, or clinging to twigs to soak up the sun’s warmth.

Cynthaen picked up the pace yet again, until there was a noticeable thinning of the plants around them, a brightening of the light. The heat, where it fell on cloth and skin, was beginning to swelter. The boy saw ahead of them shapes that were obviously not made by nature but by man.

They broke from the trees and were immediately within a gathering of structures that had clearly been put up by some craft or labour, but the boy could not understand how. They appeared so crude as to be the work of halfwits: everything was flat, angular, glaringly ugly, made of blocks and beams that seemed barely finished. He looked on them with horror and could not stop himself from asking, ‘Is this where your kindens live?’

‘Mine?’ Cynthaen glanced back at him. ‘Oh, this is none of mine. Don’t like it, eh? Then maybe there’s some hope for you. They call this place Arvandine. They have built it as close as they dare without risking our wrath.’ She led them down paths running between the blocky buildings, ignoring those few residents they met on the way. The denizens of Arvandine were of a quite different kind to Cynthaen: most seemed burly and dark, heavy-bodied men and women bearing burdens of various kinds. One other was almost as dark, but as tiny as a Smallclaw, his head barely reaching to the height of the boy’s chest, barely to the Dart-kindens’s waists. In a moment this little man, seeing Cynthaen striding straight towards him, had flashed a blur of dancing Art from his back and thrown himself into the air. The boy gasped at this prodigy, staring upwards, watching the man vanish over the rooftops.

The land-kinde are also air-kinde. That great unbounded void above them, that had gone from freezing cold to throbbing heat with the coming of the sun, was a slave to these strange and terrible people.

‘Here.’

The shabby-looking place they had fetched up beside was a little bigger than most, but no lovelier to look on. Cynthaen banged at a door, while the boy could only think, *How can they live in such ugliness? Even the forest would be better. Cynthaen’s kinde have the right idea.*

On the eighth rattling bang, the door was jerked open. A squat, slope-shouldered, dark-skinned man stood there, wearing a sleeved robe that he clasped tight about his broad waist.

‘What?’ he roared. ‘What is it that can’t wait for a civilized hour?’ His speech was different to the land-kinde woman, a little slower, with the vowels dragged out, but no easier to follow.

‘Master Panhandle.’ Cynthaen addressed him with obvious scorn.

‘Penhold,’ he corrected her. He had not even spared a look at her companions. ‘What is it, fishwife?’

‘I have a gift for you,’ Cynthaen told him. ‘Your luck has come in with the tide this morning.’

The dark man scowled at her. ‘Make sense,’ he said.

‘I bring three new members for your household,’ she told him. ‘Rejoice, therefore.’

He stared at her, and the boy wanted to feel sorry for him, but the fact that he himself was being palmed off onto this huge stranger, who obviously bore Cynthaen no love, eclipsed all other considerations.

‘Who . . . ?’ Penhold glanced past the woman, to see the two Dart-kinde, and then the boy. His face froze, hiding anything that might move behind it. ‘Since when did the Mantis-kinde traffic in people?’ he enquired slowly, but it was clear that his mind was more concerned with the problem of what this boy and his escort might be.

‘You will take them in,’ Cynthaen told him. ‘Give them a home. Feed them. Work them, if you will. The two tall ones look like they could carry a load.’

The Dart-kinde bristled at that comment, but even Marcantor could tell how everything now hung in the balance.

‘And why should I do so?’ the big man asked.

‘Because I shall bring to you four swords, Panhandle, Mantis-forged rapiers, no less. I know what riches that can bring you.’

Panhandle, or Penhold, stared at her. ‘You have no four swords.’

‘I will have.’

‘You are a catcher of fish.’

‘I am a warrior.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Six.’

‘Four.’

‘Five.’

‘Four. Of the very best.’

His eyes flicked again to the boy and the two warriors, as though weighing their worth, and then back to Cynthaen. Something passed between them, some familiarity that made the boy realize that their sparring words hid a longer association than he had

guessed.

‘I’ll bring you a fish, too, if you want,’ Cynthaen told him flippantly.

‘There’s no market for fish.’ Panhandle shook his head. ‘What am I letting myself in for? Who’s after them?’

‘No one on the earth is hunting them,’ Cynthaen replied, and to the boy the deception seemed glaring. Perhaps it was to Panhandle as well, but if so his face hid it well. He squinted at the two warriors first. ‘You’ll stand guard, I’d guess,’ he decided. ‘Guard a shipment, a warehouse? Warriors, in short.’

Santiren nodded shortly. ‘We can, once our charge here is safe. We shall not need charity.’

Penhold’s eyebrows had risen as he heard her speak, her accent as strange to him as his own was to her. ‘And no questions asked, I’m sure,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Well, then. I am Ordly Penhold, merchant of Collegium. What shall I know you as?’

‘Santiren,’ the Dart-kind woman replied. ‘And this is Marcantor.’

‘And a boy,’ Ordly Penhold observed. ‘Your servant, is he?’

‘I am no servant,’ the boy snapped. It had been a long march over a foreign land, passed hand to hand, losing his beloved Paladrya. ‘I am Aradocles. I am the . . .’ He stopped at Santiren’s warning hiss. A whirl of faint colour danced on his skin: shame. *I am hunted, that is what I am.*

There was nothing on Penhold’s face to suggest he had understood their exchange but, when he spoke, he said, ‘Well now . . . Arad Oakleaves, is it? Perhaps we’ll call you Master Oakleaves. Almost a Collegium name that, and a lad like you’s better without something too grand.’

Aradocles looked him in the eyes, and saw a man old enough, and wise enough, and outright foreign enough, as not to be easily read.

‘Ordly Penhold . . .’ He corrected himself, copying the man’s own term of address. ‘*Master* Penhold. Thank you for taking me into your household. I shall do what I can to requite you.’

Only a few scant years later, General Tynan and the Imperial Second Army defeated the Mantids of the Felyal, burned out their holds, drove them from the forest ahead of his swiftly advancing army, and put to the torch every village and trading post they came across. Nor was Arvandine spared.

Two

To an outsider it would have seemed that the politics of Collegium were of least interest to the politicians themselves. There had been some few moments of silence known to fall during the Collegiate Assembly – they had mostly occurred during the war when to speak into that sudden chasm would have been to volunteer. Business as usual was the constant mutter and murmur of deal-making, deal-breaking, jokes and snickering, and a hundred separate commentaries about current affairs. All too often the only person paying attention to the matter being spoken on was the speaker himself. Sometimes not even that was the case.

‘Your big moment soon enough,’ Jodry Drillen observed. An experienced Assembler knew how to utter a few low words, amid that babble, which would carry clearly to someone close by, or even to someone halfway around the great bank of stone seats. Drillen, with a voice honed in the lecture theatres of the College, was such a man. Stenwold, sitting two tiers further down and three to the left, heard him precisely and glanced up to see the paunchy, richly dressed man smiling down at him.

And I am in his party, am I not? Stenwold knew it. Just sitting here was enough to tell people that he had at last cast his lot. He had never actually taken such a step, it seemed, and yet the men above and below and to either side of him were all supporters of Drillen’s faction. The Assemblers were men and women with enough time on their hands to find significance in anything. In the Assembly, just sitting down was a political act.

It went deeper than that, of course, for Stenwold and Drillen had made deals together behind closed doors. Despite the secrecy it was, paradoxically, well known. There had been an expedition dispatched in Stenwold’s name that people had recently started calling ‘the Drillen expedition’. It had, rumour suggested, been a great success. Rumour also preceded the expedition’s return to Collegium by several days.

Stenwold sat there, surrounded by Drillen’s creatures, with an aching void inside him because he had not yet had a chance to confirm some of those rumours. There were a few matters manifestly known about the returning expedition: one College scholar had died, and the Empire had somehow been involved. But Stenwold’s interest, for once, shrugged off the political on behalf of the personal.

What has happened to my niece?

He had been given no chance yet to speak to the returning scholars. Drillen had grabbed them yesterday at dusk, the moment they arrived. Stenwold had been forced to put his official position ahead of all his personal demands and speak instead to the Vekken ambassadors. What he had heard so far had confirmed his worst fears: Che had not returned with them.

Drillen had promised him access to the two surviving scholars tonight. That was all Stenwold could think about, yet here he was in the Assembly with his name listed to speak.

The Assembly had not seemed itself since Lineo Thadspar died, everyone agreed. Still, while Collegium had been under siege or busy negotiating the Treaty of Gold, that had not seemed to matter. All hands were on the tiller, and pulling the same way. Only with the return of peace had the chaos come crawling in. Without an appointed Speaker the Assembly was deteriorating into name-calling, special interests and personal feuds.

Most of the personal feuds revolved around the identity of the new Speaker. The casting of Lots, the formal process whereby the citizens of Collegium voted in the leaders they deserved, was open all this tenday and Stenwold had already made his choice. Nine Assemblers had put themselves forward as candidates, and Jodry Drillen was one of the front-runners. He was a man with plenty of manifest flaws, to Stenwold's eyes. He was not reliable, trustworthy or honourable. His scholarship had been surrendered to his political ambitions. His patriotism was as fluid as his waist, dependent on his own station within the state. He was nevertheless, Stenwold was forced to admit, the best of a bad field.

We should select someone at random, plucked out of all the citizens of Collegium, he thought, and not for the first time. In the absence of a Speaker the role had devolved to the Administrar of the College, as tradition dictated. This meant the task fell on a beaky middle-aged man by the name of Master Partreyn, whose main ambition had hitherto extended to ensuring that the College had sufficient supplies of paper and ink. Used to conducting his life in a quiet monotone, he was usually hoarse through shouting by mid-afternoon, and today it seemed as though the Assembly had a never-ending stream of business. Assemblers would soon start skulking off into the early evening, their patience with democracy exhausted.

Partreyn looked over his scroll where, Stenwold knew, the various Assemblers who wished to take up their fellows' time would be listed, in Partreyn's own neat script. Stenwold's name was amongst them today, to report on the current position with Vek.

To report success, or some grain of it – and won't that be far less well received than failure. Not so long since the Ant-kindens of Vek had brought an army up to Collegium's gates. Wounds from the Vekken siege were still open. People had lost relatives and businesses and property, and gained nothing but scars. News of a glimmer of hope for peace with that violent city would sit badly with many.

But it is essential, because of the Empire: the Wasp Empire, which had not been standing still since the inconclusive end to the war. Latest news from Stenwold's agents said that all of the renegade Imperial governors had been pacified and that, of the lands in Imperial hands before the war, only the Three-City Alliance and the Border Principalities remained unbowed. *And when they come for us, we must not risk having an enemy to our west.*

‘I have Stenwold Maker,’ Partreyn got out, forcing his voice over the hubub. There were some cheers, some groans, for Stenwold had never been shy of forcing his company on these men and women. Stenwold pushed himself to his feet, ready to descend and take the floor. Someone else was shouting, though, voice rising high over the general din.

‘No! No! This is quite intolerable!’ It was a bony Beetle-kindens man who looked slightly Stenwold’s senior, sitting near the front row of seats. Several of the men and women beside him began adding their voices to his. He clearly seemed to be the spokesman for some small faction of his own, but Stenwold could not place him.

Partreyn’s reply was entirely unheard by anyone further back, but the bony man caught it.

‘Three days!’ he shouted. ‘On the list, three days running, and no time to hear me speak! Do you think my business is not already so injured that I can spare time from it? Hammer and tongs, but you’ll hear me speak!’

‘Master Failwright!’ Partreyn’s ragged voice rose in pitch. ‘I cannot guarantee—’

‘Where’s Maker’s name on yesterday’s list, eh?’ Failwright, whoever he was, had a fine screeching voice for such debate. ‘Nowhere! Mine’s there, not his. Let him wait for the morrow then! Let me speak and be done! Is it so that just because a man goes to the wars, he must always have his way? Are we an Ant-kindens state now? I have business that the Assembly must hear!’

Partreyn looked up and down his list as though he were a seer consulting omens. Stenwold glanced back, and saw Drillen making motions that he should start his speech. *And I could. I could just start shouting with the rest of them, until people started to listen – if they ever did.* There were some others, mostly those who saw Stenwold or Drillen as rivals, who were now calling on Failwright to be given the floor. More though, whom Stenwold guessed as merchants and magnates who, presumably, opposed Failwright, were demanding that Stenwold speak. A few opportunists were now trying to demand that they speak instead. Had there been an elected Speaker, this would never have happened, but Partreyn had neither the formal nor the personal authority to control it.

At last the wretched Administrar looked towards Stenwold with a despairing expression, and Stenwold sat down, sparing his voice the battle. Drillen shot him an interrogating glance and Stenwold leant back to say, ‘There’s nothing that can’t wait for tomorrow, and I’d rather not lose what I have to say in the backbiting that’ll follow this. It’ll keep.’

Failwright, having abruptly been ceded the floor, seemed uncertain of what to do with it. He glowered defensively at the Assembly from beneath bushy eyebrows. The hum of conversation waxed.

‘So who is he?’ Stenwold asked.

‘Shipping, must be,’ Drillen decided. ‘That’s Ellan Broadrey and old Moulter on either side of him, and they’re both dock-merchants.’

Stenwold settled back, preparing himself for a piece of mercantile tedium. The commercial activities of Collegium’s magnates had always left a sour taste in his mouth, since there were enough of them who had made a fine profit from the Empire before the war.

Failwright glared around him with a belligerent scowl, as though expecting to be

evicted at any moment. Stenwold could not recall ever seeing him before, and guessed he was that kind of Assembler who, once elected, never came to the Amphiphos unless his own interests were threatened. As they were under threat now, apparently.

‘Look at you all!’ Failwright snapped at the Assembly. His voice carried well, but it set Stenwold’s teeth on edge just to listen to it. ‘Playing at tacticians and diplomats, as if anyone honestly cared what Maker has to say about the abominable Ant-kindens.’

That caused a scatter of laughter, mostly forced from Stenwold’s opponents. *For I have opponents*, he admitted. It was another foot in the mire of politics, and currently it was Helmess Broiler and his adherents who led the chase. Broiler had been one of Jodry Drillen’s main opponents for the speakership until recently, when a series of debates and a scandal over cartography had set the man seriously back in his peers’ estimation.

‘What this city lives on is trade!’ Failwright went on. ‘We’re not Ant-kindens to march, or Spider-kindens to plot. *Trade*, curse you all! And we must act to protect our trade. Are you blind to what has been happening?’

‘What has been happening?’ Stenwold hissed back at Drillen.

The fat man shrugged. ‘No idea,’ he said frankly. ‘Probably someone’s elbowing in on one of his monopolies.’

‘The wealth of Collegium is under threat!’ Failwright declared dramatically.

‘I’m doing fine, thank you!’ someone heckled from near where Helmess Broiler sat, to general amusement. Failwright spat out a few half-formed words, furiously, before regaining control of his tongue.

‘Oh, yes!’ he choked. ‘The rail-trade is very well indeed. The airships to Helleron, yes, yes, also well.’ His hands clutched and clawed. ‘Nobody even asks us how things go for us at the quays!’

‘Serves you right for hanging around the docks!’ another anonymous wit interjected.

Failwright was flushed with anger. ‘Two ships I’ve lost!’ he shouted. ‘And in the last three months, eleven merchantment out of Collegium, attacked or disappeared! If you want war, what of the war that pirates have declared on us?’

‘Pirates or the weather?’ someone from near Broiler called. Had old Thadspar still been Speaker, none of them would have dared, but the absence of his firm hand had given all the malcontents licence to jeer.

‘It is an attack aimed at our very heart!’ Failwright protested. ‘I have papers! I have documented it all precisely. Ships that are robbed. Ships that have been loosed upon by pirate vessels. Ships that simply vanish, no man knows where, with not a single living sailor left to speak of the lost cargo, the ruined investments.’ His eyes raked the uninterested Assembly. ‘It’s Master Maker you call for? Well let him apply himself to some matter of real import for a change!’ he shrilled. ‘I call on Master Maker to answer this! He who has been so loud in advertising his own imagined threats! What does he say to this?’

The Assembly virtually exploded in a mix of laughter and shouting, some telling Failwright to go away, others calling on Stenwold to stand. The idea of a clash between two firebrands obviously appealed to them.

Partreyn kept waving his hands, mouth open as he shouted inaudibly for quiet. At last the roar died down and left him rasping wretchedly. ‘You cannot demand answer from an individual,’ he croaked. ‘Only if he consents to answer, on behalf of the