

## Queen of the Night

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

First off, I need to explain to you just what the Peachpit Street Merchant Company was all about. This was before the war, before the words ‘merchant company’ conjured up nothing but a pack of artisans crammed into ill-fitting armour and pretending to be soldiers. We were singers, actors and musicians. We were, for the most part, also tradesmen, shopkeepers and the like, but we were performers as well. We weren’t exactly the Grand Siennis Ballet, but we had a determined little following from the residential and the mercantile districts about Peachpit Street, and we would sometimes tour a few of the tributary villages around Collegium, when we had a particularly good show on our hands. Once every couple of years our producer would secure us a booking in Sarn, perhaps, and we’d travel by rails and stay at some barren little Ant-kinden hostelry and do a few nights up there in the foreigners’ quarter, but we were a small company. Like any small company, though, we had big dreams.

It started with the Annual Company Assembly, where those of us highest up on the steps of Art got together to see how much was in the money-jar and decide what we would do with it. Since Keynes Bounder was made producer, this almost always meant him dictating to us: each year a bolder production, each year a new trick to draw in the punters. Keynes was not a shopkeeper or a craftsman. Keynes Bounder had trained at the Aristarta in Seldis, and was an actor and theatre manager the whole day long, and a remarkable proportion of our take went to keep him in fancy-edged robes and fortified wine. Two years ago his command had been Banxawl’s *For the Love of Two Doctors*, with a real preserved cadaver from the College’s medical wing, and last year Keynes had tried to top that with Lysarea’s fiendish *Phaladris*, which some professionals would balk at, and our leading man risking his neck every night, leaping off the castle wall to his death whilst trying to hold a high note. Our success had been debatable, but Keynes Bounder was not in the least disheartened, and we could see in his face that he had something special this year for us.

I should say who counts as ‘us’, the leading lights of the company. There was Sheppa, the little Fly costumier, and Madame Graspin, who owned both the Masque theatre and the taverna it backed onto. There was Eswell Broadwright, our perennial leading lady, whose length of tooth and width of waist had been noted last year when she played Cercera in *Phaladris*. There was a tedious old man who suffered under the moniker of Boswell Marwell and who, despite nothing about him being any more amusing than the name, generally scooped up any role with comic potential. He was a Master at the College, and so his continued involvement smoothed over a great deal of rough ground. Last, and least likely to have an opinion, was me, Miles Breakall. I don’t act. By day I run a little repair workshop off Peachpit, and in the evenings I tend stage, paint scenery and keep the company’s accounts.

Keynes Bounder leant back in his chair, there in the private room of the Other Masque taverna. “*Pathaea*,” he said.

It was a disappointment to my more artistically learned colleagues. They ridiculed it from the start.

“*Pathaea*?” old Marwell scoffed. “That old rag? You could drive an automotive through the holes in that one.”

“It’s just dreadful,” Eswell Broadwright agreed. “She’s *so* insipid.” As usual she was only interested in the quality of the female lead.

“Too short,” Sheppa put in, concerned as usual with practicalities. “What do we double it with?”

“And besides,” Marwell ground out, “You know our audiences. If they go to a opera called *Pathaea* they’ll want someone called *Pathaea*, and she doesn’t even feature in it.”

“Yes she does,” Bounder said, quietly but with enough confidence to catch the ear.

“I think you’ll find...,” said Marwell, working up to a good pontificate, but Bounder cut him off gleefully.

“There’s a common misconception about the work, it’s true. There are whole essays on how a composer like Scriatha could produce such a rotten apple amongst all her classics. When I was at the Aristarta, though, I heard differently, so this spring I went off to Merro to track down the rumours. Yes, the version that we see here is frankly terrible, but that’s because it’s *incomplete*. *Pathaea*, as Scriatha wrote it, is a beautifully-constructed full-length opera in the old style, and a few years ago some clever Fly-kindens transcribed a complete score in modern notation, and I was able to secure a copy.” He looked inordinately pleased with himself.

“And?” Marwell prompted. “Is it any good?”

“What about that miserable little wet Eriphe?” Eswell pressed. “Has she a single piece worth singing?”

“She does not,” Bounder admitted. “However, as far as a rewarding role for you, my dear, who do you think *Pathaea* is?”

He had come prepared. He put three bundles of paper down on the table and let people paw over them. I peered over Sheppa’s shoulder. The music was dense, the printing not of the best. Sheppa leafed through it until I saw the name ‘*Pathaea*’ feature in the lines.

Old Madame Graspin, our sour-faced landlady, made a “huh” sort of noise. “Good luck,” she told Eswell flatly, singling out one page of music. My grasp of notation is only good enough to follow the passing of the bars, but the others stared and even Eswell herself looked a little shaken. Still, she tossed her head and declared, “It shall stretch me,” in a fairly blithe tone of voice. As usual, there was no suggestion that she would actually have to do anything so coarse as *audition*.

With that agreed, and any other business taken care of, we retired to the public room of the Other Masque to drink to the coming season. A few of the rest of the company breezed in and were told about the play, and we all drank up a lot of enthusiasm and confidence, so that we were toasting each other and the company with Graspin’s best wine and, of course, we toasted *Pathaea*.

That was the first warning we had that we were about something particularly foolish. The Other Masque was only a few streets away from the College itself, but because of the theatre it had always catered to a mixed crowd. As long as I remember there was always a little coven of Moth-kindens that met there, who must have represented most of the Moths in Collegium. They came to the plays, as often as not, and so we got to know them, as much as Beetle-kindens can ever know one of their kind. They were shabby, scruffy creatures, exiled or self-exiled, scratching out a living on the periphery of Collegium society and yet somehow never quite going away. There was Velvet Lise the procurer, and a man named Voadros who I knew did conjuring tricks in the parlours of merchants for a living. There was old Doctor Nicrophos, who was a Master at the College but could not afford a robe without patches and darns. The man who came over to us, though, was Gravos, a small-time silk merchant and the most solvent of them. He didn’t look happy.

“What are you blathering on about?” he demanded. He was tall, for a Moth, all angles, with high cheekbones in his grey face. His eyes, blank white as Moth eyes always are, were narrowed.

“Our new production,” Bounder toasted him, “the lovely *Pathaea*.”

“You Beetles have no idea,” Gravos said disgustedly. “Stick to what you know. Stick to Banxawl, or Latchey comedies. How about *A Master of two Servants*? It’s been at least four years since you did that one.”

“No no, you mistake us,” Bounder insisted, solemnly drunk. “*Pathaea*. The full *Pathaea*, with added *Pathaea*.”

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in, and Bounder had been loud enough that the other Moths had overheard as well. Then they were staring at him, eight white and featureless eyes just locked onto Bounder’s dark, wine-sweaty face. I thought they were angry, and then I thought they were about to burst into laughter, and then I realised that whatever they felt or thought, it wasn’t something I had any easy name for.

“Whatever you say, Beetle,” was all Gravos came out with, at last, and then, “Be careful what you wish for.”

“Full houses and full wine-bowls,” Bounder declared, and dismissed it all from his mind, as did we all, but it came back to us nonetheless, in time.

A few tendays later we came to look over the score and cast the piece. We held a few desultory auditions, but we had done a lot of plays from around the time Scriatha was writing, and they all had the same kind of structure: there were lovers, there were villains, there were clowns and maids and supporting bit parts. We had a regular company and everyone had worn their own personal rut in the road of drama. In addition to that we had a few non-artistic considerations. For example, every few years we had to find a role for Madame Graspin, as a sop to the low rent we paid her, and then there was old Master Gafferow, our longtime and most generous patron, who would expect to see his son in some prominent and flattering role. Poor young Mosley Gafferow was a perfectly pleasant lad, and everyone was very fond of him, but no amount of coaching could much get past the fact that he was apparently made of wood. He could hold a tune well enough, certainly, but he couldn’t *act*. Still, Eswell made no complaints. She had no fear of him ever stealing the audience’s love from her, for all that she was twice his age. One unkind critic had said, of *Phaladris*, that she hadn’t realised that the title character was in love with his own mother.

The script was in a bit of a mess, Fly-kinde draftsmanship and printing presses being what they are, but Bounder had sketched out a cast list for us to mull over. Boswell Marwell harrumphed and grumphed over that, because the last item was “Chorus of Beetle Slaves” which he said was in bad taste.

“You can’t judge everything by modern standards,” Bounder told him genially. “A story set in Pathis-that-was is bound to have slaves. All our ancestors were slaves back then, remember?”

Marwell’s dour expression suggested that, as the College Master, he was more used to giving than receiving lectures. Still, it was true enough that when our Collegium had been named Pathis, and when the Moth-kinde had been lords and ladies here, our forebears had presumably not had a good time of it. They taught that, a bit, but mostly they tended to start history off with the Revolution, and mumbled over the thousand years of servitude that preceded it. What did I care? I was an artificer. History before the machines came in was of limited interest to me.

The old *Pathaea* that we, and greater Collegium, was familiar with was mostly your standard love story, only with a number of difficult bits where there's no real sense to what's going on. A Spider lordling (Teranis, tenor) arrives in Pathis and is rescued by the servants of Pathaea, who is a Moth magician of some kind. She wants him to rescue her daughter from another magician (Sarostros, baritone). He runs into a Beetle-kindens clown (Prater, comic baritone) who is sent to the evil magician's lair to meet with the daughter (Eriphe, soprano). There are a series of escapades, and in the end Teranis is captured by Sarostros' Mantis-kindens servant (Menamon, bass). However Sarostros dismisses Menamon and puts Teranis and Prater through a series of incomprehensible tests, which Prater fails in comic style. The last section is the most problematic one, because Eriphe tries to kill Sarostros for no reason, Menamon comes back from nowhere to fight Teranis, and then they all live happily every after except for the dead ones. Well, that was the version that *we* knew.

The difference in Bounder's score was that Pathaea, who doesn't have the guts to show her face traditionally, actually turns up, adding a second, and rather meatier, soprano part to the proceedings. She only gets three scenes, mind, but when you stick her bits back in everything makes a vast amount more sense. It's Pathaea who gives Eriphe the knife to kill her rival (and former lover) Sarostros, and it's Pathaea who steals Menamon away into her own service and sets him on Teranis. At the very end, there's a whole scene where she and Sarostros are having some kind of occult spat, and it's up to Eriphe to stab *her* to save the day, and her lover. She's the reason everything happens, you see, which is why the work was such a damp lamp after they took her out.

None of us asked *why* they took her out. We were all too sold on Bounder's idea.

In the middle, after handing out knives and bewitching Mantids, she has this piece to sing, what they call an aria. It was the one that Graspin had picked out earlier, and now Bounder was looking over it worriedly. "My dear," he murmured to Eswell, "whilst I have no worries whatsoever as to your ability..." but then he tailed off, seeing the look she was giving him. It was clear that, if the Peachpit Street Merchant Company was performing *Pathaea*, then so was Eswell Broadwright.

The rest of the parts were disposed of without much reference to the actual cast. Bounder would take Sarostros, and we would shoehorn poor wooden Mosley Gafferow into the Spider-kindens shoes of the Aristos Teranis because otherwise the rent wouldn't get paid. Boswell would take the clownish Prater, and drain the role of humour as a mosquito drains a man of blood. There was a bit of discussion about who, if Eswell was taking the plum title role, would actually do the miserable part of Eriphe, and it was agreed that it would be offered to one of our Fly-kindens, Fratte, who usually specialised in maids and understudies, because she had a pleasingly clear, high voice, and because it was probably her turn. There were three Moth-kindens functionaries who were parcelled out to reliable third-stringers, and after some deliberation the role of Menamon the Mantis was given to a relative newcomer, a renegade Tarkesh Ant-kindens, because he was pale-skinned and quite lean, and it was felt he would look the part, whatever his voice was like. Also, as an Ant, we thought he would make the fight with Teranis look good even if Mosley Gafferow just stood there. How little we knew, how little we suspected.

We got most of the company together a tenday after, having printed off enough scores for the leads. Everyone not cast got to be a Chorus of Beetle slaves, and Sheppa the costumier was busy asking people to bring in any torn or damaged clothes to be converted into slavish rags. Eswell had decided that she would wear the gold dress that she had donned for *Lysperrae the Tyrant* five years ago, meaning that poor Sheppa would have to go shopping for several yards

more of the expensive material. Meanwhile some of her numberless female relatives discussed amongst themselves just what combination of pale make-up would give Bounder and the others a complexion even slightly approaching the grey of Moth-kindens.

Whilst everyone pored over the scores, and a couple of our regular musicians discussed what other instruments we'd need to hire in to do it justice, Eswell was backstage working ostentatiously on her big aria. It was, to be frank, something of a painful distraction. I wouldn't say anything against her voice. She had a fine timbre that would have cut stone at twenty paces, and normally she got the music to agree with her by sheer volume and force of personality. *Pathaea* was not behaving, though. She stopped and started, started and stopped, breaking off mid-line, mid-note. The aria was something of an order of magnitude grander than anything she had attempted before, and the pitch-! I don't know whether poor Eswell had ever got within reach of that top note on her best day. It didn't stop her battering away at it, though, and woe betide anyone who dared pass a comment. The rest of us got on with what we could, and Bounder called me over to discuss the staging.

"There are about six different locations," he told me, "so I want some flats on revolves. No long changes, we learned that one after *The Merchant of Merro*." He was right at that. By the time the Aristoi Palace at Seldis had made the stage, half the audience had gone.

"Also," Bounder went on, "I want something special for *Pathaea*'s entrance. She's a Moth. She won't just stomp on. I want Eswell in the hoist, coming down from the rafters. It'll be magnificent."

"I'll reinforce the hoist," was all I said to that. Our three Fly-kindens, Sheppa, quiet Fratte and a leery little man called Villo, were in barely-suppressed stitches of laughter at my elbow.

We had a good few tendays of rehearsals after that, mostly because Bounder was being uncharacteristically diplomatic and steering well clear of the problem areas – which meant anything involving Eswell. She was always there, of course, at every rehearsal, whether she was called or not. She had commandeered the dressing room and, while everyone else slouched about the stalls, we could hear her warble and bleat through three walls. The other parts of the opera, mostly those parts that had survived into the standard version, were going quite smoothly. The three Moth-kindens functionaries had a tendency to lark it up during their scenes, and the fact that one of them, Villo, was half the size of the other two, would cause comment on the night. Boswell declaimed and posed his way through his lines, demolishing two centuries of careful Spider-kindens humour, and put in a great deal of dragging business of his own over which he and Bounder almost came to blows. Mosley was dutiful, polite, punctual and utterly uninspired, and across from him, Fratte's Eriphe always looked as though she was about to cry. However, as Mosley was used to playing across from Eswell, at least this time he would have a leading lady who was both shorter and more slender than he. The big surprise was our Menamon, the Ant in Mantids' clothing. He was called Rannus or Rannius or something, but by the time he got to us he was just Ran, and he was expressionless and quiet and very still, only the last of which is much use on stage. He was also the only Ant we had ever got at the company, and nobody quite knew what to expect. However, his voice, which had been a bit croaky on audition, filled out beautifully with a little instruction from Bounder, and he turned out to be quite the find.

Anyway, we were doing a scene from the first act when it happened: Marwell, as Prater, was droning and bumbling about in Sarostros' court, whilst Fratte did her best to look attentive, and one of our musicians sat with a harp waiting to pick out the skeleton of their duet. In the background we could hear, and manfully try to ignore, the strained blarts of Eswell trying to

follow her aria those last few notes to where it was waiting for her on its lofty peak. She almost had it, that one time, or so my memory tells me, just teetering, tooth-jarringly a half-tone away. And then she screamed.

We thought it was frustration first. The action on stage stopped and Villo and Sheppa looked up from their cardgame offstage left, but then she was still screaming, over and over, shrieking out for someone to “*get away!*”

I remember Ran had his wooden sword in hand, and he just vaulted the stage and was gone backstage before anyone else could move. Then we were all piling after him, getting in each other’s way, tripping each other and stepping on the drapes until we exploded into the dressing room and found her.

Ran had arrived, like a proper hero, and not known what to do with her. She was huddled in one corner, her hands over her face, cringing away from... well, away from nothing, really. There was nothing there but the dressing mirror. It was a big old piece, that mirror, Spider-kindens work, that had been there since long before the Peachpit Street Merchant Company ever took up residence, before Madame Graspin inherited the building, before anyone could remember. It was tarnished and dark these days, but it was enormous, one of those amazing works of skill that even modern-day artificers find it had to duplicate. Bounder was kneeling by Eswell, doing his best to console her, but she was still shrieking, not so loud, but too garbled and panicky to make much sense of what she was saying. Only one thing was clear, though. She had seen something. In the mirror. She had seen something that had completely broken her. She was highly-strung, our Eswell, but she was strong, too. She was used to driving her ambitions through any number of reasonable objections. There wasn’t one of us that didn’t glance, at least once, at that old mirror, even Bounder, although he thought nobody saw him. It showed us nothing but us, and that dimly. There were a lot of shadows in that old mirror, that was all.

After a few days Bounder called the cast and crew together. Eswell, he explained, would not be returning to us. She had gone to stay with relatives outside the city, a bit of country air. She was feeling much better, he assured us. Artistic temperament, he said, just a little too highly strung, working too hard, and we’d all heard how she was getting frustrated at the role. Hardly surprising that she had a bit of an off day. Bounder smiled and jollied us along, and most people went along with it. I didn’t, so much. I’d seen her before she left for her family estates. Better, yes, but she wasn’t the same. I tried to talk to her, maybe even to get her to stay on, but she was having none of it. Just as her carriage pulled off, Eswell hissed at me, “I saw *her*.”

But it didn’t matter what I thought. What mattered was that we were short a Pathaea.

We held auditions, then. There was nobody in the cast who could have carried off the role, certainly not poor simpering Fratte. However, most of the other merchant companies in the city had wind of what we were doing and the chance to be the first ever Pathaea in Collegium was extremely attractive. Bounder put the word out, and next evening we had twenty would-be Pathaeas lined up at the Masque waiting to do their stuff. Not one of them had seen the piece, of course, and Bounder was taking no chances this time. With Eswell no longer in a position to squat on the role, he was determined to get someone worthy of it. He really could be a mercenary bastard, when the mood was on him. Anyway, it was *that* aria he handed out to the hopefuls, and I think at least one in three just gave up when they saw it.

The rest gave it their best. Beetle-kindens, Flies, a few Ant maidens even, they came and launched themselves at those cascades of notes with all the furious attack of the Wasp-kindens light airborne. The Flies were best, overall, because their soprano was a half-octave higher than

anyone else's, but the aria defeated them all in the end, broke them like wreckers' rocks. There were a few strained voices in the city the next day, I can tell you. They came and squeaked at us, and then they left. Most of the time Keynes Bounder didn't even have to tell them that they weren't what we were looking for.

He was getting desperate, I knew him well enough to tell that. He staked his reputation on every piece we performed, and *Phaladris* had left him on the back foot already. If he couldn't get a *Pathaea* for his *Pathaea*, what a fool he would look. As the evening drew to a close he was muttering about sending to Seldis, to Siennis even. I wish he had.

And then *she* came in, stepped in out of the dark without a word or a nod to anyone. It was near midnight then, but she didn't ask if she was late, or whether we'd cast the role, she just stood in front of Bounder with her hands behind her back and waited.

Moth-kindens, she was: a slight, small woman with that dusky grey skin, those blank eyes. Her dark hair was gathered up at the nape of her neck, and she wore a drab, mottled robe. Most of her looked young, except for a certain tension about the face, a certain implication of the hardship of ages, but then with some of those old races it's hard to put a sum of years on them.

We had never had a Moth-kindens on stage at Peachpit Street. In the audience certainly, but not in the company. We were a little provincial operation, and our attempts to perpetrate art were mediocre even by Collegium's standards, let alone those of a race that traditionally jeered at everything we did. Still, here she was and, after blinking at her foolishly for a moment, Bounder passed her the score.

She didn't take it, and she waved our harpist to silence when he started to pluck a string. She stood there, her arms at her sides now, small grey hands curled half-closed. It was impossible to tell what she was looking at.

And she *sang*. Hammer and tongs, how she sang! Pitch perfect, word perfect, but that was secondary. She sang the words like everyone else had just been trained crickets chirping them. She sang them with meaning, with a thousand years of history that we couldn't guess at. Her voice soared and spun, like a fish in a stream, like a glitter of dragonflies, vaulting and dancing up, leaping the falls of notes until she found that elusive high point, that single clear tone that nobody else had quite been able to reach, that note that I have never, ever heard in any other work.

I felt my heart and lungs, my stomach and all the guts of me, resound, reverberate with the music she made. When her voice leapt, I leapt with it, inside. Her voice left an unfamiliar taste in my mouth, sent ghosts of wild thoughts flitting in my mind, like dreams forgotten on waking. I was gripping Bounder's hand and he was gripping Sheppa's, and the three of us had eyes - no, ears! - for nothing but her. She showed us what we were, really: a pack of Beetle-kindens trying to put on a two-hundred year-old Spider opera about a six-hundred year-old Moth-kindens city, a world we were unqualified to know anything about, and yet, with her giving voice to all of that, we knew we would make it. *Pathaea* would happen. More, it would be a show the like of which Collegium had never seen.

And when she stopped, when the last sound of her had rung away, we stood and applauded her, applauded her for sheer gratitude, not that we had our *Pathaea*, though surely we had, but that she had given that to us. If she had asked something of us just then, whether it was to fight a duel or travel to the Commonweal or slap the Spider ambassador, we'd have done it, all three of us.

“Orillaea,” she said, when Bounder regained the self-possession to ask after her name, and she asked when the next rehearsal would be, cool as you like. Nobody actually told her she had the role. Nobody needed to.

The three of us retired to the private room of the Other Masque, which old Madam Graspin had left open for us despite the hour. It took a long time, and several bowls of wine, before any of us said anything. Eventually Sheppa started, “It’s their Art, you know. All the Bad-Old-Days kinden. Spiders are the same. Look at you, talk to you, and their Art’s in your head, making you want to do what they ask. It’s like breathing to them. They don’t even realise they’re doing it.”

“It’s more than that,” Bounder declared. From his tone he had obviously been thinking hard. “It’s Aptitude. You know, the Moths, the Spiders, all of them? Can’t fiddle a door-handle, can’t load a crossbow. I remember when I was at the Aristarta, in Seldis. Not a locked door in the place, not a latch, just curtains and curtains and open doorways. Their minds work differently to ours. They can’t see what we can, they can’t understand it. And yet, and yet... Scriatha was Inapt. If that Fly-kinden hadn’t translated we wouldn’t even be able to read her notation. I thought that would be the only difficulty but... there’s something more, something in the music itself. Just in that role, in Pathaea’s grand aria, there’s something that *we* can’t see, and just as Scriatha couldn’t have picked a lock, so we can’t sing her music as she intended.” He grinned a little wildly. “But we don’t have to, because we have the beautiful Orillaea to sing it for us, and we’re going to be the most famous merchant company in the city!”

Rehearsals picked up in a couple of days. Everyone was very curious about our newcomer, and at first she steered well clear of all of them, hardly deigning to speak to them, only heeding Bounder’s direction, and that barely. She came on and she sang, faultlessly, without book, and the rest of the time she might as well have thought us all slaves or savages.

But you can’t live amongst a troupe of performers like that for long. It was the Fly-kinden that wore her down, mostly. Sheppa had to measure her for costume, of course, and the bustling host of Sheppa’s female relatives, without number or limit it always seemed to me, treated her as if she was royalty, doting on her every need. She, in turn, began to treat them as if they were servants – I won’t say slaves, that would be unfair – and they didn’t seem to mind. I did, but then she never so much as looked at me, so there we are. One of the only times I ever ran into her face to face was for one rehearsal where someone had shut her out – not locked, just shut, but Bounder was right about that – and I went over to answer her quiet knock. She brushed past me as though I was beneath contempt, and I found I much preferred being out of her notice.

Once Sheppa and her people had broken the ice there were various other overtures. Madame Graspin brought her hot drinks, which she took without any more thanks than a curt nod. Boswell Marwell tried to show off by reciting a piece of poetry full of classical allusions, stentorian and over-enunciated, and the politely incredulous smile that established itself on her face, despite her best efforts, went a long way towards endearing her to the rest of the cast. Shortly after that, poor Mosley Gafferow began to hang about her.

He was an odd one, Mosley. Solid wood, like I say, but that doesn’t mean he was stupid. He had good prospects in his father’s export trade, and he was extremely marriage-worthy, worth a few thousand Centrals a month once his dad shuffled off. He wasn’t bad to look at, either, just a bit bland, a bit stout, with his hairline a bit high. He was a lump: a personable, amiable lump.

The lump had got a new idea into his head, though, which was a rare event in itself. The lump had decided that he rather liked Orillaea. He would sit near her, when they were not on

stage. He would smile and screw up his courage, consult his notes and then make strained pleasantries, offer halting compliments, try to strike up a conversation like someone trying to strike sparks from pumice. It was all his idea, certainly. His father would have slapped some sense into him, had he known. No itinerant Moth chanteuse was going to seduce his son, he'd have said, but he never knew, and I suspect he wasn't the type to notice a change in his offspring. Mosley, to Old Man Gafferow, was just as much a part of the business as the goodwill and the stock, and would be invested and borrowed against like everything else.

At first, Orillaea ignored him, and everyone assumed that was that. What you must remember, though, is just how dull a lump Mosley was. There was no room in that solid oak skull for doubt. He kept on with his faltering praise, his strangled observations. Throughout the tendays of our rehearsals he would always find a place to sit near her, would bring her little treats to eat, or once a book, a very old book of poetry. He even sang better when she was in the auditorium than when she was out of earshot, although the difference was very slight. She held him off as long as she could, with her indifference, but we could see the cracks start.

Eventually, however, his plodding campaign bore some minute fruit. She would look at him when he spoke. She would eat a honey-pastry when he offered it. She took the book, though it's anyone's guess whether she actually ever read it. Towards the performance date, when Bounder was throwing daily tantrums at how unready we were, she would let him feed her, hand to lips, and once she held his hand. I don't think she was remotely attracted to him. To speak frankly, her kind, the old Inapt races, really don't see us like that. We're all lumbering oafs to them, for all that we oafs run the world now. He confused her, though, with his blundering kindnesses. She didn't know what to do with him. The odd thing was, I felt at the time that the last thing holding out in her was a kind of guilt: that by then she had realised just what an adoring fool Mosley was, and she was holding him at arm's length because otherwise she would hurt him: he the moth, and she the flame.

Bounder, as I say, was incandescent with rage at least once each day, but never with her. After all, everyone else had to rehearse. *She* knew it all already. She had come to us fully formed, and everyone assumed that she had played the role somewhere out east, somewhere in the Spiderlands, where the true *Pathaea* was still routinely done. I wonder now, myself, but enough of that. I can't prove anything, nor even quite believe what I might suspect. She was ready, as I say, and everyone else was shown up as the awful amateur hams they were. She made everyone in the company work, I'll give her that. By the time of the opening night there wasn't a voice, an actor, a chorus member, a musician, who wasn't giving their best ever performance. I'm still not saying that they were good, mind. Marwell was still as funny as losing a foot, and Mosley, for all his ardour and passion, was still more the province of the carpenter than the physician, but everyone was better than they had ever been.

I, on the other hand, had precious little to do. I had taken apart and reassembled the clockwork beneath the stage, tested out the winding engine and replaced the spring. The rotating flats were moving as smooth as oiled silk and, as for the rest of it, well, there wasn't much for me to do. For the first time ever nobody seemed to need a prompt and, as for the hoist that I had lovingly reinforced in anticipation of its labouring under Eswell's weighty talent, well... I had explained to Orillaea, another of my rare meetings with her, about Bounder's plans for her entrance. She laughed at me. It was such a disdainful laugh it rendered me speechless.

"If he wants me to enter from above," she said, "he has only to ask," and in the next moment she had spread her gleaming wings, darkly shimmering fans that glimmered and faded

in the air around her, drawn from nowhere by her Art. I shrugged and conceded that my poor clumsy hoist would not be needed.

In the last tenday before the show we had a few warnings, none of which we heeded. One of Sheppa's cousins broke an ankle when something startled her on the stairs – and you're right, *I've* never heard of a Fly-kindén breaking an ankle before either. Another time, our Ant-kindén, Ran, got spooked by something and missed an entrance, and we wasted an entire hour whilst he hunted about behind the scenes for a quarry he would never name. A bottle of Madame Graspin's wine, left backstage, turned out to contain something so smokily, headily intoxicating that the entire chorus ended up coming on three scenes early and singing... something, some song not in that opera nor any other I ever heard, but at the time it sent shivers down my spine. Even Keynes Bounder himself was not immune to this spate of strangeness, but went through three evenings where he called everyone the wrong name, mostly names of people he had known at the Aristarta, all except for Orillaea. He had only called her one thing from the start.

'Pathaea,' of course.

But then, when you get close to the first night, there's always a certain air of energy and panic that makes odd things happen. Theatre isn't an artificer's game. You can't measure it and you can't properly control it. Nobody was about to admit that something unusual was going on.

The night before the show I got in early, as I always do, to make sure everything was in place. It's an engineer's neatness, to count off the props and the flats and all the raw materials of theatre, but it's saved us from ruin before. When I arrived at the Masque, however, I found a lean Moth-kindén man waiting for me. It was the silk-merchant, Gravos, who greeted me solemnly as I unlocked.

He asked me how rehearsals were going, and I said fine. I asked him if he was coming to see us, and he told me he'd already reserved a seat for tomorrow night. I wanted to go in and began counting things but it was clear he had more to say.

"How is Pathaea?" he said, and it was a strange thing: when Bounder said it, you always knew whether he meant the opera, or the character, or whether he was talking to Orillaea direct. He had distinct ways of saying it, depending. The way Gravos said it wasn't any of those. It was odd enough that it stopped me halfway through the door, looking back over my shoulder and frowning at him.

I said nothing useful, and so he said, in his soft Moth-voice, "You Beetles love to play with things you don't understand," which was rich from a man who couldn't have turned the key in the lock or done double-entry book-keeping.

"What about Pathaea?" I asked, somewhat belligerently, trying to match the way he had said it.

"Pathaea of Pathis, greatest of her generation, ruler of this city, Queen of the Night," said Gravos, and there was reverence and a little fear in his voice.

"Is that the first night or the last night," I said, trying to make light.

"*That* work, in *this* city," he murmured. "Scriatha never dreamed that your people would do such a thing, and still she put down her pen for three years, after completing the piece. She had to empty her head of the dreams, the images, the sendings of Pathaea that cluttered her mind like old furniture." Gravos could normally be relied on to talk like a merchant, not a mystic, but there was something eating away at him, forcing him to it. When I turned away he actually grasped at my tunic.

"They called her the Queen of the Night," he told me, hoarsely. I just shrugged, and politely removed his hand, and went into the dark theatre. It was probably less than a minute I

spent fumbling for the ignition on the gas lamps, but it seemed like whole years of my life, I can tell you. You see, that's another thing about the old Inapt people. Spiders, Mantids, even Fly-kindens, who have a bit of both ways, they see well in the dark. Moths, I'm told, see better in the dark than the day. Me, I need light, and so do almost all my folk. We're daytime people, just like the Ants and, until I got those lamps burning, I had all the old night terrors of my kinden dancing up and down my spine.

We had a full house for the first night. The Masque wasn't a large theatre but it had been a long old time since we'd packed them aisle to aisle, I can tell you. Word had got around, of course: the rediscovered opera, the mysterious Moth-kindens lead. We were turning them away at the door. Keynes Bounder was already planning the tour: not just Sarn this time but Helleron, Seldis, Merro, who knew where else? We were about to put the Peachpit Street Merchant Company on the map.

Everyone there, I reckoned, had seen *Pathaea* at least once before, or the emasculated version that normally hobbled onto the boards. They were waiting for the changes, the differences. We had a select audience out there, educated and sophisticated: College Masters, merchant magnates, the idle wealthy, our favoured regulars, and of course the Moth-kindens. All that little coven who gathered in the Other Masque were there, on that first night, and Gravos amongst them.

Well, it all started off without a raised eyebrow. Mosley Gafferow, dressed, as best Sheppa could manage, as a Spider-kindens Aristos, arrived in old Pathis to be menaced by Ran's Mantis-kindens, looking convincingly lean and deadly. The Spider is knocked out, the Mantis is driven off, and Teranis, still clearly poor old wooden Mosley, wakes to meet the clown Prater, and a selection of Moth-kindens magicians, who first punish Prater, and then tell Teranis that they are the servants of Pathaea.

Then, with the name, Orillaea stepped on stage and you could feel the audience's mood change. Sheppa's costuming had done the woman proud. She was got up in a robe of black and silver that caught the lights like a dozen constellations of stars, and her grey skin - her face, her arms and one bare shoulder - were startlingly pale above it. When she sang it felt as though it was not just the audience going quiet to hear her. It was as though something else, something old and vast and forgotten that could not hear poor Mosley's voice, or Marwell's, was awoken and paying heed. It took me in too. I was supposed to be following the score but I forgot and I just listened when she started to sing.

Pathaea has barely five minutes on stage in the first act, but once she had been and gone the play was different. We were inspired, is what we were. Bounder, as Sarostros, was menacing and smooth and crammed with secrets and power, which was, let me tell you, entirely different to the vainglory he'd been playing it with during rehearsals. Ran stood there in his green arming jacket, with wooden spines buckled to his forearms, and radiated calm murder. Fratte, usually so colourless on stage that you could see through her, mustered a little borrowed fire when told that Teranis would be coming to recue her. Marwell was funny. Boswell Marwell got a laugh from the audience, free and without being prompted by some friend of his in the second row. History in the making, I assure you.

The first act tripped brightly to its conclusion: Eriphe and Teranis, the lovers, meet and are captured by Sarostros. Menamon the Mantis is disgraced and cast out. Sarostros is setting the lovers and the slave Prater a series of tests to prove their passion. The curtain came down to applause that was more astonished than anything else. I half expected someone to come backstage and demand to know what we'd done with the real Peachpit Street Company.

The break between acts is usually an excuse for all manner of gabble and babble amongst the cast, but everyone was quiet that night – not subdued, just quiet. They didn't want to break whatever spell had been cast on them. I dropped in to give Bounder my nod and let him know all was well, and I took a moment to look at them: I remember thinking that, of our regulars, only Marwell was actually playing his own kinden, and he was playing at slavery. The others, Flies and Beetles and the Ant, were got up as people from a vanished world, people whose kinden had lost their way in history: I remember Bounder and Fratte and Villo all greyed up, and Mosley powdered practically white and, beyond them, beyond the trumpery, the slender Orillaea, sitting silent at the far end of the dressing room, the thing itself that they were all imitating. Perhaps her blind-looking eyes were fixed on the tarnish-webbed mirror, perhaps not.

Then we were on again, and the big moment was coming up.

Bounder, as Sarostros, outlined the tests he was going to set the lovers, and here is where the usual plot falls apart, because nothing anyone does for the next twenty minutes makes much sense. We had Scriatha's true script, though, and we had Orillaea. The audience's intake of breath when she made her appearance was audible even backstage. She sang, giving Eriphe the knife to stab Sarostros. She sang, playing with Menamon's loyalties and luring him to her side, and then she *sang*. Her voice, already by far the best thing anyone had heard all night, slipped free of the constraints of propriety and lifted and lifted, circling about the flame of that impossible top note. She sang the piece that had broken Eswell Broadwright, the piece that had been cut, ruthlessly cut, by those who had first brought Scriatha's great work to Collegium, and when she touched that fatal note, something *changed*.

What was supposed to happen, after that, is that she and Sarostros have a duel of what is supposed to be magic, but is just singing, of course, and Menamon and Teranis have a duel in the more conventional sense, and Prater the clown, who's failed the tests, is despairing of ever achieving his freedom, and it's up to poor Eriphe to jump up and dispatch her mother, Pathaea the Queen of the Night, back to the darkness and save the day for everyone. That's what the score says. It's almost what happened. I'm not entirely sure what the audience thought they were seeing. I've never dared ask anyone. I've certainly never dared ask Gravos, or anyone of his sly, secretive kinden, but only for fear that I might, for once, get a straight answer.

There was a brief space after that aria where she was offstage, and Bounder put the lovers through their paces, and they pass and stupid Prater fails, and it was as though a storm, a real thunder-and-lightning storm was about to break. The air was crackling with leashed rage. I could see Bounder's eyes very wide as he swept about the stage, his manner, his very stance belonging to another man of another age. Mosley and Fratte clung together convincingly, the lovers convinced that at any moment this man, this Moth sorcerer, would part them forever. I remember old Marwell sitting in the middle of the stage, his seamed face a picture of misery, and I remember thinking that it was not just Boswell Marwell trying for the tragic. There was a thousand years of slavery in that look, the face of an underclass, of a man whose fate is to be nothing but a toy for his betters, to live or die, prosper or fail, by their arbitrary word. I looked up from that ghastly visage, and I swear that Bounder's eyes, Sarostros' eyes, were blank white.

Then she came on again for her showdown with her rival magician: Pathaea, Queen of the Night, and all the gaslamps in the house guttered out, and yet it was not dark. There was light, a purplish light fit for funerals, and it came from Orillaea. No, I will be honest. It came from Pathaea, walking in majesty, the greatest noble lady of old Pathis come home after so many centuries.

It all went wrong then, which meant it all happened according to the script. She sang at Bounder, and he sang back, and they fought. They fought in song, and I cannot say it clearer than that. It was all beyond me, beyond my understanding, but the length of the stage bent and bowed between them, the very air clenched and strained to the sound of their voices, pummelling and twisting as they sang magic at it. There was nothing of Keynes Bounder in Sarostros' face now, no admission that he had ever been a Beetle-kind actor-manager with grandiose ideas, and as for *her*, well, she was just as she always had been, and that was bad enough.

And in the middle of the stage, the other fight, because Ran was trying to kill Mosley Gafferow.

In all my remembrances, I reserve a special place for that Ant, Ran. In his swift, sharp movements, as he flung about the gleaming rapier that his wooden sword had somehow become, there were a multitude of different expressions trying to get out. Firstly he was trying to kill Mosley as a Mantis-kind kills, all that swift and deadly striking, that perfect poise and balance, all that sheer unadulterated lust for blood that they seem to reek of, and yet, in the grip of whatever hold Pathaea had on him, he was trying to kill Mosley as an Ant-kind. Like all Ants, he had trained in arms back in his city, and I could see a lot of that in there, in the quick, brutal economy of motion, the guarded lunges and thrusts that would better fit a man with a shortsword and shield. In harness with those two conflicting killers there was Ran the actor, because part of him was still forcing his actions into the choreography of the stage fight that he had drilled into Mosley over the course of months, and finally, mark you, finally there was Ran the human being, Ran the citizen of Collegium, and he was doing his absolute cursed best to rein in his traitor limbs, to hobble himself, to do anything, in short, except kill Mosley Gafferow: four men fighting in the same body at cross purposes: Ran, whatever his full name was, was a hero as far as I'm concerned.

And what of Mosley? Was the wooden man about to become splinters? Ran would have killed him, despite everything, had the boy not pulled something special out. As I watched, I saw a change come over him. It was not anything given to him by Pathaea, that I'll swear. It was just Mosley, solid, even-tempered Mosley, in real danger and left to his own devices. I saw an expression, a real expression come over that lumpen face, and a passion in his movements that nobody could have guessed at. As Ran drove at him, all that chaotic wrestling of intermingled desires, he fought. He was not Teranis defending himself from Menamon in a two-centuries-old opera, he was Mosley fighting for his life, and it brought out something in him, some animation and life, that never truly went away.

Well, that was going to be it for me. I was well and truly out of my depth, and I wanted out. I'm not ashamed to admit it. I deserted my post. Having seen all that going on, on stage, I ran for the backstage door and threw it open, meaning to come back in the morning when life was comprehensible again.

I cannot vouch for what I saw, beyond that open door. I can only say what I remember, even though I doubt my own mind, now, when I recall it.

I saw the College, true, just as one might expect, because those white-stone buildings are old, very old indeed, but most of the rest was gone. All the residential tenements, the three- and four-storey places, gone. The row of little workshops where I had my living, gone. I could see clear down to the market, but the market was not the close clutter of stalls I knew, but a grander open space with something like a stage in the centre, and the people –

They were Beetle-kind, for the most part, men and women and children, but they were not my people. My people never walked with such sloped shoulders. My people never looked

solely at the ground or at their feet. My people never spoke in such mumbled whispers or flinched at a loud sound. My people would never have carried the chairs of their masters through the streets of their city, or stepped aside humbly to let a grey-skinned, white-eyed lord stride past, or cringe from a sharp-featured Mantis warrior as though not a voice would decry the spilling of their blood.

And I saw the night. Of course it was night, it was supposed to be night – but not *this* night. Night in Collegium is not dark. The streets are picked out by the warmth of gaslamps, and each home has a cheery hearth ablaze, the firelight leaking past the shutters. The doorways of tavernas and hostelries stand open, spilling out golden welcome to passers-by. Collegium nights hold the dark at bay. This was not the night I knew. No gaslamps, no cheer. The silent city, the labouring masses, the august, blank-eyed lords and ladies, were lit only by the sparks of torches and by the vast, impartial face of the moon that bathed the city in cold, dispassionate fire. It was the old night of Pathis, lost these five hundred years. It was the night that *she* was queen of.

I retreated back into what passed for the familiarity of the theatre. I closed the door and forced myself not to think about what I might just have seen, and I found my way back to my station offstage.

It was all as before, but more so. The air was so taut between Pathara and Sarastros that it seemed to be about to tear in half, and what would come through such a rip was anyone's guess. Ran had forced Mosley upstage as far as he would go. Their rapiers flickered and danced, but it was clear that there were few moves left, and none of them choreographed. It was all about to fall apart.

*Something was supposed to happen*, I knew. This terrible, drawn-out moment was wrong. Something should have broken it, rather than allowing it to stretch and twist out like this, rather than allowing Pathaea's world, that centuries gone tyranny, an opening in which to reach forward across all the years. What, though? What was missing?

I was an idiot, of course. The answer was in the score, right before me. What happened was that Eriphe, in her one worthwhile moment of the whole opera, confronts Pathaea, breaking her concentration and allowing Sarostros to banish her. Our Eriphe was the Fly-kindens Fratte, though, and she was cowering at the side of the stage, her head wrapped in her arms, utterly incapable of doing anything but denying all that was going on around her. There's a mis-casting in every show, in my experience, and faced with everything she knew being turned inside out and upside-down, the poor sweet-natured girl had resorted to blotting it all out. She would be no use at all. Which left me, to my certain knowledge, and I had better act fast.

I first reached for a hammer with half a mind to just rush out on stage and have at Pathaea myself, strike a blow for freedom. It wasn't going to happen. Partly it was that I was stage crew, and going out before the audience was absolutely out of the question, but rather more was Pathaea herself. Awe and dark splendour radiated off her in waves. I knew that I could never get close to do her harm without falling under her influence, without reverting to being a slave, as my ancestors had been her slaves. There was nothing I could do to stop her. Her influence was laid like heavy chains on me, ready to stop me raising a hand against her.

I saw Ran's blade raised, shining in that unnatural light.

There was something that Pathaea had not thought of. She had not thought of it because she could not think of it. My hand jumped of its own accord and found the levers for the hoist.

The hoist was not needed, of course. When Pathaea had made her first grand entrance she had floated down on wings of Art. The hoist had rested, unused, since the evening I spent strengthening it for use with Eswell, before she came face to face with Pathaea in the mirror.

I had been simulating Eswell's bulk as best I could, back then. I had fitted the harness about the biggest sandbag we had.

I heard the mad ratchetting sound of clockwork abruptly let fly without anything to stop it, three dozen gears suddenly going at top speed. I saw Pathaea's grey, beautiful face tilt up, and there was no comprehension in her face, no acknowledgement of what she was seeing.

And after all, it's something that every stage manager wants to do to an actor once in their lives.

I cannot swear as to my accuracy. It didn't really matter. Her concentration broke when the harnessed sandbag struck the stage, shivering the boards into pieces. Everything snapped back. Ran's sword was wood and Bounder's eyes had pupils, and the chorus, oblivious as always, launched spontaneously and raggedly into their end-piece, celebrating the union of the various sets of lovers, whilst the leads stumbled dazedly about stage in the pitch dark and I fiddled desperately to re-fire the gaslamps.

Of Orillaea, there was no sign. To this day I do not know whether there was ever such a person as Orillaea, whether there was anything else there but *her*.

There was no second night. It was not for want of audience, but we had no Pathaea and, even if some miraculous replacement had walked off the next boat, nobody felt that they wanted to return to Scriatha's great masterpiece just yet. Also the stage had suffered considerable damage from a falling sandbag, and it would be a tenday before I had it repaired. The financial loss to the company was devastating. Had it not been for Old Man Gafferow we would have ceased to be. As it was, he seemed to take the new, more motivated Mosley as just rewards for his patronage. Certainly the lad started to take a more active interest in the family business – in everything, for that matter – than he ever had before. Still, there were times, once or twice, when I saw a thoughtful look come to him, and I knew who he was thinking of. I think he'd have had her back if he could, despite it all.

The only person I ever tried to talk about it to was Ran, because I thought he'd understand. He just shook his head though. Perhaps if I'd been an Ant-kindin too, perhaps if he and I could have spoken inside our heads with the clarity of their Art, then we would have come to an understanding. He was a good man, Ran, and a good actor. He gave the company a few memorable supporting roles, certainly. He died in the siege, they tell me. I was too busy with the artillery to see it happen.

And Keynes Bounder? His reputation was in a constant state of flux, afterwards. He was clown or genius depending on who you spoke to. There was a motion to have him fired, because of the money, and he only just clung onto his job with the company. You would have thought he was ruined, that he would have left for Helleron to set up a new company there.

But then, if you thought that, you didn't know Keynes Bounder. Next spring, before the season started, I ran into him in the Other Masque. He was sharing a bottle of some kind of clear spirits with a lean, sharp-faced woman whose forearms bristled with hooked spines.

"Ah, Miles," he addressed me happily when I came in. "I have the very thing for this year's production. How long has it been since we did a Mantis tragedy? Now Akkestrae here's been showing me the very thing. The only problem is, to do it properly apparently there has to be some kind of fight to the death..."