

City of Last Chances

By Adrian Tchaikovsky

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Adrian Tchaikovsky is one of the UK's best-known SF and fantasy authors. He has won or been nominated for multiple awards—too many to list here—and *City of Last Chances* is a worthy addition to his growing body of fantasy work.

Who could resist a book whose first line is 'That morning, God was complaining again'? Or resist moving on to the next section, entitled 'The final moments of Sage-Archivist Ochelby'? Or withstand the temptation to read on to find out what happens to a wildly disparate but startlingly realistic group of characters?

Ilmar is a city seething under the yoke of invader-occupiers the Pallaseen, who are ruthlessly trying to crush any culture and replace it with their own merciless, unfeeling way of life. This is a theme Tchaikovsky also explored in his award-winning series *Shadows of the Apt*. So far, the Pallaseen have succeeded, but revolution is in the air. It won't take much for the simmering resentment of students, various political factions and factory workers to burst into a violent uprising. The interactions between these different groups, and with the Pallaseen, are graphically described. Action leaps off the page and the main characters are all given their own backstories, their own motivations.

There are pockets of magic in Ilmar. Some is captured and used to fuel weapons that can emit a killing blast. The Grove is a magical place which is not always there—but when it is, it makes available gateways to other worlds. Demons are harnessed by carefully drawn up contracts to power factories and transport. And part of Ilmar, The Reproach, has been consumed by an ancient madness that affects anyone who enters it; there they will remain, dancing until they die.

Tchaikovsky expertly weaves all these factors into a satisfyingly solid and realistic story. It's hard to think of any fantasy quite like this book. Its style is something of a cross between the directness of Joe Abercrombie and the complexity of Jay Kristoff, but you would perhaps have to go all the way back to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* to find something quite as stifling and claustrophobic in its setting. Further, *City of Last Chances* is not based on a premise of right and wrong, only on how things *are*. Events happen by chance; plans go awry or get tangled up with other plans. Readers are not surprised when the demons get loose, when the Reproach starts to expand, or when creatures emerge from the Grove. The tension has ratcheted up and we expect these things to happen. But the results are not quite what we might be led to expect from other fantasy novels, and therein lies Tchaikovsky's skill in weaving the odd, the strange and the downright weird into a thoroughly believable whole.

In summary, *City of Last Chances* is a compelling read, and not just for fantasy aficionados.