

HOUSE OF OPEN WOUNDS

ALSO BY ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

THE TYRANT PHILOSOPHERS

City of Last Chances

SHADOWS OF THE APT

Empire in Black and Gold

Dragonfly Falling

Blood of the Mantis

Salute the Dark

The Scarab Path

The Sea Watch

Heirs of the Blade

The Air War

War Master's Gate

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The Scent of Tears (with Frances Hardinge et al.)

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Dogs of War

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Lords of Uncreation

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Guns of the Dawn

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Cage of Souls

Firewalkers

The Doors of Eden

Feast and Famine

(collection)

HOUSE OF OPEN WOUNDS

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are
either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*I'm dedicating this book to everyone on the Friday night creatives'
Zoom that helps keep me sane.*

About the Author



ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY was born in Lincolnshire before heading off to Reading to study psychology and zoology. He subsequently ended up in law and has worked as a legal executive in both Reading and Leeds, where he now lives. Married, he is a keen live role-player and occasional amateur actor and has trained in stage-fighting. He's the author of *Children of Time*, the winner of the 30th Anniversary Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the *Sunday Times* bestseller *Shards of Earth*.

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Acknowledgements

An Invitation from the Publisher

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF NATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PALLESEEN WARS
OF PERFECTION

Allor – conquered, a haunt of conjurers

Bracinta – a protectorate split between Pallesand and Lor

The Divine City – unconquered, a city of powerful magicians

Galletes – conquered, a mobile, island-dwelling people

Jarokir – conquered, formerly a land of many temples

Lor – unconquered, currently at war with Pallesand

Oloumann – conquered, formerly a land of many gods

Pallesand – heart of the Palleseen Sway

Telmark – conquered, a land of proud traditions, including the city of Ilmar

ELEMENTS OF THE PALLESEEN SWAY

Temporary Commission of Ends and Means – the ruling body of Pallesand

School of Correct Erudition (Archivists) – responsible for learning and magic

School of Correct Appreciation (Invigilators) – responsible for art and law

School of Correct Exchange (Brokers) – responsible for trade

School of Correct Conduct (Monitors) – responsible for military and enforcement

School of Correct Speech (Inquirers) – responsible for religion, language and espionage

Regulars (Troopers and Statloi) – the soldiers of the Pallesen army
Accessories – conscripted foreign troops, also known as Turncoats and Whitebellies

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

WITHIN THE HOSPITAL (PALLESEEN UNLESS NOTED)

Guest-Adjutant Alv – Divinati sympathetic healer
Former Cohort-Broker Banders – orderly
Cohort-Monitor Cosserby – sonorist and artificer
Chief Accessory Erinael – former lead medico of the hospital, now dead
Accessory ‘Maric’ Jack – Ilmari former priest and orderly
Kilbery – the Butcher’s ward
Accessory Lochiver – Jarokiri former priest and flautist
Accessory Masty – Bracite orderly
Chief Accessory ‘Butcher’ Ollery – alchemist, lead medico
Fellow-Inquirer Prassel – necromancer, commanding officer
Accessory Tallifer – Jarokiri former priest and surgeon
God – a divine being
The Fisher King – a divine being
Life Of Dead Trees – a divine being
Mazdek, the Chastising Flame – a divine being
Sturge of the Unclean Sacristy – a divine being



From L–R: Trooper Lidlet, Former Cohort-Broker Banders, Cohort-Monitor Cossery,
Guest-Adjutant Alv, Chief Accessory ‘Butcher’ Ollery, Accessory Masti, Accessory Tallifer,
Accessory ‘Maric’ Jack (bottom), Accessory Lochiver (top), Fellow-Inquirer Prassel
Thaumagraph © Adrian Czajkowski

IN FORTHRIGHT BATTALION (PALLESEEN UNLESS NOTED)

Caeleen – Maserley’s demon companion

Cohort-Monitor Fosby – quartermaster

Trooper Foley – regular soldier

Companion-Monitor Goughry – officer

Trooper Klimmel – regular soldier

Trooper Lidlet – regular soldier

Fellow-Invigilator Maserley – Conjurer

Trooper Paucelry – regular soldier

Statlos Peppel – Watch officer

Sage-Monitor ‘Uncle’ Runkel – Commanding officer, Forthright
Battalion

Mother Semprellaime – Allorwen bawd

Fellow-Inquirer Sherm – administrative officer

Fellow-Archivist Thurrel – Decanter

IN LANDWARDS BATTALION
(PALLESEEN UNLESS NOTED)

Companion-Archivist Callow – scholar of sympathetic magic

Cohort-Monitor Festle – Necromantic Unnatural

Cohort-Archivist Hobbers – scholar of sympathetic magic

Fellow-Inquirer Killingly – necromancer

Cohort-Inquirer Megget – Watch officer

Accessory Pirisytes – Oloumanni conscript

Professor-Invigilator ‘Old Eyeball’ Scaffesty – Commanding officer,
Landwards Battalion

Cohort-Archivist Skilby – scholar of sympathetic magic

Sage-Archivist Stiverton – senior necromancer

Cohort-Monitor Tunly – Watch officer

Zenotheus, the divine scorpionfly – a divine being

OTHERS

The Dread Lord Ghastron – Varinecthes’s demonic familiar

General Halseder – Bracite loyalist

Kosha – former priest of God in Ilmar

Varinecthes ‘Varney’ – ancient sorcerer of uncertain provenance

Hell – The Butcher

He does look a bit like a butcher. Not the murderer sort but the jolly figure serving up paper-wrapped parcels of sausages and ham. A family butcher, so to speak. The sort of man – ruddy-faced, rotund, moustached – who always has a disarming joke at his own expense. A pillar of the community. And that last is true. For a given value of pillar. For his own definition of community.

It is a vision of hell.

The air is made of screaming. Like a picture where the gap between two objects is revealed, after a squint, to be just more of the same, here the gap between throat-stripping shrieks is just less-insistent sounds of men and women in agony. A hierarchy of torment so constant and yet so varied it becomes something close to a choir.

Here, then, is the choirmaster. A great weight of a man who nonetheless passes through the bloody clutter of the space with an appalling deftness. Like the thing in your dream, that cannot possibly follow you into the small spaces, and yet does so in defiance of reason. His bulk is gravity, demanding the attention of everything around him. It's a wonder the rivulets of spilled blood don't orbit him in a wheeling astronomy of gore.

Behind him his minions, his attendant devils, are hard at work. Time enough for them when you've escaped the pull of this man, this bloody-handed emperor, even now stomping to look over the new arrivals thrown to his mercy.

His face is a thing of parts. It can clench like a fist, open like a flower. In other moments, with the rigour of his profession lifted from him, it's a good face. A friendly thing to see. A broad smile, such as might be used to persuade you to open your door to him at night. His moustache, which right now is crusted with red, can make him seem clownish and harmless. The mass of him, which can drive a cleaver through a limb or give bite to the teeth of a saw, becomes the ungainly comedy of a dancing bear. When he wants it to. Right now, though, he's working. The worst kind of torturer, who preys only on those already in agony. No fit and healthy victims come to his dungeon to be broken. He takes the leavings, and his people make them squeal.

Spilling into his tent now: a flurry of men and women, some in full uniform, others stripped to their shirtsleeves. They are whole as yet. They aren't *his*. And those that are his, well, their uniforms are already ragged, holed, sodden, scorched. The fit set down the stretchers of the infirm and retreat. Nobody wants to spend time in the Butcher's company when he's working. Most especially not the howling victims set at his feet.

One figure remains. Uniform jacket open, slovenly, hanging improbably from her shoulders as though it'll slough off any moment, save it never does. She's been outside with the bearers, taking details, and she bends to the Butcher's ear.

"Taking the wall. Caught a bonecutter, then counterattack." The words almost stripped of their regular meaning, a code between her and the Butcher to give him context.

He casts a look over the array of the agonised, a workman inspecting the damage; a clerk, today's agenda for the meeting. Nearest to him a man whimpers with his leg laid open. *Sword-stroke*. Next, the woman without a hand, screaming at the stump. Then three silent ones. He sees where their uniforms are shredded, the ripped edges presented outwards where the shards of shattered bone erupted from *within*. Then the next, and the next. The pucker-and-scorch of baton-shot. The man whose head is laid open so that the jigsaw of his skull is present for any budding puzzlesmith to piece

together. The woman – the loudest screamer in the place, whose leg was splinted by some cack-handed amateur who doesn't understand how bones go.

The Butcher works his first magic. The silent man whose ribs were shattered on one side can still be saved for future torments. Blunt-fingered hands signal and that stretcher is hauled deeper into hell where the devils can get to work with saw and tongs. The woman with the shattered arm, she can be saved. She goes to the foreigner with the shimmer skin, staring up with eyes pulled so taut it's a wonder her lids will ever close again. The gutshot man can be saved. He's placed in the far corner for a scouring and a working over, back where a weird old man plays a weird old pipe, skirling and squalling on it as though mocking the screams of the afflicted. It's all a part of the service. A necessary component of this precise and exacting hell the Butcher built.

Those are the highest priority, where a little delay means the difference between live victim and corpse. Now it's time for the Butcher's second magic. His apron is not that of a friendly family butcher. There are twenty pockets in the leather, each with a flap to keep the worst of the ambient weather out, though most have an inch of red at the bottom of them by now. He goes down the line of the brutalised, his blunt fingers finding phials and bottles by long habit, feeling for the nicks he cuts in the corks, to tell him concentrations and active ingredients. A personal love-language of agony and alchemy. The woman without a hand has had the stump cauterised – not battlefield medicine but the side effects of a point-blank baton discharge. She'll keep. He forces the lip of a glass phial to her lips. She chokes, swallows. Her screams fall inwards until their scrabbling fingertips can't reach her lips any more and she's silent. He goes down the line, a bespoke service for each, this philtre or that, based on wound, on whim, on the individual predilections of his busy hands that seem to act on their own recognizance. Sometimes he salts the wounds with powder, stuff that burns and eats away necrotised flesh, undoes the work of energies and corruption or at least staves it off for long enough.