

CITY  
OF  
LAST  
CHANCES

ADRIAN  
TCHAIKOVSKY



*An Ad Astra Book*

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# Contents

|                                             |      |
|---------------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Factions</i>                             | VII  |
| <i>Dramatis Personae</i>                    | VIII |
| <i>Map of Ilmar</i>                         | X    |
| Yasnic's Relationship with God              | I    |
| The Final Moments of Sage-Archivist Ochelby | II   |
| A Game of Chaq                              | 24   |
| Ruslav in Love Again                        | 35   |
| Blackmane's New Collar                      | 45   |
| The Old Songs                               | 64   |
| Parliament of Fowls                         | 79   |
| Maestro in Durance                          | 89   |
| Mother Guame's Interrogation                | 98   |
| Mosaic: City of Last Chances                | 103  |
| The Reproach of Statlos Shrievsby           | 112  |
| The Pawnbroker                              | 120  |
| The Face of Perfection                      | 127  |
| Ruslav's Master's Voice                     | 133  |
| Jem's Reasons for Leaving                   | 139  |
| Unleashing Hell                             | 151  |
| Mosaic: The Hospitality of the Varatsins    | 164  |
| Ruslav in the Teeth                         | 184  |
| Nihilostes Loses a Convert                  | 196  |
| Going Home                                  | 207  |
| Chains                                      | 212  |
| Not Venom but Eggs                          | 220  |
| Conversations About God                     | 227  |

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Breaking Things                | 247 |
| The Second Murder              | 253 |
| Dancing on Air                 | 258 |
| Through the Bottom of a Bottle | 265 |
| Orvechin's Boots               | 271 |
| The Price of Rope              | 279 |
| Evidence                       | 297 |
| The Day Gets Only Worse        | 304 |
| Mosaic: Wings                  | 314 |
| Drinking Alone                 | 334 |
| The Bitter Sisters             | 342 |
| Past the Threshold             | 355 |
| Blackmane's Reckoning          | 367 |
| Mosaic: The Spark              | 382 |
| Fire                           | 397 |
| Mosaic: The Dousing            | 406 |
| Higher Powers                  | 423 |
| The Apostate                   | 426 |
| Hellgram's War                 | 435 |
| The Fine Print                 | 442 |
| Unity and Division             | 447 |
| Port to Nowhere                | 457 |
| A Single Piece of Bronze       | 464 |
| Mosaic: Resurrections          | 471 |
| Mentioned in Reports           | 487 |
| Another Round                  | 493 |

## FACTIONS OF THE CITY OF ILMAR

- Allorwen** – from the nation of Allor
- Armigers** – the aristocratic families of Ilmar
- Divinati** – from the nation of the Divinates
- Gownhall** – the Ilmari university
- Hérons** – resistance faction of the riverfolk
- Indwellers** – the people of the Anchorwood
- Lodges** – criminal gangs
- Loruthi** – from the nation of Lor
- Ravens** – resistance faction of the Armiger families
- Shrikes** – murderers for the resistance
- Siblingries** – workers' organisations
- Vultures** – resistance faction of the Ilmar streets

## FACTIONS OF THE PALLESEEN OCCUPATION

- Temporary Commission of Ends and Means** – the ruling body of Pallesand
- Palleseen Sway** – the occupied territories as a whole
- Perfecture** – an individual occupied territory
- School of Correct Erudition (Archivists)** – responsible for learning and magic
- School of Correct Appreciation (Invigilators)** – responsible for art and the judiciary
- 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

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Aullaim** – Allorwen conjurer with the Siblingries  
**Benno** – Vulture thug  
**Blackmane** – Allorwen pawnbroker  
**Fellow-Monitor Brockelsby** – Correct Conduct  
**Carelia** – one half of the Bitter Sisters, Vulture leader  
**Cheryn** – Vulture thug  
**Sage-Invigilator Culvern** – Perfector of Ilmar, Correct Appreciation  
**Dorae** – Allorwen antiques dealer  
**Dostritsyn** – ruin-diver  
**Mother Ellaime** – Allorwen landlady  
**Emlar** – student  
**Ergice** – Vulture thug  
**Companion-Monitor Estern** – Correct Conduct  
**Evene** – the other half of the Bitter Sisters, Vulture leader  
**Fleance** – Heron gambler  
**Fyon** – Shrike murderer  
**Archivist Gadders** – Correct Erudition  
**God** – divine entity  
**Maestra Gowdi** – Gownhall master  
**Grymme** – ruin-diver  
**Mother Guame** – Allorwen brothel-keeper  
**Fellow-Inquirer Hegelsy** – Correct Speech  
**Hellgram** – bouncer at the Anchorage, foreigner  
**Hervanya** – student  
**Hoyst** – hangman  
**Jem** – Divinati bartender at the Anchorage  
**Kosha** – priest, Yasnic's master, dead  
**Langrice** – keeper of the Anchorage

**Lemya** – student  
**Petric Lesselkin** – Siblingry scrapherd  
**Meraqui** – ruin-diver  
**Companion-Archivist Nasely** – Correct Erudition  
**Nihilostes** – priestess of the divine scorpionfly  
**Fellow-Broker Nisbet** – Correct Exchange  
**Sage-Archivist Ochelby** – Correct Erudition  
**Father Orvechin** – Siblingry leader  
**Orvost, the Divine Bull** – divine entity  
**Maestro Ivarn Ostravar** – Gownhall master  
**Maestro Porvilleau** – Allorwen Gownhall master  
**Archivist Riechy** – Correct Erudition  
**Ruslav** – Vulture thug  
**Statlos Shrievsby** – officer, Correct Conduct  
**Sachemel Sirovar** – former head of the family, dead  
**Shantrov Sirovar** – Armiger and student  
**Vidsya Sirovar** – Armiger and Raven  
**Fellow-Invigilator Temsel** – Correct Appreciation  
**Tobriant** – Allorwen furniture maker  
**Johanger Tulmueric** – Loruthi merchant  
**Maestro Vorkovin** – Gownhall master  
**Yasnic** – priest  
**Zenotheus, Scorpionfly God of Chaos** – divine entity



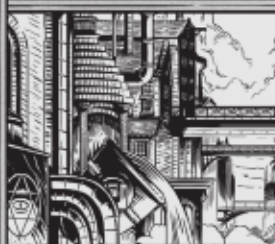
The Reproach



The Anchorage



Gutter Districts



Hammer Districts



The Reproach

The Anchorage

Gutter Districts







## Yasnic's Relationship with God

*Yasnic the priest. Thin and not young, though not quite old. Half lost in clothes tailored for a larger man in the voluminous Ilmari style. Face hollow, hair greying before it should, thinning, creeping back from his temples like an army that, seeing its opposition is time, no longer has the will to fight...*

That morning, God was complaining again. Yasnic lay crunched up in bed, knees almost to his chin and his feet twined together. Trying to tell from the way the light filtered in through the filthy window whether the frost was just on the outside, or on the inside again. He could have put a hand out to touch the panes and check. He could have put a foot out and kicked out at God. Or the far wall. It was, he decided, a blessing. A small room held his body heat longer. If he'd been able to afford anything larger, then he'd have needed a hearth and to buy wood or coal, or even magical tablethi, to heat the place.

"It's cold," God said. "It's so cold." The divine presence was curled up on His shelf like an emaciated cat, and about the same size. He had shrunk since the night before, and perhaps that, too, was a blessing. Sometimes Yasnic could do with a little less God in his life, and here he was this morning, and God was smaller by at least a quarter. He gave thanks, his knee-jerk reaction ingrained from long years of good upbringing from Kosha, the previous priest of God. Back when Ilmar had been a more tolerant place, and old Kosha and Yasnic and God had

lived in three rooms above a tanner's and had meat at least once a twelveday.

Not a twelveday, he reminded himself. The School of Correct Exchange was levying fines and making arrests for people using the old calendar, he'd heard. He had to start thinking in terms of a seven-day week, except then he couldn't look back on the way things had been and quantify the time properly. How often had they had meat, back when he'd been a boy learning at Kosha's knee? What was seven into twelve or twelve into seven or however it might work? His mathematics weren't good enough to work it out. And so, obscurely, it felt as though a swathe of his memories was locked away by the new ordnances. Also, he'd just given thanks to God that he had less God in his life, and God, the recipient of those thanks, was right there and staring at him accusingly.

"I need a blanket," said God. "It's only the beginning of winter, and it's so cold."

God looked all skin and bones. He wore rags. It was only a season since Yasnic had sacrificed a good shirt to God, but the diminished state of the faith – meaning Yasnic – tended to mean anything God got His hands on didn't last. A blanket would go the same way.

"I only have one blanket," Yasnic told God.

"Get another one." God stared at His sole priest from His place on the shelf up by the low ceiling. His spidery hands were gripping the edge, His nose and wisps of beard projecting over them. His skin was wrinkled and greyish, hollowed until the shape of His bones could be seen quite clearly. "In the old days I had robes of fur and velvet, and my acolytes burned sandalwood—"

"Yes, yes, I know." Yasnic cut God off. "I only have this blanket." He lifted the threadbare covering and regretted it instantly, the chill of the morning taking up residence in a bed with room only for one. "I suppose I'm getting up now," he added pettily.

"Please," said God. Yasnic stopped halfway through forcing numb feet into his overtrousers. God looked in a bad way, he had to admit. It was easy just to think that God was being selfish. God had, after all, been very used to people doing what He said and giving Him all good things, back in the day. Back in a day long before Yasnic, last priest of God, had come along. Their religion had been dying for over a century, ever since the big Mahanic Temple had been raised. And yes, Mahanism had actively spoken against other religions, but more, they'd just... expanded to fill all the available faith. People went where the social capital was. And now, under the Occupation, there really were people purging religions. Making arrests for Incorrect Speech. *Just as well it's only me and God*, Yasnic thought. *Easier to go unnoticed.*

"Ask the woman," God said. "Ask her for another blanket. I'm cold."

"Mother Ellaime will not give us another blanket," Yasnic said. In fact, their landlady would more likely want to ask about last twelved—last week's rent. And that was another thing, of course. Since the Occupation, everything had to be paid sooner, because of the weeks. And he couldn't quite make the maths work, but it seemed he was paying more each day of the seven than he had each day of the twelve. And it wasn't as though being the sole surviving holy man of God actually brought in much. There were few perks and no regular take-home wage. And, under the Occupation, begging meant risking arrest for Incorrect Exchange.

"I'll see what I can do." Clothes on, he shambled out of the room and went down for tea. One thing Mother Ellaime did provide her boarders with was a constantly churning samovar by the fire, and both fire and tea were just about enough to set up Yasnic for a day's scrounging.

God hadn't been with him on the stairs but was sitting beside the samovar down in the common room. Yasnic took down a cup from its hook and filled it with dark green, steaming liquid. He

wanted to avoid Mother Ellaime's notice as he jostled elbows with his fellow boarders to get space at the single table. God was there, though. God was hunched cross-legged on the tin plate Yasnic's neighbour had eaten porridge off.

"Ask her," God insisted.

"I won't do it," murmured Yasnic. His neighbour, the big man named Ruslav who never seemed to have a job but always seemed to have money, stared at him. He couldn't see God sitting in the remains of his porridge. He probably thought Yasnic wanted to lick his plate clean. Jealously, he pulled it closer to himself, making God scrabble for balance. Yasnic winced, aware that everyone was looking at him now, even the student girl who'd turned up a tw—two weeks ago, and whom he dreaded talking to. She was very clever, and Gownhall people loved to argue metaphysics. He was afraid he'd listen to her tortuous logic too much and then look around for God, only to find God wasn't there anymore. And he was afraid of what he might feel, if that were ever the case.

"Ask," God insisted peevishly. "I command it."

"Mother," Yasnic said. "I don't suppose I could beg another blanket from you?" Loud enough to carry to the old woman. Aware that his quiet words were expanding to fill the room. Feeling the student's judging eyes on him. Feeling ashamed. And it wasn't even a useful shame, the sort that earned you credit with God or, in this case, got you a blanket, because Mother Ellaime was already shaking her head. And if there was a little more money, there might be another blanket. And likely that would mean someone at the table, who had a little less money, would be missing a blanket, because it was a closed blanket economy here at Mother Ellaime's boarding house. And if it had just been Yasnic, he would have accepted the lack of a blanket and known that he was making someone else's life better, and tried to warm himself with that. But it was God, and God was old and petty and selfish, but God was also cold, and Yasnic had given himself into God's service. And so he

begged Mother Ellaime, with the whole table listening archly to every word. With Ruslav, who probably had two blankets or even three, snickering in his ear. God was cold, and God didn't have anyone else. And it was all for nothing because there wasn't another blanket to be had, not without money he didn't possess.

When darkness and the cold at last drove him back to the boarding house that night, he still didn't possess the money. He'd tried to find work, because he could translate two dead languages, he could teach, he could sing, and even though he was a priest, he could also lift and carry and scrub. Nobody wanted him to do any of those things, or at least not if it meant giving him any money. He mostly begged, but nobody wanted to give him money for that, either.

The common room seemed swelteringly hot as he came in, the fire banked profligately high, so that he was loosening his collars immediately and shrugging out of his shapeless, too-big coat. God was waiting for him by the samovar. Even smaller, of a size to fit into the teacup Yasnic reached down. He found barely half a cup left in the urn. The discovery felt like a blow. It had never happened before. Mother Ellaime treated her tea-making responsibilities with considerably more fervour than he treated his duty to God, and that was with God actually sharing a room with him.

"Ah..." Hearing his own voice, thin and cracked.

The room was oddly quiet. He hadn't actually registered its contents, save for God – whom he could always see clearly – and the samovar, which he had found by long familiarity and the smell of roasting tea. He had the sense of more people than usual present, and a peculiarly pregnant silence as of all of them staring at him. He rubbed at his eyes and squinted, mole-like.

The front room of Mother Ellaime's boarding house was filled with Palleseen soldiers. Or, if not filled, they had all the seats around the single table, and they had all the tea.

The old woman herself was waiting on them. She'd pulled her shawl close around her to hide the little beaded choker she had about her neck. Not because they might steal it – though they might, glossing the act with the word 'confiscate'. But because it would tell them she wasn't native Ilmari, and though the Occupiers weren't exactly kind towards the locals, they could be a great deal worse if you were from over the border in Allor.

On the far side of the room, the student girl was holding her cup to her chin in both hands, staring at its contents furiously, as though she was divining an angry future there. Mother Ellaime's other lodgers had already made themselves scarce.

With the exception of the student, everyone was staring at him. The soldiers had definitely made the place their own. There were boots up on the table beside the peaked caps they'd taken off. Their long batons were propped carelessly against table-edge and chair-back. One had slid off onto the floor, utterly unregarded. The gold of its tableth gleamed, drawing the eye. *Death*, it said. *I bring death*. The crooked characters of sorcery glittered on its little face: the whispered word that would have it discharge its burden of magic with lethal effect.

The soldiers' uniforms were familiar from every street corner since the war ended and the Occupation began: the boots, the brass buttons, the uncomfortably close cut of everything, like the Palleseen preferred. Half were in the charcoal of the Occupiers. The rest wore paler grey. Locals. Because there weren't many walks of life prospering in Ilmar right now, but 'collaborator' certainly was. The Palleseen wanted the Ilmari to police themselves, they said, under Correct principles of law and thought. Three years under the boot and it was already working very well. And perhaps a few of those men in the pale grey were shifty about meeting Yasnica's gaze, but he knew any residual shame in them would curdle soon enough. An extra kick at a

beggar, another neighbour reported to the Schools. Once you wore that uniform, it was easier to embrace it than to live a life divided against itself.

"I just wanted tea," he told them.

One of them stood, their officer, the Statlos. His face was bleak. "Again, please," he said. Except he said the words in Pel.

"Forgive me, Statlos," Yasnic said quietly, in the same tongue. "Tea. Just tea." And it was easy, Pel. It had been designed that way by all the clever men over on the Pallesand Archipelago. A new language, new thought, new correctness. Forward to perfection! Except somehow, an Ilmari speaking Pel always sounded different to the Occupiers. Cruder, subservient, no matter how they worked on the words.

"You heard your honoured guest," said their Statlos to Mother Ellaime. "Get the man some tea."

The look the old woman shot Yasnic as she hunched over to the samovar told him just how little she'd needed her day to get any worse. He tried to help her bring fresh water over, but she wouldn't let him.

"Why are they here?" he whispered.

"Something at the Anchorwood. In case of trouble," she said. Speaking Maric, her Allorwen accent came and went.

The student girl was sidling close. Yasnic winced and tried to find a smile from somewhere. "Good evening, my child," he tried. She was perhaps eight years younger than he was, though he felt there was at least twenty years between them in ground-down experience and misery. She looked fresh-minted and sharp-edged.

"Excuse me, rasophore." She eyed him. "You are a priest, Mother said?"

Yasnic grimaced. "I'm not of the Temple." Aware that he had just admitted something that would get him arrested if any of the soldiers had heard. "No 'robe-bearer', I'm sorry."

"I no longer go to Temple," she said. The hushed words came out hard as spat stones. The Mahanic Temple, spiritual

guide of Ilmar and the rest of occupied Telmark, had survived the Occupation despite the Pallesen's well-known loathing of religion. The established priesthood had made accommodations. Their sermons echoed the Occupiers' Correct Thought. It hadn't sat well with a lot of people, but to Yasnic – constantly strung between the tenets of his faith and his hungry belly – it was forgivable. Perhaps not to this girl though.

"Will you bless an endeavour?" she asked him flatly.

Yasnic exchanged glances with God. In that moment, the girl seemed to have enough fire in her to go and murder half the Occupiers' Perfecture. "I... don't really..."

"Tonight is very important," she told him. "To me and to a friend. A friend who can buy me another blanket, after I give you mine."

He coloured. She had been listening that morning, then. And here he was, known as a priest who couldn't afford bedclothes. "I..." He sought out God, standing indignantly by the samovar.

"She's not of the faith," God told him. "I won't." Little fists on hips, beard stuck out pugnaciously.

"If you could perhaps... make an allowance this once. Because it is so cold and will only get colder." Aware that the girl was looking where he was looking and seeing nothing.

"It doesn't work like that." There was a whining tone to God's voice, as though He too was bitter at the strictures of the universe. "Bring me the faithful, priest. Or convert her here and now. But to unbelievers, nothing. You know how it is."

And Yasnic, last believer in God, did know. And God's commandments also forbade a priest helping *himself*, because that would be selfishness and not virtue. And so God's power, whatever that was actually worth, ventured forth not at all, and the girl would get no blessing, and he would get no blanket.

*Unless I lie.* And he lifted a hand, three fingers together for benediction, the fourth crooked so he could flick away evil. And there should be holy water, but the last of *that* had gone to the Occupiers and their insatiable thirst for anything with power in

it. And the girl straightened, her facing lighting up. She didn't believe in God, but she believed in him.

"I can't, I'm sorry," he told her. "For myself, Yasnic, I give you every blessing I can in your endeavour. But for God, I cannot give you His blessing. He is... particular."

And it was a miserable thing, but somehow, she seemed to take it positively, and she went to her room – one of the ground-floor ones that was bigger and had its own fireplace – and came back with a blanket, a moth-eaten piece with some embroidery still on it, better than his own.

"I haven't earned this," he told her. "It wasn't a proper blessing." But she thrust it into his hands anyway, with a little smile of pity. And he saw she thought he was mad. Mad but honest. Apparently, that was enough to get you a blanket these days. "Please tell me you're not going to do something violent."

She blinked at him. He had the sense that she was actually flattered he'd believed it of her. "It's an art exhibition," she said, as though embarrassed it wasn't slitting the throat of the Perfector.

The Statos of the soldiers was staring at the pair of them. Yasnic knew the man was about to take the blanket, purely because he could.

Even as he thought it, there came a shrill whistling echoing distantly over the rooftops. The familiar signal of a Pallesen patrol calling for reinforcements. The soldiers were jumping to their feet, batons to hand. Chairs were kicked backwards. Two cups, slapped down carelessly at the table-edge, toppled towards the floor. The student girl caught one, but the other shattered. Mother Ellaime stared at it sadly. The soldiers were gone in a flurry of uniforms, leaving the door flapping on its hinges.

They heard shouting a little later, and the faint rattle of batons being discharged, but Mother Ellaime had barred the door by then, and nobody felt like going to see what it was about.

Instead, Yasnic went out into the little yard at the back of Mother Ellaime's boarding house. It was where the woman hung washing out, a space small enough he could have lain down and

put his head against one fence while the soles of his feet touched the far one. There he made a tiny fire from scrapings of tinder, just enough to catch one corner of the blanket. He'd thought of trading it with his own threadbare covering and burning that instead, but that would be putting himself before God. He let the embroidered blanket burn, thinking of the work skilled hands had put into it, a generation or more back. And here he was, turning it to ash. But that was how you sacrificed to God. And back in the day, it had been great valuables, rich meals, prayers written on fancy paper in gold ink. But now, it was an old blanket because God was cold.

Soon after, the news burned down the street like a wildfire. The Sage-Archivist of the School of Correct Erudition, second most powerful man in the Prefecture's hierarchy, had been killed in the Anchorwood, just two streets away.