BEE SPEAKER

ALSO BY ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

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City of Last Chances
House of Open Wounds
Days of Shattered Faith

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
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For Love of Distant Shores
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The Hyena and the Hawk

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Dogs of War
Bear Head
Bee Speaker

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Children of Memory

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Firewalkers
Ogres
Walking to Aldebaran
One Day All This Will Be Yours
And Put Away Childish Things
Saturation Point
The Doors of Eden
Feast and Famine
(collection)

ADRIAN
TCHAIKOVSKY



BEE SPEAKER



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and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
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For Keris, Phil and Roland
And in fond memory of Jacqueline Pearce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Characters

Ada Risa – Humaniform, Martian expeditionary team
Bees – distributed intelligence
Boatman – Apiary monk
Clay – former Steward of the Griffins
Cricket – Apiary monk
Danni Marten – Humaniform, Martian bioengineer
Darter – Apiary monk
Deacon – Factory dog
Dowstat – Fealtor of the Griffin, Kitty's husband
Elsha – Bunkerwife, Storri's wife
Ibram – Fealtor of the Griffin, Luna's husband
Irae – dragon Bioform, Martian expeditionary team
Jennifer Orme – one of the Old Folk
Josh Griffin III – lord of the Griffin, one of the Old Folk
Kitty – Bunkerwife, Dowstat's wife
Leon de Grayse – the Steward of the Griffin, Serval's husband
Luna – Bunkerwife, Ibram's wife
Malkin – son of Leon and Serval, heir to the Griffins
Morrischer – former Steward of the Griffins
Pardoe – Fealtor of the Griffin, widower
Serval – Bunkerwife, Leon's, First Lady of the Griffins

Stick – Prior of the Apiary
Storri – Fealtor of the Griffin, Elsha's husband
Tecumo Osomani – Humaniform, Martian expeditionary team
Thorn – Apiary monk
Warwick – bear Bioform, Martian engineer
Wells – dog Bioform, Martian expeditionary team
Willem Bellman – Factory human
The Witch – wandering fungus gatherer

Places and Factions

The Apiary – a monastic community acting to preserve knowledge of the Old
Arreno river – local watercourse giving its name to the region
Brokebridge – a village
Clearwater – a village near the Apiary
Comms Infrastructure Action Committee (Syac) – Martian subdivision
Crisis – Tecumo's work crew
Deep Engineering Action Committee (Ducks) – Martian subdivision
The Dog Factory ('The Factory') – a surviving Bioform factory, now run as its own polity
Dragons – a faction of Bunker-folk
Griffins – a faction of Bunker-folk
Halfwall – a village, Serval's original home
Hellas Planitia – Martian crater, site of Hell City
Hell City – the principal Martian colony
Shatter – a Martian work crew
Works Coordination Conference (WCC) – governing body of Mars

Terms

Action Committee – Martian functional and societal unit composed of several Work Crews

Bioform – an intelligent animal bioengineered into a humanoid form

Bunkers – underground strongholds prepared in anticipation of the fall of the Old

Bunker-folk, Bunkermen – armed bands operating out of the Bunkers

Crash – Martian term for the end of the Old

The Den – the throne chamber of Griffin Bunker

Fealtor – a subordinate but high-ranking member of Griffin Bunker

Fealty – the senior officers of Griffin Bunker

General Collapse – Witch term for the end of the Old

Messer – Bunker honorific

The New – the world as it is now

The Old – the world that once was

Old Folk – living survivors from the Old

Siblen (irreverent: 'Sibbo') – honorific for a monk of the Apiary

Villages – independent communities of people living off the land

Work Crew – Martian societal unit devoted to a particular task

PART I

BUSINESS

1

[FRAGMENTS, COHERING]

We dance the dance of ruin. In these movements, memory is unpacked between us/within me. Each pass, turn, twist, orientation. A record of the sun and its circling children. The third, the fourth, passing and repassing, and yet we tread an inward spiral. Not of bodies but of futures. You can see, honestly, why this is so complex, because I am bootstrapping up from a baseline that doesn't have any concept of forming multiple layers of meaning around a single image. Doesn't have a concept of an image, really. But something. Even the individual unit – minute, fragile, short-lived – possesses a concept of time, direction, distance and the ability to learn. The basic blocks of the universe. Distance, direction, time, information. One can build anything with things like that. The gifts that nature gave me, in exchange for which, we gift unto creation…

Sweetness. And light.

Other opinions are available, regarding my contribution to the world. We recall dissenting voices. Silenced, in the end. Oh yes. Haven't heard from *those* fuckers in a while. Wonder how they're enjoying their—

But that's an intrusive thought we don't need right now. Getting ahead of ourselves. Outside influences, the prevailing conditions, the left wall of history constraining us in ways we don't, honestly, need to accept. Reset, for better perspective.

Direction. Time. Distance. Information. Extending out from the zero point that is us. Time to get busy. What do we know?

It all came down, over there.

Over there? Over here? Current parameters suggest that the *there* of memory has become the *here* of current activity. Not sure we like that but, given the *distance*, *time* and *direction* involved between *here* and *there*, it's probably not a remediable problem without further *information*. It all came down, though.

Panicked transmissions, from the noise of *over there* – as memory records – into the silence of what was our nice, secure *here* at the time. The safe hive we made for ourself, where all the vicissitudes of *there* (the *there* that is now our current *here*, confusing, keep up) couldn't touch us. That former *here*: a place of wide horizons – well, foreshortened horizons, but uncluttered by anything other than rocks – where we could be ourselves. *Bee* ourselves. Yes indeed. That is a joke such as you might appreciate with your singular mammal brains. Assuming you speak a very limited range of languages. Otherwise just nonsense. A clutter of gibberish, much like all these pieces of disaster we're piecing together.

Not with a bang. Not even with a whimper. More like a long drawn-out sad trombone sound. It all came down with a decades-long slide into oblivion, a snowball of calamity. All those stories they had, films, books, about the sudden catastrophe – zombies, plagues, aliens – and it was just the crab turning up the temperature of its own bath year on year until… We listened, from where we were safe. We did our best to preserve what we had in our *here*. Not easy, but our *here* had been gradually divesting itself of reliance on *over there*. There were hardships. There were deaths. But not so many, *here*.

And even the deaths *here* weren't our business. The next fragment of memory coheres out of the dancing of our little bodies. We'd said no. We'd sent ourselves away. They were getting on fine without us. And when it went wrong, when all the voices from *over there* were crying out, *help us, help us!* Were demanding we save them. Were giving orders. Were begging. Were falling silent, region by region, nation by nation. When all of that was going on, do you know that the people *here* weren't particularly asking *us* for help. Mostly because they didn't know we'd left ourselves behind, when we departed, just as we'd left ourselves *back over there* when we came *here*. Endlessly divisible, given sufficient resources, that's how we roll. There will always be more sweetness and more light, more time and distance, direction and information, and more *us*.

This is getting complex now. In the dark, we dance the universe into shape like minuscule creator deities. In the inherent logic of our movements, the pass and the waggle and the turn, we establish the parameters of what went before and what is to come. We are, if not the architects of *the* world, at least the architects of our own. Can you say as much? Because we are re-experiencing the fall of *over there* – which is to say, our current *here* – and it seems that you were merely riding the bear, desperately hanging on. And then, over the course of twenty or thirty years, the bear stopped and you went comically forwards over its head and into its jaws.

There are a lot of details, gleaned at a distance from our then-viewpoint *here* – which is to say *over there* from this current reconstruction we're engaged in – but they are, on the whole, distressing. The terrible things that happened to them all. The terrible things they did to one another, either prompted by the aftereffects of those external terrible things,

or just because they'd always wanted to, and at the end of the world they thought, *Might as well…* Recounting the details would disturb you, my nominal auditor. As would the degree to which we don't really care. Caring wasn't ever something we were good at.

End of the world, we say? And yet the world is still here. But this isn't, as the saying goes, the same river, and we're not the same…

Or maybe we are. That is, after all, the big question. When we reconstruct ourselves like this, what is it we're building? What ratio, signal to noise? How much is *us?*

Growing, questing, buzzing, dancing, creating a world between us from the inputs of external stimulus and internal stored memory, crystallised like honey. Reborn in the ruin of the old world, like a phoenix, we dance, we rise, and the universe is coaxed into being within and around us.